

THE FEMINIST CONTEXT OF WENDY WASSERSTEIN'S DRAMA: INTERTEXTUAL STRATEGIES OF REPRESENTING WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE

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The paper deals with a comprehensive analysis of the feminist context of American playwright Wendy Wasserstein's dramaturgy through the prism of intertextual strategies of representing female experience in the plays "Uncommon Women and Others" (1977) and "The Sisters Rosensweig" (1992). These works, which cover different stages of the playwright's career, serve as representative material for studying the evolution of models of female subjectivity in American drama in the second half of the 20th century. Based on these plays, the article examines specific models of female identity that were formed at the intersection of second-wave feminism (1960–1980s) and post-feminist discourse (1990s), when emancipatory ideals faced new challenges of integrating career, family, and post-feminist discourse (1990s) and post-feminist discourse (1990s), when emancipatory ideals faced new challenges of integrating career, family, and ethnicity. Particular attention is paid to the artistic interpretation of key feminist narratives—sisterhood as a form of solidarity and resistance, as well as professional self-realization in the context of gender stereotypes. The play "Uncommon Women and Others", set in the space of Mount Holyoke College, captures the characters' transition from student euphoria to awareness of social constraints, while "The Sisters Rosensweig", through the fates of three Jewish sisters, explores maturity and the rethinking of ethnic and gender identity in the post-Soviet context. The study pays particular attention to Wasserstein's intertextual strategies, which include references to feminist literature as well as cultural codes of US mass culture of the 1970s–1990s, from media clichés to rock counterculture. The playwright reinterprets these intertexts from a feminist perspective, transforming them into a tool for sharp criticism of patriarchal norms that reinforce gender asymmetry in the private (family), professional (career), and public (politics, media) spheres. In particular, allusions to a lesbian rock band in "Uncommon Women and Others" refer to the real phenomenon of "women's music" in the 1970s, revealing the internal contradictions of the feminist generation, while cultural references in "The Sisters Rosensweig" deconstruct stereotypes about the limitations of women's life trajectories. It has been proven that intertextuality in these plays functions not only as an aesthetic device, but also as a powerful mechanism for dialogue between individual women's histories and collective cultural memory. It creates a polyphonic theatrical space where a variety of female identities – from radical to conservative – and strategies of resistance to patriarchy are represented, offering models of female subjectivity that are relevant to contemporary post-feminist discourse.

Key words: feminism, drama, Wendy Wasserstein, intertextuality, "Uncommon Women and Others", "The Sisters Rosensweig", female subjectivity.

Остропальченко Юлія. Феміністський контекст драматургії Венді Вассерштайн: інтертекстуальні стратегії репрезентації жіночого досвіду

Стаття присвячена аналізу феміністського контексту драматургії Венді Вассерштайн крізь призму інтертекстуальних стратегій репрезентації жіночого досвіду в п'єсах "Uncommon Women and Others" та "The Sisters Rosensweig". На матеріалі цих творів у статті розглядаються специфічні моделі жіночої суб'єктності, що формуються в добу другої хвилі фемінізму та постфеміністського дискурсу, а також способи художнього осмислення «жіночого дорослішання», сестринства й професійної самореалізації. Особливу увагу приділено інтертекстуальним відсиланням до класичної традиції та культурним кодам масової культури, які Вассерштайн переосмислює з феміністичних позицій і використовує як інструмент критики патріархальних норм, що закріплюють гендерну асиметрію в родині, на роботі та в публічній сфері. Показано, що інтертекст у цих п'єсах функціонує як спосіб



вписати приватну жіночу історію в широкий культурний і театральний контекст, створюючи поліфонічний простір для репрезентації розмаїття жіночих ідентичностей і стратегій опору.

Ключові слова: фемінізм, драматургія, Венді Вассерштайн, інтертекстуальність, “Uncommon Women and Others”, “The Sisters Rosensweig”, жіноча суб’єктність.

Introduction. The dramaturgy of Wendy Wasserstein occupies a special place in the history of American feminist theater at the end of the 20th century, since it records the transition from the emancipatory rhetoric of another era feminism to more complex models of female subjectivity, formed in the minds of postfeminist discourse. In the plays “Uncommon Women and Others” (1977) and “The Sisters Rosensweig” (1993) the playwright creates a rich range of women’s voices, in which the specific biographies of the characters are intertwined with the cultural, literary and political narratives of the era. Intertextual strategies, based on quotes, reminiscences and allusions to the classical tradition and mass culture, allow W. Wasserstein to provide an individual account of women with a broader cultural code, revealing the tension between social awareness and struggle to self-realization. Her dramaturgy opens up a productive field for studying how the theatrical text is recreated in the space of representation and critical rethinking of women’s guilt. The relevance of the play in the feminist context of Wendy Wasserstein’s dramaturgy is determined by a number of mutually related factors. First of all, current humanities research has a growing interest in models of female subjectivity that are formed on the web of gender, class, ethnic and cultural identities, and W. Wasserstein’s plays demonstrate a representative range of such models in modernist and postfeminist contexts. In another way, intertextuality as a key strategy of her works allows us to see how the female confession fits into the field of theatrical, literary and mass culture, reinforcing the dialogical nature feminist criticism of patriarchal norms. Thirdly, the analysis of “Uncommon Women and Others” and “The Sisters Rosensweig” through the prism of intertextual strategies makes it possible to clarify Wasserstein’s place in the canon of feminist dramaturgy and identify the specifics of its artistic responses to the calls of other branches of feminism and post-feminist transformations. In this way, the research fills a gap in the understanding of feminist discourse and intertextuality in American female drama of the late 20th century.

The purpose of the article is to analyze the feminist context of Wendy Wasserstein’s plays “Uncommon Women and Others” and “The Sisters Rosensweig” through the lens of intertextual strategies for representing women’s experience.

Research objectives. The article aims to characterize theoretical approaches to understanding intertextuality and second-wave and postfeminist feminist dramaturgy; to identify and describe the key intertextual codes and references in “Uncommon Women and Others” and “The Sisters Rosensweig”; to analyze how intertextual strategies contribute to the construction of models of female subjectivity, sisterhood, and professional self-realization.

Results. There are quite a few definitions of the concept of “intertextuality”, the theory of intertextuality dates back to the times of Plato and Aristotle.

In literary studies, the concept of “intertextuality” was first proposed in 1967 by the French literary theorist J. Kristeva in the article “Bakhtin, Word, Dialogue, Carnival” [6]. J. Kristeva advises to rethink the generally accepted ideas about the text, referring to the principles proposed by F. de Saussure, including his “pragmatic concept” of language, about which the researcher reflects that:

- poetic language is an infinite code;
- a literary text is double: it is writing-reading;

– a literary text is a network of interdependencies [6, p. 195]. The researcher emphasizes that these statements nullify the idea of the isolated position of poetic discourse, since a literary work “is included in the aggregate set of other texts: it is a writing-reply to another (other) text (texts). Since the author writes in the process of reading an earlier or contemporary corpus of literary texts, he himself lives in history, and the life of society is recorded in the text” [6, p. 195].

According to R. Barthes, “Every text acts as an intertext; other texts exist within it at different levels in more or less recognizable forms: texts of the previous culture and texts of the current culture. Each text is a new fabric created from old quotes” [2, p.115]. Ye. Vasyliiev explores and advises turning to the study of intertext in

drama, because this issue is rarely considered today [10]. At the same time, literary scholars such as O. Novobranets [16], E. Vasyliiev, O. Ankhym analyze artistic adaptations of traditional myths, plots and motifs in various literary genres, including drama. N. Astrakhan explains artistic adaptation as one of the types of intertext: “During the process of interpreting a literary text, there is not only the disclosure of the meaning intended by the author in the work and the replacement of the author’s intention with the reader’s – the interaction of the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter leads to the displacement and increment of meaning, conditioned, first of all, by the movement of history” [9].

The study of the nature of intertextuality and its varieties is relevant in modern literary studies, which is important for understanding literary progress. The study of intertext in plays compared to poetic or prose texts requires deeper study, since the analysis of plays from the perspective of intersexuality has been little studied and analyzed.

A general overview of the stage works of Wendy Wasserstein in Ukrainian literary studies was carried out only by Natalia Vysotskaya [11] and Anna Gaidash [12]. The researchers’ research became the first step in representing Wendy Wasserstein’s creative heritage for Ukrainian connoisseurs of American theater. A careful reading of the play “Uncommon Women and Others” is timely due to the relevance of the topic declared by the author in the work. Wendy Wasserstein had considerable success as an American playwright in the second half of the twentieth century. She was the first female playwright to receive a Tony Award for her feminist play “The Heidi Chronicles”.

The task of feminist literary criticism is to rethink a classic work from the perspective of female reading, authorship, and style. In general, feminist literary criticism in theoretical and philosophical terms can be interpreted in different ways. But the recognition of a special way of being female is common to all varieties of feminist literature.

Feminist literary criticism is distinguished into women’s literature, reading, writing, autobiography, where the emphasis may be placed on the gender of the author, the reader’s perception, style and content of the text [13]. The goal of feminist criticism is to study female images

in male and female literature in order to reassess experience, revise the literary canon, and bring texts written by women back from oblivion. [14, p. 210].

The life choices that W. Wasserstein made influenced her work as a playwright. Her texts always contain an element of humor and the characters of the plays are filled with the everyday realities of modern American women. Her plays were and continue to be staged both in Broadway theaters, the most desirable arena for any playwright, and on off-Broadway stages. The writer’s work cannot be considered outside the context of feminism, since almost all of her plays realize the challenges, hopes and motives of gender equality and a new future.

Wasserstein grew up in an era of rapid development of the women’s movement in the United States, when much attention was paid to issues of equality between men and women. The author’s plays are important as representatives of the second wave of feminism and the baby boomer generation. The trends of the women’s movement of that time changed the attitude of American women to their personal lives, especially regarding such issues as marriage, motherhood, sexuality, and so on. The playwright wrote her plays in the context of understanding and rethinking these ideas. Her characters often openly discuss very personal situations, paying considerable attention to such tattooed topics in the sphere of private and intimate life in her time as (same-sex marriage, clitoral orgasms, menstruation, etc.). Although the beginning of the 1970s was marked by the women’s movement, there was a lack of manifestations of gender equality in the life of American society. Therefore, “Uncommon Women and Others” raises issues relevant to that era, in particular the female dilemma of “finding oneself between the feminine mystique of the fifties and the feminist movement of the sixties and seventies” [1].

Biographical motifs are also an integral part of W. Wasserstein’s dramaturgy. The play “The Sisters Rosensweig” is about sisters who come from a typical Jewish family in Brooklyn, like the playwright herself. The prototypes of the characters in the comedy are the author’s sisters (Sandra and Georgetta) and Wendy Wasserstein in the person of the youngest Pfeni. The playwright, like Pfeni, had relationships with men of non-traditional orientation and decided to use Pfeni as an example to show her own expe-

rience [5, p. 85]. The author calls “The Sisters Rosensweig” a serious and comedic play at the same time, each sister in the play struggles with herself, trying to rationalize her choices in life. As J. Brewer notes, the conflict of the play is the individual crisis of each of the sisters, which manifests itself in the difficult interaction between professional career and personal life [3]. The play is dedicated to W. Wasserstein’s elder sister, Sandra, who is personified by the image of Sarah, a lonely woman who is a high-class professional in her field. Incidentally, Cio-ciola writes that “this is a very ordinary play, this is life itself” [4].

With the play “Uncommon Women and Others”, W. Wasserstein challenged patriarchal norms, but also the entire American culture. The academic atmosphere of Yale University, the drastic economic consequences of Thatcher’s monetary system, as well as the recognition of the new British Prime Minister as a representative of feminism, when in the seventies of the twentieth century, the first woman to hold this position, influenced the idea of writing her plays. The play is set in a Manhattan restaurant in 1978 at the long-awaited reunion of five college graduates: Kate, Samantha, Holly, Muffet, and Rita. Remaining friends even after receiving their diplomas, the young women recount the events of their lives, share their feelings, thoughts about marriage, career successes, and recall their college years at Mount Holyoke, a private women’s college in South Hadley, Massachusetts, of which Wasserstein was a graduate.

Compositionally, the play is achronological: the author uses a flashback in the second act of the play. The action is transferred from 1978 to 1972, six years ago, during the years of college, dorm life, when the characters first met. She describes each character in great detail and with humor.

Kate is a successful lawyer, Samantha is the only one of her friends who is married, a housewife who devotes her life to her husband, an actor, Rita is a writer, Muffet is an insurance agent. Wasserstein transferred her image to Holly and described her based on her own character. Like the author, Holly is a Jewish girl, a member of the WASPs, a graduate of Mount Holyoke, and is engaged in literary work. Holly also has problems with being overweight and is trying to lose weight in every way. Muffet’s remark, when looking at Holly’s skirt, says

that her father invented corduroy, which in turn confirms that the image of Holly itself encodes details from the life of the playwright herself.

MUFFET: Oh, come off it, Holly. Your father invented velveteen [6, p.18]. Morris Wasserstein, Wendy’s father, is actually a textile factory owner who patented corduroy in 1968.

The characters in the play are well-versed in the women’s movement: *MUFFET: Actually, I don’t mind being alone. I like being strong. Like Rosie the Riveter* [6, p.26]. For example, Muffet considers herself an independent woman and wants to be like the feminist icon of the time, Rosie the Riveter. Since World War II, her image has personified the American worker, a strong woman capable of overcoming gender stereotypes. Currently, the picture of Rosie is world-famous and reminds society of the development of the emancipation movement.

Also in the arsenal of friends are numerous topics about the struggle for equality, close to each of them. The graduates discuss the famous feminist and writer of the seventies Germaine Greer, who became famous after writing the book “The Female Eunuch” (1970), the representative of the second wave of feminism, the American Kate Millet “Sexual Politics” (1970), as well as Betty Friedan “The Feminine Mystique” (1963). All this is about female gender socialization, which is so lively discussed by friends.

Such famous feminist women of the time as Jacqueline Susan, author of numerous romance novels and the bestseller “Valley of the Dolls” (1966), Bette Davis, American actress, first female president of the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, English model and actress Jean Shrimpton, Anglo-American actress and screenwriter Eva LeGalienne, who founded her own theater company in New York, the Civic Repertory Theater, with the help of her wealthy lover Alice Delmar, are repeatedly mentioned by friends who are inspired by these stars.

Shrimpton and LeGalienne publicly demonstrated their unconventional orientation, while at that time this topic was still taboo. Wasserstein’s female characters also raise LGBT issues, discussing their classmate:

HOLLY: Well, Alice Hartwitch dropped out of medical school to form a lesbian rock band.

KATE: Gross me out! Does she sleep with women?

HOLLY: I guess so; they live together [6, p. 9]. In this line from Wendy Wasserstein’s

play “Uncommon Women and Others”, intertextuality is realized through an allusion to the real cultural phenomenon of “women’s music” and the lesbian counterculture of the 1970s in the United States. The figure of Alice Hartwich, who drops out of medical school and creates a lesbian rock band, refers to real groups such as Cris Williamson, Meg Christian, or Holly Near, who formed an alternative music movement associated with feminism and queer activism. This reference not only illustrates radical strategies for women’s liberation from patriarchal norms (rejection of a “prestigious” career in favor of creative self-expression), but also provokes Kate’s reaction (“Gross me out!”), exposing homophobic prejudices in the circle of “educated” characters, which emphasizes the internal contradictions of the feminist generation. The intertextual code of mass culture functions as a tool for satirical exposure of gender and sexual stereotypes in the context of second wave feminism.

From the perspective of the present, “Uncommon Women and Others” can be considered to belong to the (auto)biographical genre of drama, a memory of the times when feminism and the values of the New Left movement (a group of like-minded people who expressed their protest against the spirituallessness of society, the impersonality of mass culture, the unification of the human personality) were only seeping into the American consciousness. But Wasserstein wrote it in the 1970s, when this topic was really relevant and in demand. The play reveals

the issue of gender, the role, choice, and place of women in society. At the end of the play we see truly “unusual women” who still do not know what to choose in life. W. Wasserstein depicts the importance and durability of this female society.

Conclusions and prospects for further developments in this direction. Wendy Wasserstein’s dramaturgy demonstrates intertextuality as a key strategy for feminist representation of female experience, combining literary allusions, cultural codes, and media references to construct complex models of female subjectivity. Through a network of references to classical tradition, feminist texts, and popular culture, Wasserstein deconstructs patriarchal norms, exposing gender asymmetries in the realms of family, career, and public space, as seen in the allusion to the lesbian counterculture in the character of Alice Hartwich. Intertextual polyphony allows the characters’ individual trajectories—from “aging females” to sisterhood—to be inscribed within the broader cultural discourse of second-wave feminism and postfeminist transformations. Prospective directions include a comparative analysis of Wasserstein’s intertextual strategies with other feminist playwrights (e.g., Beth Henley or Marsha Norman), as well as an investigation of intermediality in her works through the prism of contemporary postdramatic practices. Of particular note is the study of ethnic and class dimensions of female identity in the context of the globalization of feminist theater.

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