

## URBAN SPACE IN THE STORY “SOLID OBJECTS” BY VIRGINIA WOOLF

*The article deals with the concept of urban chronotope in the story “Solid Objects” by Virginia Woolf. Author claims that urban chronotope is incarnated in the image of protagonist’s collection. Every part of this collection represents the separate urban locus, and together they present an ideal urban space. The deeper layer of this metaphor can be interpreted as a process of writer’s creation.*

**Keywords:** urban space, Solid Objects, Virginia Woolf, collector, Mark Oge, Andrew Esin, Walter Benjamin, flaneur, urban chronotope, Clare Morgan, locus.

The city is novelistic in nature, as the philosopher Mark Oge claims, comparing the semantic nature of the city with the structure of the text. The urban environment is the locus in quo of the greatest novels of the XIX and XX century: “On the one hand, the writer’s image appears to be inextricably linked with the city that inspired the author’s creativity, on the other hand, the image of the city in our perception is indissoluble from those who loved and described it” [6], but not less important is the image of the main character. The city is the space of the personality’s development. Moreover, it is the existential space, which is why it is also important to focus on the image of the character and his existential aspects, influenced by the city space: “City is the continuation of the human body outside, it is the symbolic cultural, social, and collective body. City is a projection of consciousness in external space”, writes Russian philosopher Stanislav Hurin. Some cities have produced a separate textual tradition, focused on representation of the city space with its inner particularities and iterative structures. Thereby appeared Paris text, Berlin text, St. Petersburg text, and London text.

The textual incarnation of London is an especially mythologized image of the city, presented in prose works by Charles Dickens, Henry Kingsley, Jerome Klapka Jerome, William Thackeray, and Virginia Woolf. The last author presents a unique “female view” of the city space, which becomes not only the background of action, but a projection of author’s consciousness. In this article we will try to illuminate the image of the London’s space in Woolf’s story “Solid Objects”. “Solid Objects” was written in 1918 and first published in *The Athenaeum* in October 1920, then reprinted in *A Haunted House* in 1944.

From the start of the interpretation tradition, Virginia Woolf’s urban space has been considered

to be fragmentary and close to Marcel Proust’s spatial-temporal structure. The first reception of the space poetics was negative: for example, the famous critic Wyndham Lewis in his essay *Men without Art* (1934) accused Woolf of deliberate aestheticism. The traditional aesthetical canon predetermined the author to develop an integral and consistent image of the city, which had to be a background of plot’s development, while Woolf presented London through the loupe of fragmentary poetics.

In the story “Solid Objects” the protagonist, a successful politician John, starts to gather “real things” – fragments of glass, china, and stones. John gets carried away and forgets about his electoral college, usual friends, and the brilliant career he was expected to make. The whole world shrinks to the size of the mantelshelf where his findings lie. Thereby, Virginia Woolf presents a classical collector character, whose image was developed later by Walter Benjamin in *Arcades Project*. These luminous pieces of glass and porcelain present the fragmentary urban space: each “treasury” was found in its own separate place – the shore, the dump, or the barren.

At a first glance, Virginia Woolf depicts the total destruction of John’s “unmistakable vitality”, his dominating masculinity of “moustaches, tweed cap, rough boots, shooting coat, and check stocking” [7]. Moreover, it seems that Woolf depicts the destruction of space: while at the beginning of novel John is representing London as a parliament member (so the city is the entire unit), at the end he is gathering the city splinters that seem to represent nothing. The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre accused Virginia Woolf of ruining the time and space structure, and it seems that this novel is a pattern of such destruction. In our opinion, the Woolf’s poetics does not incarnate unintelligible chaos, but, on the contrary, creates a new space unity. Moreover, to

contest Sartre's claim, we can refer to the study *Vanishing horizons: Virginia Woolf and the neo-romantic landscape in between the acts and 'anon'* by Clare Morgan, where the author claims that Woolf has no strong sympathy to the global chronotopes, but she glorifies the value of an inclusive community and local space [5]. Thereby, every piece of collection ideally represents a small locus: "Looked at again and again half consciously by a mind thinking of something else, any object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we least expect it" [7]. No less important is the fact that every tiny object is an ideal reflection of some natural objects: "the smooth oval egg of a prehistoric bird", "a starfish" or even "a creature from another world" [7]. Thus, Woolf does not oppose the ideal world of nature to the spoiled city space, but shows the inner connection between them.

The Russian literary critic Andrew Esin claims that Virginia Woolf's chronotope is the "game with the time and space, and the apparent meaning of this game is to compare different times and spaces in order to reveal the <...> universal laws of life, to understand the world in its unity" [3, p. 53, 58]. So, Woolf's subjective chronotope is opposed to the objective realistic depicting of the urban space, but this subjective nature leads to the highest level of unity of nature and city. I venture to assume that it is that unity of time and space which was characterized by Malcolm Bradbury: "But the city, its streets, the sound of Big Ben – it's their common space, it is the space that connects them – just as they are linked by the very style of the book, this free and poetic flow of the narrative, where everything is connected to everything and one flows into another" [2]. John, formerly a pragmatist, organized his own symbolic incarnation of London on his mantelshelf so perfect that he does not need the real city anymore. The

objects found by the main character presents neither real history, nor pure material objects: the glass is "nothing but glass", but at the same time it is "almost a precious stone", a stiff sea drop, or an emerald from "sunk Elizabethan treasure-chest" [7]. If the Benjamin's collector works like an archaeologist, trying to restore the real hidden history of the thing, Woolf's character uses the "solid objects" in order to develop his own mythological world, which is the symbolic reflection of London.

John's collection is a gentle hint not only at the urban space, but at the process of writing itself. The first object found by the main character was a piece of green glass polished by water: "It was a lump of glass, so thick as to be almost opaque; the smoothing of the sea had completely worn off any edge or shape, so that it was impossible to say whether it had been bottle, tumbler or window-pane; it was nothing but glass; it was almost a precious stone" [7]. John looked through the glass at the surrounding, and everything has immediately transformed. The ordinary world became the magic space, tinged with his own perception: "It pleased him; it puzzled him; it was so hard, so concentrated, so definite an object compared with the vague sea and the hazy shore" [7], the process of watching through the glass is close to the process of the writer's depicting the outer world. It is important to notice that the last John's friend, Charles, leaves him along with his collection in the end of the story. Thereby, John had to sacrifice the friendship for the privilege to create. Woolf believed that every creator is a lonely person, and social relations is the main altar to the muse who presides over the writer.

Thus, Virginia Woolf managed to depict her own concept of urban space in her story "Solid objects", referring to an original metaphor of an unusual collection gathered by the main character. And the deeper layer of this metaphor can be interpreted as a process of creation itself.

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### МІСЬКИЙ ПРОСТІР В ОПОВІДАННІ ВІРДЖИНІ ВУЛФ «РЕАЛЬНІ ПРЕДМЕТИ»

*У статті розглянуто концепцію міського хронотопу в оповіданні Вірджинії Вулф «Реальні предмети». Автор статті стверджує, що міський хронотоп втілено за допомогою мотиву колекціонування різних предметів головним героєм. Кожен елемент цієї колекції репрезентує окремий міський локус, і разом вони втілюють ідеальний міський простір. Крім того, колекціонування постає як метафора процесу письменницької творчості.*

**Ключові слова:** міський простір, Solid Objects, Вірджинія Вулф, колекціонер, Марк Оже, Андрій Єсін, Вальтер Беньямін, фланер, міський хронотоп, Клер Морган, локус.

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### ЖАНРОВА ПРИРОДА ПРИГОДНИЦЬКОЇ ПРОЗИ ЯК ЕЛЕМЕНТУ ПОПУЛЯРНОЇ ЛІТЕРАТУРИ: ПРОЛЕГОМЕНИ ДО ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ ІДЕОЛОГІЧНИХ ТА ДИДАКТИЧНИХ АСПЕКТІВ У ТВОРАХ ЖАНРУ

*У статті зроблено огляд досліджень жанру пригодницької прози як елементу популярної літератури. Ключовими ознаками жанру є такі: орієнтація на конвенційність (наявність у читача чітких очікувань щодо структури художнього світу, персонажів, розвитку сюжету та готовність авторів їм відповідати) та ескапізм. Підсумовано також міркування щодо того, як ці ознаки жанру дозволяють пригодницькій прозі передавати ідеологічні змісти, зокрема щодо місця і місії «своєї групи» у світі, протистояння «Своїх» і «Чужих». Яскравим прикладом таких ідеологічних змістів є ангажованість в ідеологію європейського імперіалізму, коли жанр «реалістичного пригодницького роману» загалом та низка його ключових різновидів – «формул» – набули свого класичного вигляду.*

**Ключові слова:** пригодницька проза, популярна література, дидактична функція літератури, постколоніальна критика.

Традиційний підхід літературознавства до пригодницької прози полягає у сприйнятті творів цього жанру як розміщених на периферії літератури. Справді, конвенційні очікування від

цього жанру приваблюють до пригодницьких романів та повістей не так тих читачів, які шукають у літературі естетичного задоволення, як охочих до «легкого» та захопливого читання.

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