

**Female verticality, male horizontality:
On genderized spaces and unequal border
crossings in the prose of Kate Chopin
and Charlotte Perkins Gilman**

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*Received 3.05.2017,
accepted 9.11.2017.*

Abstract

The aim of the present article is to analyze the notion of the border, as well as the significance of genderized spaces and movements along vertical and horizontal axes in two literary texts of American proto-feminism: Kate Chopin's short story "The Dream of an Hour" and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's utopian novel *Herland*. The theoretical framework of the analysis is based on Yuri Lotman's concept of semiosphere. The paper investigates the genderized spaces of the two narratives, showing that the internal semiospheres are assigned to female characters, while the outer spaces are typically male, and explaining the significance of this distribution. The axiological value of vertical and horizontal movements performed by the characters is also discussed. Furthermore, the article attempts to analyze the separating and translational qualities of borders in the two texts, taking cognizance of the peculiarity of the utopian boundary. An argument is made that unlike the male messages, female signals are subjects to unsuccessful translations at the borders of the semiospheres. It is argued that both literary works employ similar narrative devices which utilize spatial elements to highlight the importance of the female components of the texts.

Key words

border, horizontality, movement, semiosphere, utopia, verticality

**„Wertykalna” kobiecość i „horyzontalna” męskość:
o genderowym nacechowaniu przestrzeni
i braku równouprawnienia w przekraczaniu granic
w prozie Kate Chopin i Charlotte Perkins Gilman**

Abstrakt

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza kategorii granicy oraz znaczenia przestrzeni przyporządkowanej płciom i ruchów wzdłuż osi pionowej i poziomej w dwóch dziełach amerykańskiego profeminiizmu: opowiadaniu Kate Chopin pt. „The Dream of an Hour” oraz utopijnej powieści Charlotte Perkins Gilman pt. *Herland*. Ramy teoretyczne analizy stanowi opracowana przez Jurija Łotmana kategoria semiosfery. Artykuł zawiera omówienie przestrzeni w obu tekstach, wykazujące, że semiosfery wewnętrzne przyporządkowane są postaciom kobiecym, natomiast przestrzenie zewnętrzne są jednoznacznie męskie. W pracy wyjaśniono wagę takiego przyporządkowania. Omówiono także aksjologiczne znaczenie poziomych i pionowych ruchów wykonywanych przez bohaterów tekstów. Ponadto praca analizuje rozdzielające oraz translacyjne właściwości granic w obu tekstach, biorąc pod uwagę szczególne własności granicy utopijnej. W toku analizy dowodzi się, że w przeciwieństwie do męskich komunikatów, sygnałom kobiecym nie udaje się przedostać przez translacyjne granice między semiosferami. Artykuł stawia tezę, że obydwa omawiane dzieła literackie wykorzystują podobne narzędzia narracyjne, stosując kategorie przestrzenne świata przedstawionego do podkreślenia wagi kobiecych elementów w tekstach.

Słowa kluczowe

granica, wertykalność, horyzontalność, ruch, semiosfera, utopia

1. Introduction

In both academic and lay discussions of narratives, the inseparable pair of space and time is virtually omnipresent. Although the dyad tends to be treated in an imbalanced way, i.e. with time (sequence of events, progression) foregrounded at the expense of space, spatial components are indispensable for all narratives: even if no direct spatial information is provided, a certain spatial extension of the story world is implied (Ryan 2012: 1). In the analysis of space in literary works, the theory developed by Yuri Lotman proves immensely useful. In 1982, Lotman introduced the concept of semiosphere to address the problematic relation of space and semiosis:

Semiosphere is the semiotic space, outside of which semiosis cannot exist. The ensemble of semiotic formations functionally precedes the singular isolated language and becomes a condition for the existence of the latter. Without the semiosphere, language not only does not function, it does not exist. The division between the core and the periphery is a law of the internal organisation of the semiosphere. [There is a] boundary between the semiosphere and the non- or extra-semiotic space that surrounds it. The semiotic border is represented by the sum of bilingual translatable “filters”, passing through which the text is translated into another language (or languages), situated outside the given semiosphere. (Lotman 2005: 205)

On the basis of Lotman’s theory, literary texts can be divided into a number of semiospheres in which various utterances and messages may have different meanings. The differences of signification between semiospheres, as well as the existence of filtering and translational borders, are crucial in the present analysis of two American proto-feminist narratives: Kate Chopin’s short story “The Dream of an Hour” (1894) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s novel *Herland* (1915).

Chopin’s short story describes a dramatic 60 minutes. A young woman, Mrs. Mallard, is visited by her husband’s friend Richard, who brings terrible news of a railway accident

in which Mr. Mallard is thought to have died. The woman, supposedly distraught with grief, goes upstairs, to her bedroom, where she contemplates the view from the window while trying to absorb and understand the fact of her sudden widowhood. It soon becomes clear that contrary to our expectations and to her own surprise and terror, the protagonist begins to feel greatly relieved, as her marriage was not particularly happy. Her husband's death enables her instantly to rediscover her freedom and self-confidence. She seems pleased with the fact that from now on she will be the only person to decide about her life: "There would be no one to live for during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature" (Chopin 2015: 122). After the moment of illumination and joy, tamed slightly by remorse, the widow composes herself and, along with her sister, goes back downstairs. When the husband – very much alive and totally unaware of the train accident – opens the front door, the woman collapses. In the ironic ending of the story, the doctors interpret her death as being caused by the "joy that kills" (Chopin 2015: 123).

Gilman's *Herland* is a utopian novel narrated by a male traveller who, along with two of his friends, explores a hidden country inhabited solely by women. Deeply rooted stereotypes and prejudices make it immensely difficult for the travellers to understand the rules governing the wonderfully organized female state. The three male protagonists do reach a certain level of understanding, even though one of them does not change his original belief in the profound superiority of men.

Undoubtedly, these two literary works vary in numerous aspects, such as genre, length, and style. Nevertheless, certain narrative devices and elements of the structure of the stories are surprisingly similar in *Herland* and "The Dream of an Hour". The concurrent constituents of both works are connected with genderized narrative spaces and movements across

particular semiospheres. As these elements of the texts' structures are inextricably tied to boundaries, the notion of the border will prove useful in further analysis.

2. Genderized inner and outer spaces

Lotman observes that the language of spatial relations is crucial in human comprehension of reality, and the binary oppositions of "up-down", "right-left", "near-far" etc. are frequently used to construct cultural models which associate particular elements with such non-spatial values as "good-bad", "valuable-not valuable", "one's own-another's" (Lotman 1990: 218). The primitive divisions into worlds known and unknown, sacred and profane, are based on identifying certain spaces with axiological qualities. According to Ryan, these basic dichotomies are realized in literary works by attributing symbolic meanings to various places and regions of the narrative worlds, hence creating "a symbolic geography diversified into regions where different events and experiences take place – where life, in other words, is governed by different physical, psychological, social or cultural rules" (Ryan 2012: 9). In the discussed works, this mapping is connected with assigning particular semiospheres to genders.

In "The Dream of an Hour", the whole action takes place in the house of Mr. and Mrs. Mallard. Due to the extreme brevity of the story, the building is not described, but it is signalled that it is a standard upper-class house located on the town square. The rest of the story space comprises the streets and ill-fated railroad – these locations, though, are only mentioned, mapped by the characters' utterances and thoughts, while the immediate surroundings of the actual events do not extend beyond the walls of the house. This disproportion in the narrative significance of the inside and the outside is crucial in the story. The internal semiosphere, safely separated from the external world by the four walls of the house and the locked door, is characterized by its female nature, whereas the outside is clearly male. Mrs. Mallard and her sister occupy the

domestic space of the house, never physically leaving it within the duration of the story. Both Mr. Mallard and his friend Richard enter the domestic space from the outside, as if they belonged to the outer world. What seems important is that once they cross the boundary between the outer and inner worlds, they shatter the domestic peace and quiet by bringing bad news, tragedy and pain.

Indeed, assigning women to domestic spaces and men to public spaces is far from surprising, as it reflects the realities of the late 19th century American South, the traditional setting of Chopin's stories. However, this division is not only a marker of the plausibility of the narrative; it also serves as a medium of the feminist message. The female space, being the immediate location of the action where a vital psychological transformation of the protagonist occurs, is located in the center, while the male world occupies the periphery. Thus, this demarcation, emphasizing the importance of the female, constitutes a strong manifesto in the patriarchal sociocultural setting that traditionally associated men with centrality and women with secondariness. The main boundary, constituted in Chopin's short story by the house walls, divides the whole space of signs into two semiospheres where various gestures, words and cries are assigned different meanings.

A similar message is indeed conveyed in *Herland*. The narrative space of the novel is clearly divided into the utopian land and the outer world, which is a distinction typical for virtually all early utopian texts. The notion of the utopian border will be elaborated upon later in the discussion. For now, it is worth noting that in Gilman's work the barrier is not merely a genre-specific element. The opposition of "us" and "them", "inside" and "outside", is simultaneously the distinction between the female and the male. The feminine interior semiosphere is obviously not as restricted as in Chopin's story, as it encompasses not a single building, but a huge plateau with cities inhabited by the nation of women and large stretches of rainforests. However, it is clear that also in this case the out-

side is a male-dominated space – as signalled not only by the fact that the only men in the narrative, the three travellers, come from the outer world, but even more by the ideas that these protagonists carry with them. Van, Terry and Jeff enter the isolated country – the female semiosphere – with a strong belief in the superiority of men and a conviction of the impossibility that women alone could develop a highly organized culture and civilization. Moreover, their original patriarchal, adventurous mindset, with its inclination to rivalry and competition, is contrasted with the equality, solidarity and cooperation cherished by Herland's inhabitants. In other words, the female character of the inside and the male nature of the outside is presented on two levels: by the physical gender of the characters representing the two spheres of the narrative space, and by the values and psychological stances expressed by the characters. The boundary as represented in the novel keeps these two worlds and two sets of values apart.

3. Movements along vertical and horizontal axes

As has already been indicated, in both works the division into female internal space and male external space necessitates narrative movements between the two spheres. According to Lotman, a given work's plot always stems from the primary event in which a literary character crosses the border between two symbolically charged spaces of the narrative (Lotman 1977: 238). Indeed, in the course of the narrative's progress, the characters of Chopin's short story and Gilman's novel cross the boundaries between the male and female semiospheres, which is crucial for conveying the central messages of the texts. Furthermore, the movements which take place within the internal, female semiospheres are also highly significant.

Crossing the borders between the semiospheres in both texts involves horizontal movements, passing the "in-out" boundary. In Chopin's story as well as in Gilman's novel, this horizontal motion is assigned to male characters. Only one

woman out of the countless inhabitants of Herland, Ellador, crosses the border, as she travels with the narrator, her husband, to explore the outer world at the very end of the novel. Apart from that one character, however, no woman ever ventures to leave the internal semiosphere. Interestingly, the men enter the mysterious land of women using a biplane, hence it can be argued that they rely on the vertical movement. Nevertheless, the flight's sole purpose is to get inside the hidden country, to overcome the natural barrier of the high plateau, therefore it is the direction "to", "into", that matters to them. The plain's height actually only reinforces the association of the vertical with the female, as it is the women's land that is so elevated. Furthermore, in his descriptions of Herland, the narrator repeatedly emphasizes the loftiness of public buildings, castles and fortresses, as well as the impressive height of trees and even the tallness of the country's inhabitants. Another realization of female verticality in the novel is offered by the introduction of the very first women that the travellers meet after landing. They notice three girls watching them from a branch of a tree, and as soon as they start climbing towards the curious observers, it becomes clear that they cannot compete with these swift young women in the upward pursuit. The female characters, then, are immediately contrasted with the men by means of the distinction in the types of movements they perform.

Chopin's story, due to its brevity, presents the same phenomenon in an even more evident, condensed form. The two male characters of the narrative enter the house through the front door, which is clearly a horizontal movement. By contrast, the two women, and especially the protagonist, Mrs. Mallard, constantly move up and down. Verticality is evident in such movements as going upstairs and downstairs, sitting down and standing up, kneeling and rising to one's feet, etc. While the young widow looks out of the window, simultaneously undergoing a psychological transformation, not only does she cast her eyes from the street below to the skies above, but

she also breathes so heavily that her bosom rises and falls tumultuously. All of these actions reflect the symbolic ascension of the woman, her soaring sense of freedom, autonomy and happiness.

Undeniably, the connection of the female with the vertical and the male with the horizontal is of great thematic importance, as it contributes to the feminist overtone of the two works. From the axiological viewpoint, vertical movements are always favoured above horizontal ones, because the opposition of up and down, universal for all cultures, is frequently interpreted in moral, religious, social and political terms (Lotman 1990: 132). In literary works, upward movement cannot be fully separated from associations with such concepts as sublimity, growth, enhancement and development.

4. Separating, filtering and translational qualities of borders

As shown above, borders are easily noticeable in the two texts. Being an ambivalent concept, the border both separates and unites the two semiospheres, which means that apart from emphasizing the disparateness of the worlds it divides, the boundary serves as a mechanism of translation (Lotman 1990: 136). This filtering membrane enables representatives of both worlds to receive foreign messages and incorporate them into their languages, worldviews and semiotics. However, such translations may not always be particularly successful. The separating, filtering and translational qualities of boundaries perform a similar function in Gilman's novel and Chopin's story.

Being a traditionally structured utopian text, *Herland* contains the notion of the utopian boundary. The utopian border is an especially marked type of border in literary worlds, as it is usually clear-cut and almost always virtually impenetrable. Most early utopian texts begin with geographical descriptions of natural barriers, such as bodies of water, mountain ranges or strips of wilderness, which separate the utopian land from

the rest of the world (Blaim 2013: 136-7). The textual function of the boundary is connected here with reinforcing the notion of significant difference between the internal and external spaces. The internal, idealized land is remote and inaccessible, which is of axiological significance: “The traditional opposition of heaven and earth involving the vertical opposition ‘top–bottom’ is reinterpreted as the horizontal opposition ‘near–far’” (Blaim 2013: 135). Interestingly, the natural barrier of Herland is the plateau, hence the idea of separateness and superiority is not only expressed by the country’s horizontal remoteness, but also reinforced by its vertical location. Moreover, the border in *Herland* additionally protects the female internal semiosphere from the outer world occupied by numerous patriarchal societies. The female utopia can exist solely due to its inaccessibility, hence when the three men penetrate the border, they constitute a threat to the utopian state. Furthermore, the division into “us” and “them”, which lays the ground for every culture (Lotman 1990: 131), is particularly important in conveying utopian ideas, and therefore the border has an even greater potential for semioticization in all utopian texts.

It should be noted that during virtually the whole action of *Herland*, all of the characters, including the three male explorers, physically reside in the female, internal semiosphere. However, due to their prejudices and mental limitations, the men in fact hardly leave the outer world – it is as if they carry it with themselves wherever they go, even to the country of women. In consequence, they are unable to understand the workings of the utopian state – at least at the beginning of their stay in Herland, hence the unsuccessful translation of the female messages, which takes place at the border of the two worlds. There are multiple examples of such misunderstandings, and they extend from very basic difficulties, such as the initial unfamiliarity with the women’s language, to quite complex and ideologically based ones. The first-person narrator describes his friend’s problems with comprehending the unity of the female nation in this way: “I remember how long

Terry balked at the evident unanimity of these women – the most conspicuous feature of their whole culture. ‘It’s impossible!’ he would insist. ‘Women cannot cooperate – it’s against nature’” (Perkins Gilman 2015: 207). Moreover, the men could not understand the concept of motherhood which constituted the foundation of the utopian society:

You see, they were Mothers, not in our sense of helpless involuntary fecundity, forced to fill and overflow the land, every land, and then see their children suffer, sin, and die, fighting horribly with one another; but in the sense of Conscious Makers of People. Mother-love with them was not a brute passion, a mere ‘instinct,’ a wholly personal feeling; it was – a religion. It included that limitless feeling of sisterhood, that wide unity in service, which was so difficult for us to grasp. And it was National, Racial, Human – oh, I don’t know how to say it. (Perkins Gilman 2015: 207)

The honesty with which the narrator admits his own incapacity to understand this notion is indeed a sign of his willingness to learn more about this culture. Towards the end of the narrative, two of the three friends become convinced of the immense advantages of Herland’s structure, values and functioning, but it still seems impossible for them to reach a really profound understanding of it.

By contrast, messages brought to Herland from the outside are subject to successful translations, because the women pay close attention to what the travellers describe, they comprehend and acknowledge the mechanisms of the outer societies, despite being far from accepting or approving them. They undoubtedly wish to benefit from knowing a different culture, to draw on the men’s knowledge and experience in order to enhance their own society. When confronted by Terry as to the purpose of holding the men in pleasant and respectful captivity, his guardian-teacher Moadine explains: “We are trying to learn of you all we can, and to teach you what you are willing to learn of our country” (Perkins Gilman 2015: 205).

Translations of male and female signals can also be found in “The Dream of an Hour”, although they are not manifested in such a straightforward way as in *Herland*. The border in the story is obviously designated by the walls of the house, and the front door serves as the major pore of the membrane, enabling messages to be transferred between the internal female and external male semiospheres. The two male characters, Richard and Mr. Mallard, enter through the door, each presenting a different kind of tragedy for the protagonist: firstly, the news of the fatal accident, secondly – the denial of this information. Each time the male message, coming from the outside, is acknowledged and understood by Mrs. Mallard, producing a great sense of triumph and a shattering disappointment, respectively. However, the female signals seem to be untransferable to the outer world. The first female message – the alleged widow’s happiness stemming from her newly regained freedom – is taken for despair and death-wish, and the protagonist does not have a chance to rectify this mistranslation. The second signal, the grief and disillusionment caused by her husband’s reappearance and by losing the scarcely retrieved independence, is in fact expressed by the woman’s sudden death. Unfortunately, the translation of this message is grossly unsuccessful: in the male semiosphere, represented by the doctors, her heart attack is perceived as having been caused by extreme joy brought about by her husband’s happy return.

5. Conclusion

In both works, it is at the borders that the differences between the female and male semiospheres manifest themselves most noticeably, hence the major events which propel the narration take place around those boundaries. Necessarily, then, the main characters occupy the vicinity of the boundaries, which makes them prone to suffer from the dangers of liminality: in a way, they always remain on the edge. In the case of “The Dream on an Hour”, all the characters are on the verge sepa-

rating life from death. In *Herland*, the brink is substantially less dramatic: the representatives of the two semiospheres balance here on the verge of understanding and appreciating the other culture. Ultimately, though, the liminal oscillations of both analyzed texts are concerned with gender differences. The distinction between the female internal and male external semiospheres, along with the genderized types of movements and the translational functioning of the borders, contributes to the general feminist overtone of both works, emphasizing the narrative significance and thematic prominence of the female elements.

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