



METAPHYSICAL CRIME SCENES: LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES IN FEMALE CRIME FICTION OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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The article is aimed at studying the principal literary geographies, depicted in the contemporary female detective fiction. Drawing on the genre theory of metaphysical thriller and the feminist theory, it explores the similarities between the crime scenes, described in *The Likeness* by Tana French (2008) and *Lethal White* by Robert Galbraith (2018). It was discovered that both novels feature the images of the Big House, the Big City, and the woods. They are imbued with the similar symbolic meaning and connote transformational experiences of the female protagonist in the process of her evolution. The chart of literary geographies turns into a metaphoric map of the female identity.

Key words: literary geography, metaphysical female detective fiction, space, crime scene, metaphoric map.

Our purpose in this article is to reveal a deep-rooted relationship between the physical settings serving as literary crime scenes and the image of the female protagonist, and to show that this relationship is immanent in the genre nature of the twenty-first century female metaphysical crime fiction. The fundamental concept that connects geomorphic and anthropomorphic images is that of space. It is an intersection of the Bakhtinian vision of literary chronotopes as “spatial and temporal indicators ... fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole” [Bakhtin 1981: 84] and the spatialized understanding of the female identity in feminist theory. Its representatives including Virginia

Woolf, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Adrienne Rich, Kerstin Shands and many others compare female identity to a fluid assembly of spaces that women have ever inhabited or aspired to inhabit.

Space has always been the source of the most powerful metaphors in the history of human thought. In literary works, we observe a non-stopping interaction and cross-fertilization of metaphoric spaces and physical spaces that are often called literary geographies. Robert T. Tally defines literary geographies as descriptions based on existing topographies but also paying attention to “the shifting configurations of social space over time, as well as the means by which texts represent or map spaces and places” [Tally 2013: 80]. In the theory of literature, particular fictional geographies have become emblematic for defining the features of literary genres, and the genre of female detective fiction undoubtedly proves it. As John Martin observes, “for crime fiction, perhaps more than other genres, the setting of the book is crucial. A crime is often the product of the society around it, and that in itself is heavily influenced by the environment. In addition, the setting evokes emotion and knowledge in the reader” [Martin 2014: 1]. This article is an attempt to bring under one roof the typical literary geographies, featured in the female crime fiction of the twenty-first century. It has been suggested that by way of putting them together we can create a metaphoric map of the female protagonist’s evolution. Each of these geographies has a symbolic meaning and can be viewed as a landmark in the progress of the female detective struggling with social prejudice, professional marginalization, and deep traumas from the past.

There is a growing consensus to consider the twenty-first-century female fiction a new literary genre, which is frequently termed metaphysical thriller [Merivale, Sweeney 1999; Dechêne 2018; Lapina, Villarroel Prado 2023]. The term “metaphysical” stresses the tendency of this genre to “perceive the universe as a secret script to which we stubbornly try to find the clue” [Kolakowski 1988: 118], while focusing on the personality of the female investigator. It has its own set of generic features that differentiate it from the canonical patterns of the twentieth century. Among these features are preoccupation with the female protagonist’s approach to detection and the spatialization of her psychological and professional evolution, whereby space is converted into “an object of speculation and interpretation which takes the enquiry to a different “meta” level” [Dechêne 2018: 9].

From its emergence, the female detective fiction has been questioning the social meaning of spaces and the gendered spatial dichotomies. It determinedly contrasted open and confined spaces, a Big City and a provincial neighborhood, central and marginal locations, and spaces, specially designed for men and women. In the works of the classics of the genre, such as Agatha

Christie, Ngaio Marsh, Margery Allingham and others, the crime scene is usually a confined space: a country manor, an isolated building, a library, a train carriage, a passenger ship, a small village. All of them pay tribute to “the locked room” canon, established in the British prewar literary output, often referred to as the Golden Age detective story. However, contemporary female crime and mystery fiction subverts or sheds a different light on this canon, thus signifying its principal difference from the literary predecessors. Moving out of the locked room and into the whole wide world stresses the new, more active role of the female detective. She is viewed as a subject and object of detection, and a new player on the arena of rivalling political forces.

The material of research is comprised of the two narratives that exhibit the features of the contemporary female metaphysical thriller, Tana French’s *The Likeness* (2008) and J.K. Rowling’s *Lethal White* (2018), which was published under the name Robert Galbraith. More specifically, it was decided to study the literary geographies of the protagonists of these novels, Cassie Maddox and Robin Ellacott. Text mining and data retrieval with reference to both narratives were used as the main analytical tools. First, all language material related to the protagonist’s spatial performance was obtained from each novel. Next, the language units, i.e., phrases and sentence parts, were distributed among several categories corresponding to the protagonist’s most frequently occurring geographies. The number of linguistic units in each category indicates the importance of a place for the protagonist’s evolution. Then, a thematic analysis across the two narratives was performed in order to identify geographies, characteristic of the female metaphysical thriller as a contemporary literary phenomenon.

As the analysis has shown, the major geographies, featured in *The Likeness* and having personal connection with the life and professional activities of Cassie Maddox, are the Irish rural locations. They include the residence of the local landlords called Whitethorn House; the village of Glenskehy that used to provide servants for Whitethorn House; and the woods where the victim’s body was found. These spaces are opposed to the Dublin geographies, such as Cassie’s flat, her workplace in Dublin Castle, and Trinity College. Although the main developments of the novel take place in and around Whitethorn House, the urban space opens and closes Cassie’s work on the case, as though keeping a tight grip on her and framing her spatial performance.

Though the spatial experience of Robin Ellacott, the heroine of *Lethal White*, is more varied, it follows the same pattern. On the one hand, she is tied to several London locations: her office in Denmark street; her marital house in Deptford; the ultra-leftists’ meeting places in Camden; and the

Houses of Parliament. On the other hand, crucial for the case are the countryside Oxfordshire geographies: Chiswell House and the woods around it. The findings of the analysis show that the most important literary geographies in both novels have very similar features: the Big House, the Big City, and the woods appear as primary or secondary crime scenes and are imbued with the same cultural connotations and symbolic meaning.

In *The Likeness* and *Lethal White*, the Big House belonging to a once-rich aristocratic family is depicted as an obnoxious but enduring remnant of the British colonial power. Whitethorn House and Chiswell House were built around the same time and in the similar architectural style, associated with the heyday of the British Empire. They used to belong to the wealthy families with the strong military traditions. The old owners of those houses were known as bad-tempered bullies and oppressors of the local villagers. Both Whitethorn House and Chiswell House embody the feudal worldview of the landed aristocracy looking down at the underprivileged. Their interiors are full of material symbols, related to the past: “old bits and bobs” [French 2009: 94] or “a jumble of family photographs in messy collages” [Galbraith 2018: 354]. Both houses are undergoing a metamorphosis from the stately and proud family seats to the abandoned ghost houses. Following the Gothic tradition of *Jane Eyre*, the heroine unravels evil secrets, hidden on the top floor. Eventually, the female detective destroys the Big House, literally in *The Likeness* and metaphorically in both novels. This outcome signifies the end of patriarchal power over a self-reliant woman and also the end of the locked room as a narrative cliché of female detective fiction.

The multi-faced space of the Big City is another essential spatial context, having a determining impact on the female detective’s identity. For her, fitting into the tapestry of heterogeneous and often hostile spaces is a touchstone of professional ability. The urban geographies are in principal opposition to the spatial imagery of confinement. Both novels under analysis transmit a dissolving sense of female homeboundness. Cassie’s rented flat in *The Likeness* is a purely functional and somewhat depressive setting. In *Lethal White*, Robin leaves the family house for good because she abhors the conventional role of the home angel. Also, while the link between the woman and her home vanishes, there is a growing association of the protagonist with her changing places of work. They include private homes and offices, universities and administrative buildings, locations ranging from the “orgy of designer-label self-expression” [French 2009: 47] to “centuries-old back streets” [Galbraith 2018: 176], and from “upmarket utilitarian” venues [Galbraith 2018: 177] to “cockroachy flats from hell” [French 2009: 21]. The stark contrast between the top and bottom-end geographies illustrates the unpredictable nature of the

detective's work and likens the space of the Big City to the chaotic pile of clues or jumbled fragments of narrative.

Finally, the literary geography that displays a very pronounced gender symbolism is the woods. It stresses the role of the female protagonist as Other, an unconventional detective who carves out her own path. She finds inspiration in the irrational and the suppressed and uses her otherness as an advantage. In both novels the space of the woods becomes an in-between setting, a contested land cross-mapping the inherited memory of patriarchal violence with mystery, magic, and myth. Its image is loaded with the symbolism of spilt blood and the rites of passage. The feminized space of the woods is "dark and scented and alive" [French 2009: 311], full of "tiny, unseen creatures" [Galbraith 2018: 557], reminding of the elves or fairies. It has protected all those who ever felt miserable and ill-treated, from the victims of the historic Irish Famine to the contemporary tenants of a cruel landlord. It is timeless, because violence has no age. At the same time, the woods are depicted as a realm of female empowerment and infinite opportunity. The presence of primal feminine magic gives this setting the power to transform dead bodies. In one novel, a dead girl turns into "the bluebells and the hawthorn tree" [French 2009: 352], and in the other – first into a boy and then into a horse as a noble, even sacred animal. Thus, the woods become a symbolic counter-space, a site of ritual sacrifice and covert resistance.

Thus, the principal literary geographies, depicted as crime scenes in the contemporary female detective fiction, have very much in common. They can be read not only as maps of crime and detection but also as physical counterparts of metaphysical spaces, which altogether constitute the female identity. They acquire symbolic meaning and configure the female protagonist's evolution from the imprisoning confined spaces similar to the literary "locked rooms" into the world without boundaries.

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МЕТАФИЗИЧЕСКИЕ МЕСТА ПРЕСТУПЛЕНИЯ: ЛИТЕРАТУРНАЯ ГЕОГРАФИЯ В ЖЕНСКОМ ДЕТЕКТИВНОМ РОМАНЕ XXI ВЕКА

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В статье рассматривается литературная география, представленная в современном женском детективном романе. Сходство в изображении мест преступления прослеживается на материале романов Т. Френч “Сходство” и Р. Гэлбрейта “Смертельная белизна”, принадлежащих к жанру метафизического триллера. Делается вывод о том, что символика топосов Большого Дома, Большого Города и леса непосредственно связана с эволюцией героини. Литературно-географические образы превращаются в метафорическую карту ее идентичности.

Ключевые слова: литературная география, метафизический женский детективный роман, топос, место преступления, метафорическая карта.

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