

# MULTIDIMENSIONAL DISCOURSE IN THE FICTION OF EVA FIGES

**Małgorzata Godlewska**

**Wydawnictwo  
Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego**

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## INTRODUCTION

The present monographic work aims at analysing multidimensionality in the fiction of a British writer Eva Figs (1932–2012). The diversity of themes prevailing in the writer's works undoubtedly stems from her background and past experiences. She was born in Berlin in 1932 in a Jewish upper-class family. Her escape from Nazi Germany and emigration to London at the beginning of World War II in 1939 might be viewed as a turning point in her life, implicitly presented in a number of her works as the moment of her loss of innocence and the source of her trauma.

Figs is a recognised writer of fiction and non-fiction with thirteen novels, three memoirs, and a number of publications of literary and social criticism. Despite numerous literary awards, including the prestigious *Guardian Fiction Prize* (1967) for one of her earlier novels, *Winter Journey* (1967), and recognition among critics of literature, Figs's novels have not gained extensive popularity among readers due to the use of experimental and demanding modernist and postmodernist techniques (Schreckenberger 2002: 88). In spite of scholarly recognition, not many monographic works in English have been devoted to the analysis and presentation of her literary achievements. Such an omission is surprising in view of the writer's undisputed literary skills and wide-ranging interests in the social, psychological and historical aspects of human life.

The critical material is limited to literary reviews of her works in newspapers and popular magazines as well as to infrequent analyses in contemporary literature. The scholarly works which have served as the point of reference in this work include Peter Child's *Contemporary Novelist: British Fiction Since 1970* (2005), Bryan Cheyette's anthology *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Britain and Ireland* (1998), Beate Neumeier's *Engendering Realism and Postmodernism: Contemporary Women Writers in Britain* (2001), Olga Kenyon's *Women Writers Talk: Interview with Ten Women Writers* (1990) and Silvia Pellicer-Ortín's *Eva Figes' Writings: A Journey through Trauma* (2015). Supplementary information concerning Figes's novels has been collected from interviews and literary reviews found in online data bases as well as in periodicals and newspapers such as *The New York Times Book Review*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *Spectator*. All of them provide the reader with impressionistic, undocumented views and opinions. In a review in *The New York Times Book Review*, *Nelly's Version* has been described as "an engrossing book, so finely executed as a satire that not until we have finished it do we realize its sharp claws were never retracted" (MacConkey 1988: 9). In a book review in the *Library Journal*, *Ghosts* has been called "an impressionistic novel" in which "Figes's handling of time and structure is superb". The same review admits that "both [*Ghosts* and *Nelly's Version*] should be considered by public libraries and academic libraries strong in feminist literature" (Sandvick 1988: 101). The writer's biography highlights the importance of *Light* in her career, which is argued to be "Figes's finest work to date", and "intense poetic lyricism" found in *Light* and in her previous novel *Konek Landing* is claimed to stem from "unbroken texture, or openness and continuity" (Kemp). A review of *Tales of Innocence and Experience* in *The New York Times Book Review* defines the novel as "a story of the Holocaust, related with such a fine, poetic delicacy that no summary can do it justice" (Ehrenreich 2003: 123). The dominant issues raised in Figes's fiction that underlie its uniqueness have been summarised in the following passage from Bryan Cheyette's anthology which, however, lacks a more thoroughly analytical insight:

Figes has increasingly combined pained images of fragmentation with a lyric intensity. She has above all eschewed a cozy English realism as being unable to deal with her childhood experiences. Her fiction is not directly autobiographical, although it obviously relates on a deeper level to a profound sense of rupture and of having an irredeemable past. . . . She has spoken of the “fragmentary nature of remembered experience” [Conradi 1983: 301] and has thus tried to find a new poetic language and set of conventions to express her inner consciousness. (Cheyette 1998: i)

The opinions quoted above concerning the writer and her fiction undeniably substantiate the argument about her underrated position and the scarceness of sources proves the necessity to fill the gap. This monograph is an attempt to analyse Figes’s fiction and offer a perspective from which her works can be profitably explicated in their intricacies. Some analyses of the writer’s literary input found therein have already been published in a variety of scientific journals, albeit mainly from the perspective of the theory of trauma. The present monograph discusses Figes’s works of fiction in terms of their multidimensionality and their discourse potency which emerges out of the net of intertextual relations. Despite the thematic multiplicity of Figes’s fiction, the issues of memory, identity and transitoriness discussed in the following chapters seem to underlie all her literary works.

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### Main Stages and Common Issues in Figes’s Literary Career

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The four analytical chapters of the present work are each devoted to a different novel and the intertextual dialogue it enters with numerous literary works and cultural traditions. The aim of the analysis is to demonstrate the development of the writer’s literary techniques, her experiments with various modes of expression, and the increasing thematic diversity within the last thirty years of her literary career.

One of the major issues raised in most of Figes's works, and dominant in the first stage of her career\*, is the situation of a woman in contemporary society, the idea overtly discussed in her critical works and, in particular, in the highly acclaimed example of feminist research, *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970). The work explores male–female relations against the background of patriarchal society, which is both anti-feminist and anti-semitic, and advocates a change in the economic system which may liberate people, not only women, from the limiting roles imposed on them (Vidal 1971: 69). Her subsequent non-fiction works, such as *Tradition and Social Evolution* (1976), *Sex and Subterfuge: Women Writers to 1850* (1982) and *Women's Letters in Wartime (1450–1945)*, contribute to the creation of Figes's image as a feminist critic, which partly overshadows her other literary accomplishments. Figes's preoccupation with feminist criticism finds its justification in the general tendencies of the 1960s and 1970s in Great Britain inflicted by post-war politics. The period has been described as “a new era of inequality and social division” (Head 2002: 30) which becomes the ground for the emergence of second-wave feminism initiated in the 1960s and flourishing in the 1970s (Head 2002: 83). What is crucial to understanding the philosophy underlying Figes's works is the general atmosphere of the period marked by the criticism of patriarchy and the observable split in traditional family values as well as the growing independence of women. The theme of the British society's conservatism mediated in her feminist non-fiction works penetrates her novels, though with “a more subtle aesthetic reaction to an overly cautious and narrow English literary culture” (Cheyette 1998: i). All of her novels embody the anxiety of the social and economic changes of that time manifested by means of the recurrent subject of the crisis of identity.

It is possible to distinguish four partly overlapping stages in the writer's career, which indicates the existence of common underlying issues and

\* Elizabeth Grosz (1989) includes Eva Figes among the group of pioneer feminists of the second wave together with Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millett.

techniques in the novels as well as the process of gradual development and transformation of her literary methods. The initial stage encompasses the early 1960s and 1970s. I selected *Nelly's Version* (1977) as representative of this period as it accumulates the issues and techniques applied at this stage. At the same time, the novel arguably constitutes a breakthrough in Figes's writing because of its divergence from the previously practised methods. The writer's early novels focus on the search for a new method of expression to convey the protagonists' subconscious. The fragmentation of identity is signalled in particular by means of streams of consciousness and interior monologues. The source of the protagonists' inner crisis is perceived to be in the society: people's insensitivity and indifference towards a lonely woman in *Equinox* (1966), an elderly deaf man in *Winter Journey* (1967), cruelty towards a Jewish boy in *Konek Landing* (1969). In *B* (1972) it is the artist absorbed in the world of his own fiction who inflicts misfortunes on other people and on himself. In *Nelly's Version*, emotional disintegration is shown to have its roots in social constraints.

*Nelly's Version* might be perceived as an important achievement and a step forward in the writer's career because it departs from the male point of view, which dominated Figes's previous works, and assumes the female perspective to depict a patriarchal society. This change could be an attempt to resist her own overtly stated inhibitions that forced her to favour the male perspective against her personal convictions (Kenyon 1990: 76).

What is more, the early novels' focus on linguistic experimentation and their male perspective, visible in *Winter Journey* in particular, is supplemented with a practice of mixing genres. *Nelly's Version* adopts various determinants of the genres present in the other novels of the group, such as the genre markers of a detective novel and a realist novel with a social and psychological dimension, and upgrades them. The novel constitutes an attempt to resist the tradition of the realist novel advocated and practised by men-writers. Through the juxtaposition of various narrative techniques, contradictory genre markers and a range of intertextual relations to express the voice of an every-woman protagonist, *Nelly's Version* manages to



rebel against the author's previous male-determined literary choices and provides an example of "liberated and modern fiction" (Ackroyd 1977: 12).

The social aspect, though still present, is overshadowed in the second group of novels by a different set of issues. These novels share, to a varying degree, an interest in the poetic mode of expression. It is difficult to precisely identify the starting and ending points of this trend in Figes's writing, which emerged gradually in *Days* (1974), followed by *Waking* (1981), *Light* (1983) and finally *Ghosts* (1988). Nevertheless, because of the differences between the novels related to the narrative techniques used and dominant themes, it is necessary to distinguish two periods in Figes's interest in the poetic mode: the first one being the early 1980s, best represented by *Light*, and the second, later one represented by *Ghosts*.

Even though the juxtaposition of the poetic and the prosaic is characteristic of all of the works in this group, *Light* might be considered as belonging to the initial, intermediary phase of this trend. Positioned on the interface of Figes's two favoured literary modes, it indicates a gradual progression towards a denial of the male literary tradition. *Light* combines a number of determinants characteristic of her first works, namely the male perspective and the ascription of names and factual details to the protagonists, Claude Monet and his family, as well as an interest in the protagonists' inner life and a reliance upon the social situation depicted in the image of a family.

However, the employment of modernist techniques – multiple points of view, filtering of the world through the protagonist's eyes, interior monologue and free indirect thought as well as a highly metaphorical language – supports the argument about the gradual thematic and narrative development observed in Figes's fiction. What is more, the application of the techniques mentioned above announces the emergence of one of the two directions of Figes's prose in the next period of her literary career, namely the prose poem.

*Ghosts* differs from the rest of the poetic novels in question due to its highest approximation to poetry and its achievement of an incomparable

distillation of a universal human consciousness. *Light*, *Days* and *Waking* share the dominance of the female perspective. Nevertheless, with the exception of *Waking* and in contrast to *Light*, the other two works focus on the point of view of one protagonist rather than a group of characters.

What the novels have in common is their preoccupation with time, transitoriness and ageing, which are regarded as the origins of the women's sense of exclusion from the society and the source of their shattered identity, highlighted by the fragmentation of narration. The advantage of *Ghosts* over the other novels from this period is its multidimensionality. The consciousness which emerges from the text relies upon a discourse with cultural and literary tradition and reveals in Figes's version of *the language of the body* a spirit of feminist criticism which opposes the male realist tradition in literature.

The other direction of Figes's novels, heralded partly by *Light*, leads towards historical fiction. *Light* adopts the historical figure of the impressionist painter and recreates the idyll of the pre-war times, but foregrounds the psychological insight visible to a varying degree in all Figes's novels. What must be observed with regard to the period from the late 1980s up to the present is the growing importance of historical perspectives. The historical standpoint, almost absent in the previous works, obscured by the dominant social and psychological aspects, prevails in the later novels: *The Seven Ages* (1986), *The Tree of Knowledge* (1990), *Tales of Innocence and Experience* (2003) and *The Journey to Nowhere* (2007).

In the first two novels, the presentation of historical events and figures constitutes a pretext to discuss the inferior position of women in the society throughout the ages. The historical progress, typical male domain in fiction, is denied by a shift towards the everyday and the mundane which consciously prevent the development of the action in *The Seven Ages* (Goreau 1987: 7). The novel represents an interesting attempt at a gynocritical approach to retelling history, refocusing on women's fate and rewriting literature from the perspective of a woman writer. *The Tree of Knowledge* may be regarded as "a feminist reading of Milton" and

seventeenth-century England as well as a depiction of the inferior position of women in those times (Simon 1991: 20). These two novels seem to follow a path towards the presentation of a female perspective against the background of history and social issues.

The latest two novels, and markedly *Tales of Innocence and Experience*, exhibit an expression of the female identity displaced by history of World War II and the Holocaust in particular. *Tales of Innocence and Experience* is a search for the cure to the split between the world of innocence constituted by universal values and the mature world of experience which denies one's beliefs and virtues. In contrast to the previous works, where the protagonist's and the narrator's perspectives partly overlap, the latest two works introduce autobiographical elements to the first-person narration. *Tales of Innocence and Experience* should be viewed as a process of experiencing the sense of loss of one's nation, culture and identity through the activity of retelling one's story. The work offers the writer's answer to the question about the methods of relating history and one's traumatic personal past. It shows the writer's mastery in combining traditional with modernist and postmodernist narrative techniques in order to recount global history which transpires from the narrator's traumatised memories. The poetic mode and the combination of high and low genres can be viewed as the writer's way of expressing personal and universal statements.

Although the novels representing various stages of the writer's literary career differ in terms of genre markers, narrative techniques and themes which they adopt, they can be analysed with respect to their shared features and recurrent motifs. It can be claimed that in a variety of ways the novels touch upon the common questions of memory, traumatised identity and transitoriness. Fige's works, frequently prose poems rather than novels, enter into a dialogue with tradition. In order to demonstrate the individual ways of generating meanings within the scope of the issues of memory, identity and transitoriness, it is necessary to analyse them as a tissue of intertextual relations and present their functioning in Fige's novels. Hence, it is important to examine the concept of intertextuality,

which is not a clear-cut and unequivocal notion, and, at the present stage of its development, its interpretation has diverged from the suggestions of its progenitors, Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva. The following analysis presents the most important tendencies in the development of the notion of *intertextuality* so as to expose the theoretical concepts useful in the elucidation of the essence of Figes's fiction. As conducting a complete study of all concepts of intertextuality is not possible in this monographic work, I decided to follow Graham Allen's review of theories (2011) which introduces the intricacies of intertextuality.

The present monograph is a thorough analysis of the literary production by the English writer Eva Figs (1932–2012). The author of this monograph concentrates both on the analysis of her novels, namely, *Nelly's Version* (1977), *Light* (1983), and *Ghosts* (1988), and on a fictional memoir entitled *Tales of Innocence and Experience* (2003). In order to carry out her examination she uses the theoretical framework of multi-dimensionality, thus providing a cohesive innovative approach for the study of the fiction by a writer that requires further investigation, as Dr Godlewska proves in her book.

The theoretical framework used includes various approaches such as those of intertextuality, dialogism, gynocriticism, historiographical memory, cultural memory, and the individual model proposed by the author of this monograph. With those viewpoints in mind, Dr Godlewska perceives the polyphony of voices from many writers and artists, both contemporary and from other periods of the literary history, present in Figs's texts. In that Dr Godlewska offers the reader a neat and profound reading that elucidates ideas and echoes not yet perceived by former critics deciphering an intertextual mosaic present in the palimpsestic texts by Figs.

It is an excellent work that represents an advancement of knowledge in the field.



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