

Malina Załużna-Łuczkiwicz

State School of Higher Education in Chełm

**Spectacle realism revisited: the depiction of social class
and its effect on characters
in Elizabeth Strout's *Anything Is Possible***

Abstract

The article analyses how Elizabeth Strout shows the effect of belonging to a certain social class on characters in *Anything Is Possible*. It is argued that the location on the social ladder leaves an imprint on them that is difficult, if not impossible, to change. Similarities are drawn between Strout's collection of stories and fiction called spectacle realism, a term coined by Joseph Dewey to describe a trend in the American literature of the Reagan era.

Keywords: *social class, Anything Is Possible, Elizabeth Strout, spectacle realism, Joseph Dewey*

Abstrakt

W artykule analizowany jest wpływ, jaki na bohaterów *To, co możliwe* Elizabeth Strout wywiera przynależność do danej klasy społecznej. Autorka dowodzi, że umiejscowienie na drabinie społecznej w trwały sposób wpływa na bohaterów tej prozy. Przeanalizowane są też podobieństwa między zbiorem opowiadań Elizabeth Strout a prozą określaną w języku angielskim jako *spectacle realism*. Jest to termin ukuty przez Josepha Deweya na określenie jednego z trendów w literaturze amerykańskiej czasów Reagana.

Słowa kluczowe: *klasa społeczna, To, co możliwe, Elizabeth Strout, spectacle realism, Joseph Dewey*

Elizabeth Strout in her recently published book titled *Anything is Possible* returns to places and people from her earlier fiction. The book, like Pulitzer Prize-winning *Olive Kitteridge*, is a collection of interweaving stories held together by common characters, themes and places. It received positive reviews with critics finding value in various aspects of this fiction: "so finely attuned to humanity's flaws, vulnerabilities and moments of transcendence" (McLaughlin, 2017), "sincere, human and moving" (Jordison, 2017) or: "a profound statement about the elusiveness of truth about ourselves and others" (Tsouderos, 2017), "a haunting damnation of war" (Ode, 2017). *Anything Is Possible* is set in Amgash, the town the protagonist narrator from Strout's previous novel *My Name Is Lucy Barton* comes from. Characters in the collection are the townspeople the reader caught glimpses of in the conversations of Lucy and her mother. A lot of the unspeakable from *My Name Is Lucy Barton* is revealed in *Anything Is Possible* and it is no laughing matter. As Jennifer Senior in *NY Times* observes: "You read Strout, really, for the same reason you listen to a requiem: to experience beauty in sadness" (Senior, 2017).

In this paper I elaborate on the issue of social class and how it psychologically affects the characters in *Anything Is Possible*. Some of them are poverty survivors – people who escaped the life of destitution, climbed the social ladder and landed themselves a place in the middle class or higher, whereas others are middle class members, often fearing relegation to the bottom of the social stratum. Tom Wolfe in his essay "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: a Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel" claims that showing the effects the society has on all aspects of life has always produced great characters: "If we substitute for *class* [...], the broader term *status* that technique has never been more essential in portraying the innermost life of the individual" (Wolfe, 1989). And indeed, Elizabeth Strout uses social class to that purpose. Although out of the trio: gender, race and class, the last one seems to attract the least critical attention, there are still a number of studies devoted to it in literature, for instance: *From the Depths* by Robert Bremner, *On the Bowery* by Benedict Giacomo, *Remnants of Nation* by Roxanne Rimstead, *American Hungers* by Gavin Jones, *The Syntax of Class* by Amy Lang, *Hicks, Tribes and Dirty Realists* by Robert Rebein, *The Psychology of Social Class in the Fiction of Russel Banks*, *Denis Johnson and Harry Crews* by David Buehrer and Daniel Royot or *Vanishing Moments: Class and American Literature* by Eric Schocket. They look at poverty from different perspectives showing, among others, how social class interacts with gender and race, how the middle class fashions itself against the working class or how the poor are victims of social forces beyond their control.

However, I would like to put the portrayal of various social classes and the bearing belonging to them as in *Anything is Possible* in the context of spectacle realism, a concept coined by Joseph Dewey to describe a trend in the realistic American fiction of the Reagan era. In his book *Novels from Reagan's America: a New Realism* he argues that there were three currents in the American fiction of that time. The first one was the postmodern text, which was removed from reality, and because of its high degree of complexity could not appeal to a broader audience. According to Dewey "these texts, lavish and self-indulgent and cerebral, abandon as unworkable traditional ethical and moral stands to explore the tonic force of language itself" (Dewey, 1999, p. 268). As such they were relegated to the university; understood and studied by scholars but unattractive and incomprehensible to other readers. Dewey even equates Reagan's America and Disney World with a postmodern text: "[...] they are each about our right to spectacle, our right to succumb, our right to play in order to return ultimately to an immediate that endures (we know) just outside the confines of each insulated play zone" (Dewey, 1999, p. 15). His observations are in keeping with what Philip Stevick pointed out in his essay on postmodernist fiction titled "Scheherazade Runs out of Plots, Goes on Talking; the King, Puzzled; Listens: an Essay on New Fiction": "New fiction, on the other hand, elevates play to the very centre of the complex of apparent motives that animate the work" (Stevick, 1977, p. 215). The second type was the so-called popular fiction, which only gave an illusion of realism and typically had: stock characters, specific settings, quickly moving plots, (sometimes) moral lessons and satisfying closures. Here he mentions authors like: Danielle Steel, Jackie Collins, Robert Ludlow, Tom Clancy or James Michener. Dewey characterises their books in the following way: "Denied status as academic texts, denied serious examination even by book reviewers, such "realistic" narratives revealed their status as play" (Dewey, 1999, p. 25).

Finally, there was the third kind written and published often to little critical acclaim or scant financial success. Dewey describes it as follows: "These works seek, rather, to reenchant the immediate. They are works of what we will call spectacle realism, a genre of realistic texts that offers an unapologetically ascendant sense of the immediate, a radical recognition born from full awareness of the flawed richness that, unsuspected and untapped, encloses each of us" (Dewey, 1999, p. 27). As such they counterbalance the other two types of texts and are, what the author calls, "luminous, kinder, gentler fictions." This is not to say that this kind of realistic prose appeared out of nowhere. It has been written all along but somehow remained in the backgro-

und of the other two kinds. Joseph S. Walker, although not wholly convinced by Dewey's argumentation or his choice of texts illustrating spectacle realism, ends his review of the book on a positive note: "More importantly, the central conception of "spectacle realism" is thoughtfully crafted and has significant potential for further scholarship. It suggests new ways of approaching any number of texts, including many that may be marginalized in recent critical work, and of remapping the dominant position of postmodernism in our considerations of contemporary fiction" (Walker, 2001, p. 503). The fact that realistic fiction has never disappeared is also acknowledged by other critics and scholars, including Malcolm Bradbury, who writes: "I am one of those who believe that the practice of realism has in some fashion never been away from the main business of the novel" (Bradbury, 1992, p. 15). Perhaps it is too early and beyond the scope of this paper to draw an analogy between Reagan's and Trump's Americas in terms of culture or politics, but the prose that has the qualities of spectacle realism is still being published – Elizabeth Strout's *Anything Is Possible* being a case in point.

In Strout's collection there is a group of characters who could be classified as middle class and some of them get the least sympathetic treatment from the author. One such character is Kathy Nicely who scandalized the town and traumatized her three daughters by her affair with a Spanish teacher. She walked out on the family but the relationship ended with the woman abandoned by her lover, ostracized by the town, living on her own in a small ramshackle house. A few decades after these events the mother is portrayed as a slightly demented bitter old woman mooning about the house in the bathrobe all day. It is hard for the reader to feel sympathy or pity for her because, in spite of her own reduced circumstances, she still looks down on the lower classes. In a conversation with her daughter, Patty she sums up a woman from their town in the following way:

"She wasn't much."

"Who wasn't much? Angelina's a great person. I always thought her mother was really nice."

"Oh, she was nice. She just wasn't much" (Strout, 2017, p. 46).

And then she turns sappy reminiscing about the dances at The Club – a meeting place for local gentility. She is contrasted with another character from their town, Mary Mumford, who also left her family and, as a result, dropped down on the social ladder. Similarly to Mrs Nicely, she left her unfaithful husband and then adult children to marry an Italian. In the story "Mississippi Mary" the couple are depicted living in a modest flat in Italy. As

opposed to Kathy Nicely's choice – Mary's decision turned out to be a leap for freedom. Contrary to Kathy Nicely, Mary Mumford remembers The Club as a place where the elite would put on airs and graces: "Honey, I said it wasn't my thing, and it wasn't. I wasn't raised that way and I never got used to it, all the showing off of new dresses and the women so silly" (Strout, 2017, p. 122). These two characters who move down the economic scale are juxtaposed to illustrate the idea that whatever circumstances people were brought up in, they leave an indelible imprint on them and define them as people. Kathy Nicely, despite impoverishment, remains middle class and for Mary Mumford her life in Italy is the return to the origins and a liberating move. Like other characters in this collection she remained an intruder in the social class her husband's family belonged to.

Another middle class character is the protagonist in the disturbing story "Cracked." Linda is Kathy's daughter and one of the three, now middle-aged, Nicely sisters. She lives a more than comfortable life with her husband, Jay. They are the local elite and occupy a luxury house. In the story the couple offer their guest suite for a few days to Yvonne Tuttle, one of the photographers who comes to the summer photography festival in their town. What is disconcerting about the guest suite is that its walls, including the bathroom, are made of glass. As the reader finds out in the course of the story, Jay and Linda use webcam cameras to spy on their visitors, initially for fun, as a way of alleviating boredom in their marriage. The story takes an ominous turn when Linda is woken up by the police knocking on their door and finds out, that Yvonne is in the county hospital after Jay attempted to rape her. What is more, Linda suspects her husband of having something to do with the disappearance of a seventeen-year-old girl in their town a few years earlier. Even though Linda would rather Jay disappeared from her life, she is unable to leave him because what she fears most is the relegation to the bottom of the social ladder, which would be the consequence of walking out on him. Like her mother, Linda emerges as a character clinging to appearances and suffering from class anxiety. The moment she spots Yvonne, she notices her shoes. "Yvonne's sandals with high cork wedges, made her even taller. They gave away to Linda the fact that Yvonne had, in her youth, most likely not come from much. Shoes always gave you away" (Strout, 2017, p. 78). Jay also notices Yvonne's "slightly slutty, working-class look" (Strout, 2017, p. 79). What helps to characterise this couple is their house with a pool, two Picassos and an Edward Hopper on the walls. It is not only their living space, but most of all a status symbol, which brings to mind what Roxanne Rimstead in her book *Remnants of Nation* observes: "houses, like clothing,

are a strategic sight where public scrutiny and private identity meet, especially in the context of a consumer culture focused on the display of identity through acquisition" (Rimstead, 2001, p. 90). The couple are as removed from reality as their house with a glass-walled guest suite is. It is the facade they keep up for others to watch and admire. The role of the house is to intimidate and overawe and not to make people feel comfortable.

All Linda's life choices stem from her angst over ending up like Kathy: "her mother suddenly, so suddenly it seemed to Linda to happen while she was at school one day, moved out and into a squalid little apartment, and it was the most terrible thing Linda could imagine, worse than if her mother had died" (Strout, 2017, p. 86). The dread of losing her status and the exposure to public shame if people found out about the webcams, make Linda protect her husband so that he avoids punishment and the status quo is preserved. A minor character from "Cracked," Joy Gunterson, who after her divorce lost all the money and lives in a trailer, reaches out to Linda when the rape accusation is made public. "I'm not going to end up living in some trailer, Joy," Linda blurts out when Joy knocks on her door. Both women are taken aback by what Linda has said but this knee-jerk reaction, actually reveals Linda's deepest fear. She belongs to the group of characters Dewey describes as "too drawn by the logic of disengagement – too locked within private magic kingdoms – to enter into the vibrant immediate. They are characters [...] difficult to like, characters cut with deep irony, characters who resist learning [...]" (Dewey, 1999, p. 31). Indeed, Linda locks herself in her secret world of fear and shame. She chooses to stay in a protective bubble made of her husband's money insulating her from shame, which is the burden most of the characters in this collection carry.

As it has been mentioned, a lot of denizens populating Strout's fictional landscapes are people who experienced dire poverty. The Bartons are the family of poverty survivors whose story is interwoven with the stories of other Amgash inhabitants. The family appears in the conversations of the Nicely sisters or in the reminiscences of Abel Blaine, and we learn that when the three Barton siblings were children, they lived as outcasts and kids called them cooties. Pete Barton, the protagonist in "The Sign" managed to move only one rung up the ladder. He does not go hungry, as he did in the past but is still the epitome of the deterministic effect of class station on a character. The man resembles a dishevelled flesh and blood ghost, more dead than alive, living on the outskirts of Amgash, earning his living in casual jobs. Uninterested in any connection he occupies the Bartons' old family house, which nobody seems to visit. In "The Sign" the setting mirrors the protagonist and, as in "Cracked," is a me-

ans of characterisation. This "tired little house" is so dirty that when Pete decides to clean it up before his sister comes to visit after seventeen years of absence, he discovers that the curtains he thought were grey, after washing turn out to be off-white. He is amazed at the amount of grime on the floor and kitchen counters. Furthermore, the connection between the man and his place is explicitly established by Strout herself: "his hair was almost all gray now, but it was a pale gray, and it seemed to match the pale shingles of the house he stood in front of". (Strout, 2017, p. 16)

The reason for Pete's isolation is a childhood trauma caused by his upbringing in the abusive family that still has a hold on him. He is also burdened with guilt and filled with remorse for what his mentally unstable father did to the Guptills – one night in an act of revenge he secretly set fire to their uninsured dairy farm, as a result relegating the family of once prosperous farmer almost to the bottom of the social ladder. Tommy Guptill never regained his position after the fire and had to earn his living as a school janitor. What is strikingly different about these two characters is that for Guptill, who emerges as a Job-like figure, seeing everything he owned go up in smoke is paradoxically a secret moment of epiphany. He interprets the fire and the ensuing impoverishment as a message from God; not a test of faith, but the reminder of what counts in life – his family. "He often thought his children had become more compassionate as a result of having to go to school with kids who were poor, and not from homes like the one they had first known. He had felt the presence of God since, at times, as though a golden color was very near to him, but he never again felt visited by God as he had felt that night, and he knew too well what people would make of it, and this is why he would keep it to himself until his dying day – the sign from God" (Strout, 2017, p. 7). In the meeting of Pete Barton and Tommy Guptill we see the human assertion of compassion and a turn toward engagement of the immediate, which is the quality of spectacle realism. They form a certain bond when Pete divulges what his father did and Tommy Guptill, in an attempt to lift the burden off the other man's shoulders, reaches out to him and reveals his own secret. This moment shows what Dewey calls (writing about a character from "Kate Vaden" by Reynolds Price) "the strength to be weak, to relinquish the pretense of control by opening a heart completely, to trust in the heart against the considerable evidence of human meanness. That strength Price argues (and spectacle realism reaffirms), is not what makes us male or female but what makes us finally human" (Dewey, 1999, p. 113). Indeed, characters making gestures that deny "collapsing into the self" are treated with kindness and sympathy by the author in *Anything Is Possible*.

Vicky, the third Barton sibling from "Sister," who rejects connection, is contrasted with Pete and Lucy. When the three of them reunite after seventeen years, she is the one who is resentful and rejects Lucy. All of them had their fair share of traumas in the past but, Vicky, as opposed to the other two, has turned sour. She is afflicted by the memories of the horrifying scenes that took place in their home, for instance, having been forced to eat from the toilet or having had all her clothes cut up by her mother. She feels she got the roughest treatment of them all and, to Lucy's astonishment, accuses her of having been their mother's favourite. Similarly to Pete, Vicky no longer has the underclass status but she has not escaped far. Doing a menial job in a nursing home she has the material resources for a decent living but not enough to pay for her daughter's college. She comes across as a jealous and greedy type repeatedly taking money from Lucy and even as an adult woman envying new dresses their mother made decades earlier for their poor cousin, Dottie. Pete describes his sisters in the following way: "No, Lucy wouldn't have taken a penny that wasn't hers [...] My sister Vicky, well she's another story. I bet she would have taken the quarter and then asked for more" (Strout, 2017, p. 25). Grotesquely obese Vicky in her garish clothes is also physically repulsive. Lucy, whose emaciated figure contrasts with Vicky's bulk, on the other hand, managed to escape the world of poverty geographically but, as it turns out, not emotionally. She has a university degree and enjoys considerable success as a writer and it appears that her disconnection from the family was a therapeutic choice. After Vicky attacks her for having separated from them for so many years, Lucy admits that she did not visit Amgash because she did not want to. As they reminisce about their parents and the distressing scenes in their family life, Lucy has a panic attack and escapes. In this trio, Vicky and Pete are the people locked out of the American Dream whereas Lucy's life story is one of self-transformation. Although still haunted by the memories of her childhood, she managed to build a better life for herself.

It seems that the siblings' reunion ends in disaster but, in fact, there is some hope for these characters. Vicky's emotional outburst when she confesses work mates call her Icky Vicky makes her more humane. She is also moved by the fact that at work a supposedly mute patient of all the people called her name. Toward the end of the story a shift in the narrator's attitude to the characters is noticeable and the tension subsides. When the emotional turmoil of the siblings' reunion is over, Pete and Vicky drive back home together and he feels safe sitting next to her. On their way home she is no longer the spiteful obese caricature of a woman: "He liked her bulkiness, the way

she filled her seat and drove with such authority" (Strout, 2017, p. 179). On their way home Pete wants to say something comforting to Vicky but the only thing he can come up with is: "Vicky, we didn't turn out so bad, you know," to which Vicky replies: "Well, we're not out there murdering people, if that's what you mean" (Strout, 2017, p. 179). However flimsy it sounds, they make a small step toward the affirmation of life. They know they will stay where they are for the rest of their lives, yet there are worse places to be in. Even though unwillingly, Pete opens up to the world a little – he goes out and helps with the Guptills in the soup kitchen. However, the story ends with Pete offering Vicky a rug he earlier bought for the living room in a hopeless attempt to improve the appearance of his house before Lucy's arrival – possibly a gesture indicating that no transformation in his case is possible.

Another pair of siblings, who in their childhood seemed to be beyond the purview of the American Dream, are Abel and Dottie, the Bartons' cousins. They appear as protagonists in "Dottie's Bed and Breakfast" and the last story in the collection titled "Gift" as elderly people and the past is revealed through their reminiscences and other characters' conversations. Brought up by the widowed mother, they lived below the line of poverty. The most disturbing memory they have is that of having been forced to look for food in garbage. But the tables have turned for them – Dottie is a bed and breakfast proprietor and Abel has climbed the highest on the social ladder – he owns a company manufacturing air conditioning units. It is in these two stories that the question of class is addressed openly. Dottie reflects on her difficult past and how it took her some time to get used to the fact that she would not be watched in shops and subsequently asked to leave. During a conversation with Mrs Small, an upper middle class guest in her bed and breakfast, who keeps on about her personal life, Dottie feels embarrassed. She realises that talking about yourself at great length is not something people from her own class station would do. "This was a matter of different cultures. [...] She thought that this matter of different cultures was a fact that got lost in the country these days. And culture included class, which of course nobody ever talked about in this country, because it wasn't polite, but Dottie also thought people didn't talk about class because they didn't really understand what it was" (Strout, 2017, p. 199). Her perception of classes as different cultures is very much in keeping with Michael Harrington's observations in his seminal work on poverty titled *Other America*, in which he quotes a famous exchange between two characters from Hemingway's "Snows of Kilimanjaro" (supposedly, a conversation between Hemin-

gway himself and Francis Scott Fitzgerald). One character says "The rich are different from you and me", to which the other one responds "Yes, they have more money" (Harrington, 1964, p. 24). Harrington points out that the reply is incorrect – being rich is a question of thinking and speaking in a completely different way, having a different outlook on life and different psychology; simply, a matter of different cultures (Harrington, 1964, p. 24).

Knowing the humiliations of the life of poverty, Dottie is very sensitive to how others treat her and how she treats others. In "Dottie's Bed and Breakfast" she is confronted with two people in need – Mrs Small and Charlie Macauley. Dottie senses Mrs Small secretly pities her, which is something she has an aversion to because being pitied is reminiscent of her troubled childhood. In order to change the dynamics of power Dottie invites her for a cup of tea and as they chat, Mrs Small pours her heart out, going on about her new luxury house, quarrels with friends, family problems and overall disappointment with life. In the course of their conversation she emerges as vain and self-centred and, with distaste, Dottie concludes her problems are not remotely serious: she is "a woman who suffered only from the most common complaint of all: Life had simply not been what she thought it would be" (Strout, 2017, p. 204). Mrs Small is juxtaposed with another troubled character, Charlie Macauley. He is an ex-Vietnam war veteran, who had to terminate a relationship with a woman he loved and, strange as it sounds, comes to Dottie's bed and breakfast to have a breakdown. In fact, the man does not talk to Dottie at all and she never learns what caused his behaviour. They just sit watching TV together when she realises there is something wrong with him because he starts making strange weeping sounds. She takes it in her stride and just asks him a few questions, which he answers nodding or shaking his head. Finally, Dottie brings him a glass of water and takes him to his room. The difference between Charlie Macauley and Shelly Small is not only what they tell or withhold from Dottie, but what they do the next day. Shelley Small pretends not to see her and Dottie overhears how she and her husband make fun of her in a crude way, whereas Charlie Macauley just thanks her and leaves. "Honest as a brook in spring, the entire thing had been. She never looked him up on the Internet, nor was she ever tempted" (Strout, 2017, p. 203). The same cannot be said for Shelley Small. The final straw for Dottie is when, after breakfast Mr Small throws a napkin onto his cereal bowl. Dottie loses her temper and says: "I'm not a prostitute, Dr. Small. That is not my profession, you see" (Strout, 2017, p. 207). Of course, the Smalls do not understand Dottie's vehement reaction and think she is deranged. Because Dottie has the consciousness of class limitations

and their consequences, she feels used and humiliated. The Smalls, in turn, react in the same way as if they saw an armchair get angry. For Dottie, it is a question of standing up for herself. But it is her treatment of Charlie Maudcley that makes this story feel like spectacle realism. "As texts of spectacle realism argue, the unexpected wonder of the relational world is seldom [...] in the family. Rather, it is felt in the compelling mystery of strangers opening themselves up to others – the fragile miracle of a moment's generosity [...]" (Dewey, 1999, p. 106).

"Gift," the final short story in the collection features, Abel, Dottie's brother who is the most spectacular climber of all the characters. His ascent to prosperity is a true rags-to-riches story. Having been a boy who looked for food in the dumpster, through marriage Abel became a wealthy businessman. In the story he has a grown-up daughter married to a successful lawyer. His daughter's family belongs to "the privileged layer of society, to what was referred to these days as the *one percent* [...]" (Strout, 2017, p. 231). So, on the face of it, his life should be perfect but it turns out not to be so. The story is set on Christmas Eve, when Abel after an exhausting day at work has to rush home and go with his family to see the staging of *Christmas Carol* accompanied by the crème de la crème of the town. During the performance, there is a failure of electricity supply, due to which Abel's granddaughter loses her toy. Once they are home, Abel has to rush back to the theatre to retrieve it. It is there that he has a disturbing encounter with an apparently mentally unstable actor, who played Scrooge in the performance they saw.

Wealthy as he is, Abel is faint with hunger all afternoon and evening because he does not have time to eat. The Christmas season brings back the memories of his sister. He also reflects on his family life and has a disconcerting feeling, enhanced by the actor's poor performance, that, just like in the staging of *Christmas Carol*, "everyone he met was reciting a line" (Strout, 2017, p. 232). In fact, it is Abel's own sense of living a false life, which he later on realizes himself: "He remembered how earlier he'd thought of people reciting a line, and he understood now that he was one of them" (Strout, 2017, p. 242). The person who points it out to him is the grotesque actor, who behaves like unreformed Scrooge and declares he hates theatre and children. He locks himself with Abel in a room backstage and confesses he used instructions from the Internet to cause the power cut during his performance and says he is "at the end of his rope," apparently, on the verge of mental breakdown. Oddly enough, it is the actor who sees through Abel and, to his horror, characterizes him quite accurately just on the basis of his looks: "Your clothes are expensive [...]. A devoted secretary organizes your days.

Nothing is *really* expected of you anymore, you're figurehead. A few leadership qualities left. But physical strength, I doubt you have much" (Strout, 2017, pp. 238-239). There is an unbridgeable gap between Abel and people from the class he belongs to. Even for his own wife his childhood indigence is something to be ashamed of. She forbids him to ever mention that to their children, which contributes to Abel's alienation. He likens poverty to a phantom limb that one always feels, even if it is not there. As a once-poor man among the rich he is like a stranger in a foreign land; always in denial and fearing exposure. To make matters worse, as a poverty survivor, he feels being rich is something to be ashamed of too. The experience is almost physical – he feels waves of shame which he likens to the hot flashes of his wife's. When the actor asks Abel who he is, he answers: "A man who dresses well, [...] a man who doesn't cheat on his taxes" (Strout, 2017, p. 249) and realising what he just said feels like weeping. The answer reveals much about the state he is in and the sense of self that he lost. Abel is confronted with the necessity to redefine his life. Before his meeting with the crazy actor, Abel deluded himself that he had achieved financial success thanks to his hard work and honesty. Linck McKenzie holds up a mirror to his face and Abel sees that without his wife's money, all of that would not have happened. Another blow is landed when the actor blunts that the "perfect" life Abel thinks his daughter has is probably making her unhappy and sooner or later she is bound to end up depressed and on medications.

Joseph Dewey states that in spectacle realism "characters are brought in some cases with significant resistance, to confront the immediate and find for their efforts the (un)easy joy of affirmation, the unexpected beauty of the unscripted mystery of the immediate" (Dewey, 1999, p. 258). Indeed, that is what happens in the course of the story. In the first part of their strange conversation Abel takes a defensive stance and speaks in well-rehearsed lines trying to block the perception of home truths, which feel like Linck McKenzie's nasty blows on his head. When Abel says what his line of business is, they have the following exchange:

"Air conditioning. You make a bundle."

"And every year I give to the arts."

Scrooge tilted his head, looking at Abel. His lips were colorless, cracked in places. "Now, please," he said quietly. "Don't be like that." (Strout. 2017, p. 242)

Abel receives blow after blow and the effects of that combined with his weak heart and hunger make him drop his guard and he speaks his mind.

When at some point Linck McKenzie says he's lonely, Abel admits that he is too. It is the moment when he accepts what Dewey calls "the imperative of engagement" (Dewey, 1999, p. 108). Scrooge spots it as well and says: "But you're honest. Oh, thanks the *gods*. I wanted to talk to a person, and here you are a real person, you have no idea how hard it is – to find a real person" (Strout, 2017, p. 247). In fact, they don't get a chance to talk for much longer because in a moment Abel starts feeling faint and Linck McKenzie has to call an ambulance. On his way to hospital, in the half-conscious state Abel experiences a kind of epiphany which ends the whole book: "Abel had a friend. And if such a gift could come to him at such a time, then anything – dear girl from Rockford dressed up for her meeting, rushing above the Rock River – he opened his eyes, and yes, there it was, the perfect knowledge: Anything was possible for anyone" (Strout, 2017, p. 254).

The ending could be interpreted in different ways. The friend he is thinking about might be Linck McKenzie, the lonely half-crazed actor disappointed with the theatre who, like Abel, belongs nowhere. It could be the girl from Rockford who tried so hard to impress him with a presentation at work that morning and in whom he sees himself as a young boy. It could even be the ambulance woman he is thinking about with such fondness, who takes care of him on their way to hospital. It should also be noted that in "Gift" Strout quite explicitly draws an analogy between life and theatre depicting these rare moments when people-actors remove their masks and embrace the real. Whichever way we interpret it, the final message of the story and the whole book is that of hope – reaching out to another human being is what matters in the end.

As it has been shown, the fact of belonging to a certain social class, the desire to move up the social ladder or class anxiety deeply affect the characters. In most of the cases it is the factor that shapes them, influences their life decisions and determines their relationship with the rest of the world. Social class permeates relationships between people, which brings to mind Charles McGrath's observations about the hovering presence of this theme in literature that he makes in the article titled "In Fiction, a Long History of Fixation on the Social Gap": "The subject is a little like n'er-do-well relative, it's sometimes a shameful reminder, sometimes openly acknowledged, but always there, even, or especially, when it's never mentioned" (McGrath, 2005). Class is not elided in Elizabeth Strout's fiction. On the contrary, she quite openly addresses this issue. Her gaze is never neutral and she does not distance herself from the characters who populate her book at the same time avoiding sentimentality while exploring their plight. Her depiction of

these, often deeply flawed, people is in most cases free from irony or cruelty. Showing that people's actions are more often than not offshoots of the class station they belong to and that poverty is a burden that is both economic and psychic, she also argues that, like Lucy Barton, Abel Blaine or his sister, they can leave the world of pain behind. However, forging a new identity is never easy and the past cannot be simply erased. And it is in such humane and life-affirming fiction that we find the very imperative of spectacle realism metaphorically described by Joseph Dewey in the following way: "We cannot afford retreat [...], we cannot afford crabby misanthropy, to step out into a breathtaking winter morning and ponder only the dog turds, unseen, under the clean sheen of snow [...], we cannot afford to shut down our hearts imperfect exercise [...]" (Dewey, 1999, p. 259).

Bibliography

- Beuhrer, D., Royot, D. (2014). *The Psychology of Social Class in the Fiction of Russel Banks, Denis Johnson and Harry Crews: Neo-Realism, Naturalism, and Humanism in Contemporary Fiction*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Bradbury, M. (1992). Writing fiction in the 90s. In: K. Versluys (ed.). *Neo-realism in Contemporary American Fiction*. Amsterdam: Rodopi B. V.
- Bremner, R. (1956). *From the Depths: the Discovery of Poverty in the United States*. New York: New York University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1999). *Novels from Reagan's America: a New Realism*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Giacomo, B. (1989). *On the Bowery: Confronting Homelessness in American Society*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Harrington, M. (1964). *Druga Ameryka* (S. Kerner, Trans.). Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza.
- Hemingway, E. (2004). The Snows of Kilimanjaro. In: E. Hemingway (ed.). *The Snows of Kilimanjaro: Six Stories*. Stuttgart: Reclam.
- Jones, G. (2009). *American Hungers*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Jordison, S. (2017). " 'Anything Is Possible' by Elizabeth Strout Review – a Moving Return to the Midwest". In: *The Guardian*, 25.IX.
- Lang, A. (2003). *The Syntax of Class: Writing Inequality in Nineteenth-Century America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- McGrath, Ch. (2005). "In Fiction, a Long History of Fixation on the Social Gap". In: *The New York Times*, 08.VI.
- McLaughlin, D. (2017). "Anything Is Possible Review: Lucy Barton is Back in the Family Home". In: *Irish Times*, 06.V.

- Ode, K. (2017). "Review: 'Anything Is Possible,' by Elizabeth Strout". In: *Star Tribune*. 23.VI.
- Rebein, R. (2001). *Hicks, Tribes and Dirty Realists: American Fiction After Postmodernism*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky.
- Rimstead, R. (2001). *Remnants of Nation: On Poverty Narratives by Women*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Schocket, E. (2006). *Vanishing Moments: Class and American Literature*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.
- Senior, J. (2017). "Elizabeth Strout's Lovely New Novel Is a Requiem for Small-Town Pain". In: *New York Times*. 26.IV.
- Stevick, P. (1977). Scheherazade Runs out of Plots, Goes on Talking; the King, Puzzled; Listens: an Essay on New Fiction. In: M. Bradbury (ed.), *The Novel Today*. Fontana: Fontana/Collins.
- Strout, E. (2017). *Anything Is Possible*. New York: Penguin Random House LLC.
- Strout E. (2016). *My Name Is Lucy Barton*. New York: Penguin Random House LCC.
- Tsouderos, T. (2017). "Review: 'Anything Is Possible' by Elizabeth Strout". In: *Chicago Tribune*, 24.IV.
- Walker, J. (2001). "Reviewed Work: Novels From Reagan's America: A New Realism by Joseph Dewey" In: *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 77 No. 2 (Summer 2001).
- Wolfe, T. (1989). "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: a Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel". In: *Harper's Magazine*, XI.

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Malina Załużna-Luczkiwicz, M.A. in English Philology – a faculty member of the English and American Studies Department (State School of Higher Education, Chełm). E-mail: mzaluzna@op.pl