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Metaphors of Postmodernism in Neo-Victorian Fiction: “The Trial of Elizabeth Cree” by Peter Ackroyd and “The Decorator” by Boris Akunin

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Abstract

One of the features that characterizes postmodern fiction is an intense interest in the past, and especially so – in Victorian period, chiefly in its sensational aspects. Therefore we witness a revival of Victorian crime novel and this tendency can be traced not only in recent English literature, but in other literatures as well, Russian in particular. This gave birth to the term “neo-Victorian novel”, referring to the pieces, which recreate the atmosphere of the period, introduce a lot of intertextual allusions and references to the well-known Victorian novels and exploit most popular subjects of the 19th century literature. However as we will argue in this essay the authors often use these plots as implicit metaphors of postmodern art as such. It will be demonstrated on the example of two Neo-Victorian novels – “The Trial of Elizabeth Cree” by Peter Ackroyd (1995) and “The Decorator” by Boris Akunin; for the latter Ackroyd’s novel can be also regarded as one of the precedent texts. Both novels give their versions of the story of *Jack the Ripper* but what is more important in our case – employ akin plot structures, images and artistic devices, which in fact become metaphoric actualization of postmodern techniques.

Keywords: Neo-Victorianism, Postmodernism, Metaphor, Intertextuality, Thriller.

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Introduction

Postmodern fiction is marked by an intense interest in Victorian epoch, especially in the sensational aspects of the period connected with crime, violence and mystery. Therefore we witness a revival of Victorian crime novel in a new image. On the one hand the authors try to recreate the atmosphere of the period, introducing a lot of intertextual allusions and references to the well-known Victorian novels, exploiting most popular subjects of the 19th century literature, but on the other, as we'll try to show they use these plots as implicit metaphors. We would argue that postmodern literature has developed a certain paradigm of metaphors which in a concise figurative form embody essential characteristics of postmodern worldview. We will try to show it on the example of two Neo-Victorian novels – “The Trial of Elizabeth Cree” by Peter Ackroyd (1995) and “The Decorator” by Boris Akunin (1999).

Methods and Materials

With the increase of interest modern authors express in this epoch the term *Neo-Victorianism* has recently come into being. In her article “What is the Neo-Victorian Novel?” Stephanie Carroll (2015) offers a number of definitions of this phenomenon. However the majority of scholars define this term as Miss Jessica Rose, who claims that Neo-Victorianism “is contemporary fiction that employs Victorian settings and/or styles to self-reflexively invoke the Victorian era for the present” (2013). As for us we would rather side with Elizabeth Ho, who considers Neo-Victorianism as “a deliberate misreading, reconstruction or staged return of the nineteenth century in and for the present across genres and media” (2012) and Louisa Hadley, who defines neo-Victorian fiction “in the broadest possible terms as contemporary fiction that engages with the Victorian era, at either the level of plot, structure, or both” (2010). This is also connected with the problem of different strategies used in postmodern fiction, which has been taken into consideration in our research (Kochergina & Kozyreva, 2015). Another problem, which is quite relevant for this essay is the problem of dialogue of cultures (Sibgatullina & Krylov, 2016).

Discussion

In both novels the scene is laid at the end of the 19th century, which is also symptomatic, because it was the time when many of the established canons, very much connected with Victorianism were revised, and awareness of relativity of moral values became predominant. Both novels can be identified as psychological thrillers. At first glance, they present a chilling story of a serial killer, a maniac, which might be perceived as a typical phenomenon of mass literature. But at the same time these novels visualize and actualize many attributes of postmodernism. Besides their rich intertextuality and playing with historical characters and setting there are more subtle manifestations of postmodern worldview and aesthetics, which are expressed in a number of metaphorical motifs. The most overlapping metaphoric motif inherent in these novels is the so-called phenomenon of *collecting*, which we perceive as one of the major signs of postmodernism. As a matter of fact it was emblemized as such in the well-known novel by John Fowles as “The Collector” (1966) and masterfully developed in “The Perfume” by Suskind. In each of our novels the above mentioned phenomenon reflects itself in the plot, structure and the style, which is based on polycitation. But first and foremost, it is related to a certain type of hero and the character of the crime committed. For a postmodernist reality is only material for a free design. So it is natural that in these novels the story of the crime is invariably accompanied by the motive of plan, which is based on the idea of compiling a certain collection. The central characters of both novels – Elizabeth Cree and doctor Stotskii commit multiple murders just for art's sake. They both are a kind of collectors, but their trophies become real people, slain with the same composure as the butterflies pinned by Clegg – the character of John Fowles' “The Collector” or the girls murdered by Suskind's Grenouille to create perfume.

One of the basic characteristics of postmodern worldview is simulativity of reality, which is often embodied in the image of theatre. In Ayckroyd's novel this image accompanies the heroine throughout the narrative. The image of theatre occurs on the very first pages of the novel, when Elizabeth's execution is described. Here stage is replaced by a wooden platform of the gallows, the executioner and the victim feel like actors, and the role of the audience is performed by the official witnesses to the execution, from whom the heroine of this macabre spectacle could not take her eyes away until the very last moment of her life. It is noteworthy that the last words of Elizabeth Cree before her death: "Here we are back again" (Ackroyd, 1995) – as it turns out later were a quotation from the piece, in which she had played. So the initial episode of the novel brings together all its main motives – theatre, murder and role playing. The scene that opens the novel becomes a kind of pattern, according to which the whole story is built; it sets the world picture presented by Ackroyd: life and theatre interchange and replace each other, role playing replaces genuine existence. No wonder, Elizabeth first played her execution on stage.

The image of theatre is closely connected with the motif of role playing. Elizabeth Cree was an orphan, who murdered her own mother as a revenge for her unhappy childhood. She was an unwanted and unloved child and had to endure her mother's bullying, so she left her to die alone and went to the theater, where she was reborn in multiple new guises. Since then Elizabeth tends to perceive the world through the prism of role playing. Due to the fact that she is constantly changing her masks, appearing now in female, now in male disguise and records her actions in the diary, which she is writing on behalf of her husband, her own identity completely dissolves and it seems as if she never existed at all - she becomes a sheer simulacrum which can be filled with different content. This phenomenon of theatre discourse in literature was thoroughly studied in the essay "The interaction Between the Theatrical and Fairytale Discourses of Yuri Buida's Novel *Blue blood*" (Bobileva & Prokhorova, 2016).

Elizabeth's role playing is associated with another important postmodern motif – that of appropriation, which in its turn suggests a metaphoric description of creating a postmodern text characterized by blurring of the boundaries between one's own and someone else's. Elizabeth doesn't have a life of her own, but only appropriates the lives of those characters she plays or those victims she uses for her monstrous collection. In Ackroyd's novel the most vivid symbol of such misappropriation is Golem – a vicious animated anthropomorphic being from Jewish folklore made of clay, whose role Elizabeth Cree takes on. The word 'golem' literary means 'unformed', 'amorphous', which fully corresponds to Elizabeth's lack of personal identity. Moreover, the image of Golem also embodies many of the above mentioned concepts – mainly simulation and imitation. The terrible murders that took place in London in the late 19th century revived this legend.

Elizabeth Cree is from the outset excluded by the author from the system of any moral coordinates, as she is living by the laws of the theatre, where pain, suffering and crime are only given circumstances. All this results in complete detachment of the heroin from reality and her perception of life as raw material for experiments. This gives rise to the desire for cataloging, which is positive in itself, but the concept of order is emasculated, the norm turns into a simulacrum, and the character, claiming the role of Creator becomes a monstrous collector.

The motif of transformation – cross-dressing involving blurring of distinction between one's own and somebody else's, between the scary and the funny, male and female – is also another typical metaphor of postmodernism. As a result the entire text is based on substitution of the real by the imaginary, of human essence by mask, and this replacement occurs continuously and with such a speed that the reader together with the heroine is finally completely confused by this endless chain of substitutions losing moral guidelines.

“The Decorator” by Boris Akunin can be perceived as a kind of sequel of Ackroyd’s novel, the more so that the author himself confessed that Ayckroyd is his favorite foreign writer. Boris Akunin is a pen name of Grigory Chkhartishvili (born May 20, 1956), a Russian-speaking writer of Georgian and Jewish origin. He is best known as a writer of detective and historical fiction. He is most famous by his series of novels about the adventures of a genius detective Erast Fandorin, to which actually the novel “The Decorator” belongs. Here, it should also be mentioned that Russian literary criticism has recently introduced the concept of ‘Russian Victorianism’, which refers to the novels set in Russia in Victorian period and characterized by a certain set of values associated with Victorianism as well as by intertextual dialog with English literature of this time (Breeva, 2010; Mezhhuyev, 2017).

The action of Akunin’s novel takes place 8 years later (Elizabeth Cree - 1881, Decorator - 1889) when in Moscow there appeared a homicidal maniac, whose “handwriting” just as the nature of the crimes committed by Elizabeth Cree was very reminiscent of Jack the Ripper’s. As a matter of fact Ackroyd in his novel develops one of the suggested versions concerning the identity of Jack the Ripper, which has never been finally established – that he was actually a woman and therefore was not caught; as for Boris Akunin he proceeds from another explanation – the murders in England stopped because the killer went abroad. English reminiscences are recurrent in the novel, and the title of *decorator*, which the killer doctor Stotskii assumes is directly associated with theatre and therefore with the central character of Ackroyd’s novel: the murderer claims: “Out of the bodily organs I create an intoxicating beauty panel, majestic scenery. In England an unprecedented profession is now coming into fashion – that of a decorator, a specialist in the decoration of a house, shop Windows, festive streets. (...) I’m a decorator” (Akunin, 2000).

In both cases we come across the aestheticization of the ugly. For Stotskii just as for Elizabeth Cree, decorative, aesthetic quality is an integral part of the murder. Stotskii perceives himself as a Creator, as a kind of Messiah, bringing joy to the world and correcting the imperfection of human nature: “I’m the Creator’s apprentice” – he says (Ibid).

Here, too, we can’t fail to notice the passion for collecting inherent in Stotskii’s actions: He carefully looks for and selects each new instance of human deformity in order to “correct” it, revealing a hidden inner beauty, every time admiring his new monstrous still-life made of human organs as an artist who created a beautiful work of art. So like in “Elizabeth Cree” we see one of the recurrent motifs of postmodern literature – creation of beauty at the expense of life, which in this case is justified by the lofty idea, supposedly inspired by the Creator. Thus, if in the previous novel we were confronted with absolute moral relativism in “The Decorator” we see a diabolical reversal of moral values, and Christian rhetoric used by Dr. Stotskii turns him into a kind of Antichrist. This allusion is also established by the fact that the name of the beloved of detective Fandorin who investigates the murders – is Angelina. So here there is a moral conflict, which was absent in “The Trial of Elizabeth Cree”. Unlike Ackroyd Akunin creates the protagonist, expressing the author’s position and advocating moral imperative. At the same time, the whole plot situation of Akunin’s novel involving specific nature of the murders, their discovery and the capture of the criminal can be perceived as a kind of aesthetic allegory, where human body becomes a metaphoric expression of text and its dismemberment and creation of something new from the remains becomes a metaphor for postmodern creativity, which in a way we could also see in “Elizabeth Cree”. In this context, the struggle of the protagonist with the decorator can be seen as a protest of the author himself against the literature, where moral, humanistic content is replaced by cold mind game.

Thus as we have tried to show in spite of the obvious similarity of the techniques used in the discussed novels there is essential difference in their approach to Victorianism. Ackroyd in his work step by step deconstructs Victorian world picture with its steady system of moral values, its commonly accepted truths, clear cut message and outwardly expressed authorial attitude, substituting it with a postmodern world view with its decentralization, fragmentation, denial of final answers, blurring the boundaries

between the sacred and the low, the real and the imaginary. As for Akunin, who also largely uses most of these strategies, in essence he rather tends to reconstruct the paradigm of Victorian novel with its love of law and order, binary opposition of the protagonist and the antagonist, strict moral imperative. No wonder, the central character – Erast Fandorin – is very reminiscent of another famous Victorian hero, namely Sherlock Holmes.

Conclusion

On the bases of this brief analysis we may conclude that the late twentieth century literature has developed a genre of post-modern thriller with a central character who becomes a serial killer and collects his victims in the name of the stated goal. The authors of these works use largely similar plot twists and techniques, which can be seen as metaphors of postmodern strategies (collecting, cataloging, simulation, creating a simulacrum, dismemberment, misappropriation, aestheticization and sacralization of killing, etc.). The very choice of a disgusting subman as the central character, his/her indirect characterization, the penalty of death in the end may suggest that these novels contain implicit criticism of postmodern position as such, and the authors self-irony and self-parody. However, there is another possible conclusion: the authors lead the reader to understanding that by dismembering old texts, the writer is able to create new notable pieces of work. In this case, not just the characters but the authors themselves act as collectors.

Conflict of interests

The authors confirm that the data presented do not contain any conflict of interests.

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