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A DECONSTRUCTIVE READING OF R. JOYCE'S
"A FARAWAY SMELL OF LEMON"

Modern literary criticism may seem extraordinarily confusing with its numerous and often interweaving literary theories and methods for literary analysis. A contemporary scholar has to be well aware of intellectual modes predominant in today's cultural paradigm, philosophical and linguistic theories, social and cultural studies, which can be relevant to the interpretation of literature.

The plurality of methods, overlapping definitions, and disagreement over the main objectives and approaches to reading and understanding texts have become the leading scientific tendencies. While the conventional literary theory mainly focuses on the search for the authorial intention, New Criticism emphasizes the text itself with precise attention to the words and the form, claiming that the author cannot be reconstructed from a piece of writing and the main goal of literary analysis and interpretation should be the assessment of the aesthetic beauty. On the other hand, more recent developments, such as feminist criticism, postcolonial criticism, queer criticism and others, involve a desire to trace sexist, classist, racist, heterosexist or imperialist ideologies, in order to stop their promotion in literature.

When it comes to practical analysis, it can be quite frustrating for a researcher to have such a great range of theories to choose from, because all these multiple schools of literary criticism don't follow each other chronologically and represent not a coherent system of critical views, but a chaotic amalgam of interdisciplinary ideas. Thus, there is no unity both among the theories, and among theoreticians, as there is a certain opposition between "classicists" who believe that modern theories "rest upon special qualities of modern literature and cannot be applied to ancient literature" [1, p. 7], and those who refuse to deny modernity. As T. A. Schmitz wittily points out: "This (denial of modern theories) would amount to the same thing as if we ordered archeologists to eschew the methods developed by modern engineering for analyzing ancient material. Literary theory claims to speak for literature in general, for all periods and cultures" [1, p. 7].

Literary scholars *en masse* embrace the perspectives of deeper and more profound interpretations of both contemporary and classical literary works, offered by modern literary criticism. L. Tyson in her manual "Critical Theory Today" provides extremely interesting examples of a deconstructive interpretation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), a Marxist analysis of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and a queer reading of Scot Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) [2, p. 6], which illustrate vividly the various ways of interpreting literature with the help of modern critical theories. On the other hand, the question remains why we make use of this or that theory in each particular case. The obvious answer (that it depends on a literary text under analysis) leads us to a vicious circle of similar questions. Why should we give preference to one particular strategy over the others? How far can we go in analyzing the social, historical and cultural context of the text? To what extent do we rely on the structural elements of the text? Finally, how can we draw a definite line between different strategies for interpretation when the boundaries between them are so blurred?

To tackle this bunch of contradictory questions, it is important to realize that modern literary theory doesn't exist as a *thing-in-itself*, it reflects the intellectual and philosophical mode of thinking, which prevails in culture and social life. It means that there are important philosophical premises, which give a new perspective to the relationship between the language and the world, literature and its interpretation.

The world is text. This premise derives from J. Derrida's famous *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*, which can be translated as *there is nothing outside the text* [3]. In this way, J. Derrida attacks the assumption that language (words) can connect us to the world or represent the existing reality [3]. J. Kristeva developed this idea and introduced the notion of intertextuality, claiming that every text can be understood as *a mosaic of quotations* [3]. Literature as a form of art, which employs texts as the main tool of expression, has become a happy beneficiary of the new paradigm. Furthermore, writers got hold of unlimited freedom to digest the literary works of the past to their content, without being accused of plagiarism, which led to the rise of new genres in literature, redefinitions of literary structural elements and reconsideration of traditional rules of writing. The tendency towards genre experimentation has led to the hypertextual practices, such as a pastiche novel, which is based on imitating the existing writing styles. A good example of a modern pastiche, which imitates the styles of writing used by V. Wolfe, J. Joyce and others,

is *The British Museum is Falling Down* (1965) by David Lodge. A more extreme hypertextual endeavor gaining popularity nowadays is a genre of a mash-up novel, which involves a rewriting an existing plot adding new *twists*, for example *Pride, Prejudice and Zombies* by Seth Grahame-Smith.

J. Derrida's concept of deconstruction as a form of literary analysis, which is aimed at breaking the stereotypical patterns of meaning by including them into a new context, switched on the green light to critics who got the freedom to enjoy the intellectual pleasure of decoding and deconstructing texts without being accused of inaccurate understanding of the author's messages.

The author is dead. This premise correlates with R. Barthes's essay *The Death of the Author* and puts emphasis on the reader as a co-creator of the textual meaning: "We know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" [3]. If the author is metaphorically dead, it liberates writers from the burden of responsibility for relevant and adequate representation of messages and ideas. Whatever I write, the reader will misinterpret it to the degree of his or her own competence, so why should I be accurate and reliable in my wording? The consequence of being free from responsibility for the message was the experimenting with points of view in narrative, with unreliable narration being one of its most conspicuous manifestations. *The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime* by Mark Haddon can serve as perfect examples of unreliable first-person narration, which plays a crucial role in the process of interpretation.

The priority of the reader's interpretation over the author's intention challenges a conventional approach to literary criticism, giving way to studying classical literature from modern perspectives. A good example of how classical literary works are interpreted as a part of modern cultural paradigm is Anglo-Saxon ecofeminist literary studies. Medieval ecocriticism is becoming a more and more influential direction of literary theory. For example, professor H. Estes rose to the challenge and reviewed *Beowulf* from the feministic point of view, considering new aspects of femininity and sexuality in the medieval epic poem [4].

As far as the meaning represents itself not as a stable element of a literary work, but as an indefinite concept which depends on the reader's experience, competence and cultural background, literary theory faces a dead-end problem: what do we come to analyze in fiction: literary messages or ourselves through the prism of the author's language?

However confusing and vague modern philosophical premises may be, we can't deny the fact that they have changed greatly both the way we write and the way we read literature and deconstruction as a literary theory and a reading strategy has become the most influential school of literary criticism.

According to L. Tyson, "one of the main purposes in deconstructing a literary text is to reveal the complex operations of the ideologies of which the text is constructed" [2, p. 259]. It means that the text can show us how these ideologies operate in our own view of the world. Anyway, we start with the identification of the central conflict/tension/theme (the protagonist's evolution) and the message. The further deconstruction is aimed at looking for "the themes that conflict with the main theme, self-contradictions of which the text seems unaware" [2, p.260].

The following passage of this article represents an attempt to do so with Rachel Joyce's marvelous story *A Faraway Smell of Lemon* (2015) [5]. The main theme is emotional evolution of the main heroine (Binny) after a very disappointing break-up. The setting of the story (Christmas time) emphasizes the dramatic nature of the prevailing binary opposition: tradition (social acceptability) vs. social noncompliance. Traditional Christmas celebrations associated with family reunion and joyful atmosphere are opposed to Binny's pessimistic emotional state, loneliness and the feeling of loss, which is revealed in her anti-social and sarcastic behaviour.

Overall, there is nothing in Binny's life, which is in conformity with stereotypical conventions. An Oxford graduate, self-sufficient, ambitious, without prejudice and ready to embrace gender equality and independence, she has made her life an embodiment of feministic and post-familial paradigm of values. Even her appearance is far from being typically feminine: "when she looks in the mirror, she finds a wild-haired giant who seems to come with inbuilt shoulder pads" [5]. Her emotional reactions are also out of the typical patterns. She is unemotional and reserved, denying herself the pleasure of being a weak woman. When her partner leaves her, one would expect her to be outrageous and emotionally expressive, but she seems not to react at all. The image of a strong personality needs constant effort and control, so she can't relax even in the moments of intimacy and is not able to speak about her feelings openly: "I love him. I should tell him. I don't know why I never do" [5]. This kind of emotional stiffness and constantly suppressed feelings make the reader doubtful about the strength of her character and give us a hint of a deeply hidden inferiority complex, connected with her low female self-esteem.

The best way to understand Binny's female self-consciousness is to pay attention to her love interest, Oliver. In the framework of patriarchal values, Oliver seems to be a cringing embarrassment of a man. Indeed, Binny's partner embodies a totally emasculated male character who fails to come up with any of patriarchal expectations: he doesn't work and is not financially successful; he is not a handsome guy; he can't do the home repairs; he doesn't have ambitions to dominate in their relationships. On the other hand, Oliver, unlike Binny, doesn't feel doubts about his gender compliance, and he is far from being unhappy and passive. He feels quite comfortable to live at the expense of a woman older than he is, to cheat on her and then to claim openly that he doesn't get what he wants in this relationship. A traditionally minded matter-of-fact woman would ask: how could Binny fall in love with this parody of traditional masculinity at all?

The main character's ambivalence about her own femininity is emphasized by the third-person omniscient limited narration, which creates the effect of an unreliable narrative, while the account of events resembles self-motivational trainings. The statement "the real joke is that Binny had believed things were looking up for her and Oliver" is based on euphemisms as if Binny does not want to be honest even with her own self. "Things were looking up" is a very awkward and cowardly female euphemism for "hope for marriage". The word "joke" is a lame substitute for "disappointment", which looks like an attempt to hide how much she really wants to see Oliver as a husband, not as a "partner". Though she realizes that there is no any future for this relationship: "It took barely two hours for Oliver to snip the shape of himself out of Binny's life" [5]. After five years, it took him just a few hours to clean

his presence in Binny's house, which makes us doubt about the tightness of their emotional bond. Moreover, Binny is intelligent enough to realize the transient character of this relationship and it explains the defensive euphemistic language, deliberately dry and matter-of-fact, when it seems more logical to go hysterical.

Her blunt belief that everything connected with emotional expression is a sign of weakness elevates her emotional control to the level of psychic condition. However, even when she "finally gives in" and starts to break her mother's crockery and empty wine bottles, she can't admit that she is hysterical. Instead, she calls it "fury" and holds back her tears. This is the second time "love" is mentioned in the story, when she wonders in her interior monologue "Did her love mean nothing?" creating the feeling of illogical contradiction between Binny's words, actions and feelings. She deliberately avoids talking about love in their relationship, but when Oliver leaves, she wants love to be meaningful. So, is it about love and desire to be with another person, or is it about Binny's vanity and the image of a strong overeducated superperson, who is not able to accept her own femininity?

The cognitive dissonance is revealed via Binny's denial of tradition, sarcastic and arrogant attitude to everything connected with patriarchal lifestyle, starting from the symbolic violent annihilation of the Royal Doulton plates and up to the open hatred of traditional Christmas attributes. She ignores all the traditional customs: Christmas cards, Christmas tree, Christmas shopping, presents for the children, but keeps thinking about her failure to catch up with the rest of the people in their social acceptability, which emphasizes the impression of irritation with the forthcoming holiday: "If only the machine that is Christmas would come and go without Binny" [5]. Though the repetitive concern about not being ready for Christmas makes us think that the main character's hatred of Christmas is the projection of her hatred of her own life and herself. The sarcasm and aggression towards everything that reminds her of stereotypical female happiness gives out her deeply hidden attraction towards traditional femininity.

The inner conflict is resolved in the story through Binny's spiritual and emotional evolution, when she literally learns to express emotions and figuratively learns not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. In other words, she understands that Christmas is just a joyful family holiday, not a windmill for Don Quixote to fight, and it's too selfish to deprive her own children of festive celebrations, even if she is too exhausted. The theme of the main character's spiritual re-education at Christmas echoes with *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. The Ghost of Christmas Past is mentioned in the story when Coco, Binny's daughter, has to perform the role of the Ghost of Christmas Past in the traditional Nativity play and Binny reacts rather aggressively, "The Ghost of Christmas Past was in another bloody story altogether" [5]. The allusion reminds us of the cultish novella not by chance, opening doors to a larger intertextual context. Ch. Dickens's Scrooge, a greedy egoist who stands against the Christmas spirit, meets the three Ghosts of Christmas and changes to a joyful advocate of Christmas holidays. Just in the same way, Binny meets a mysteriously looking shop girl who teaches Binny to cope with the feeling of loneliness and depression and to accept the Christmas spirit. Finally, Binny decides to join the traditional ritual: "Binny will get a tree for the children. She

will buy cards and write messages. She has missed the Christmas post, but what does it matter? She will send the cards anyway. She will join the ritual of acknowledging what she has loved, either with an email or a sparkling snow scene” [5].

It would be such a live-affirming and optimistic resolution, but for the re-educational method offered in the story, which adds a bit of tragic irony to the whole idea of positive spiritual change. The shop girl explains to Binny that “domestic chores can be therapeutic” and helps Binny discover the psychological healing power of cleaning. The initial resistance is easily stopped and at the end of the story Binny is totally concentrated on wiping the small silver christening mug: “Binny wipes and she wipes and she wipes”.

Cleaning home silver is one of the most difficult domestic chores, which is usually shifted to house cleaners and cleaning services. It takes oceans of time, concentration, effort and certain skill. Wouldn't it be easier to introduce Binny to vacuum cleaning or ironing? Why is she offered something that doesn't involve any modern household appliances, as if we are getting back to the times of traditional patriarchal household?

The tragic irony is that Binny doesn't need a clean house (which is relatively easy to get with the help of modern chemical agents and good cleaning equipment). Binny needs more, she needs redemption, which can be reached only via something no less exhausting and tiresome than cleaning silver cups. The loop is closed, and here she is: a modern heroine freed from gender stereotypes, but so miserable and lonely that she gets back to the hardest of domestic chores, mind, not because she is oppressed and exploited by men, but because she desperately needs therapy.

The deconstructive analysis makes Binny a pathetic and pitiful character, and transforms the idea of gender equality into a marketing trick which rebrands the traditional chores with new pathos without changing the real state of things and making women even less ambitious and more limited in terms of inner freedom of thought. Once women challenged fixed gender roles. However, it doesn't mean that since then somebody else has taken the responsibility for keeping their house clean, it means that no one actually cares and domestic chores are still women's domain. The only difference is that now women do the cleaning not because this is an old-fashioned gender stereotype, but because it has a therapeutic effect that can be used to tackle the feeling of emptiness and loss, as loneliness and depression seem to be an eternal female lot.

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