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TEACHING THE BRITISH HISTORICAL NOVEL
AT A LINGUISTIC UNIVERSITY

In recent decades, a multitude of award-winning historical novels has crammed the bookstore shelves, and they are receiving a lot of media attention, with analytical articles trying to make sense of such an interest in history. Since the

1990s, people have witnessed “a ‘memory boom’ that has made memory a central concern in contemporary culture and politics in all societies on a global scale” [1, p. 1], and the current dominance of historical novels is now attributed to the scholarly and cultural preoccupation with memory.

A country’s obsession with its own history has a particular meaning but it is also necessary to take a look at how a reader, foreign to this history, may interact with the text and find the benefits of such a reading experience. It is self-evident that no culture survives without its history, and when a foreigner comes in contact with another culture it is important to have sufficient knowledge of that culture’s history. Students who study English at Minsk State Linguistic University have a number of disciplines in the curriculum that foster knowledge and skills associated with knowledge of the history, culture and literature of the English-speaking countries and necessary for their professional development. The aim of this article is to look at how the British historical novel may be integrated in the educational process to its full potential, as fictional works have the power to emotionally engage a person in the problems discussed and give an illusion of living through the experience described in the book, which may include historical events and processes.

Historical fiction is included into several literature courses for 3rd- and 4th-year students of MSLU; however, its study is not systematic. In the case of W. Scott’s *Ivanhoe* (1819), it is clearly presented to 3rd-year students as a historical novel, but they do not easily distinguish its literary value. Apart from seeing the novelist’s thorough work with the archives and the love relationships of the characters, it is hard for students to notice anything else. At the same time, W. Scott’s novels are accompanied by a massive bulk of scholarly works dedicated to researching the genre of historical novels. F. Jameson, for example, considers the creation of British identity to be W. Scott’s goal in writing historical novels [2]. B. Proskurnin emphasizes that in Scott’s novels the main characters are heroes who “have the ideological and moral position that embodies the historical future” [3, p. 20]. G. Lukács and P. Anderson [4], prominent researchers of the historical novel, believed that the “classical” historical novel, founded by W. Scott, was built on the idea of society’s progress and with the aim of forming a national idea. A lot has been said about W. Scott’s heritage, and yet there is no distinguished or unified approach to teaching his historical novels, so the lecturer’s strategy in presenting and discussing *Ivanhoe* with the students consists, as a rule, in incorporating many disparate elements.

When John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) is introduced to 4th-year students of MSLU, it is done fully in the context of the postmodernist literary paradigm, and the majority of them have a hard time identifying the novel’s relationship to the genre of the historical novel, or, to be more precise, of historiographical metafiction. While the postmodernist features of the novel are clearly seen, its genre similarity to Walter Scott-style historical novel is not. The notion of historiographical metafiction as a modification of the historical novel is

itself complex. However, understanding the specificity of the novel's chronotope, that is, the Victorian epoch, is crucially important for analyzing the characters' motives and the novel's themes and ideas. Thus, although postmodernist philosophy and aesthetic are key to understanding the novel, even greater attention should be paid to the historical context in which the events take place. M. Boccardi states that "the intrusive presence of a self-conscious omniscient narrator in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) is an attempt on Fowles's part to revisit Victorian narrative from a contemporary perspective, emphasising its desirability while also acknowledging that the representational self-confidence that characterises it is no longer tenable at a time of literary, philosophical, and representational scepticism" [5, p. 24]. Consequently, the student needs to draw a comparison between the historical and literary records of the Victorian era and Fowles's treatment of it.

From these examples it is seen that studying historical novels can be challenging. To facilitate the process of reading and studying a historical novel, we need to determine which features of the genre have to be given priority in the process of study. Historical novels have subgenres, which means there is a diverse spectrum of novels that may have little in common (gothic, postmodernist, realist, etc.). Moreover, scholars are still putting efforts into providing an all-encompassing definition of the historical novel. This also presents an obstacle in the study of such novels. The reader approaches the book with certain expectations that the genre establishes [6, p. 3]. When the book fails to meet the expectations, it may deteriorate the reading experience. We suggest giving students the following definition of the genre: the historical novel is a novel that, through retrospection, comprehends history by combining in its protagonist not only his or her personal problems but also societal issues of the past. According to M. Boccardi, retrospection is a key formal feature of the historical novel along with "the dual temporal dimension in which the genre operates, the time of the writing (the present) and the time of the setting (the past)" [5, p. 5].

As follows from this definition of the genre, the protagonist of the historical novel must be related to students as a character that represents both the general historical tendencies of the epoch and his or her personal dilemmas. This way, the main character must be analyzed first as a representative of the historical period and then as a unique individual. Moreover, in the case of contemporary British historical novels with their intense psychologism, another important task for the students is finding the universal in the characters as well as pointing out the mechanisms of the author's presenting the human psyche in the narrative.

In case of *Ivanhoe*, the characters (Cedric, Isaac, Wamba, Gurth, etc.) are demonstrated by W. Scott as typical of their class and position in society, while Wilfred Ivanhoe, the title character, as B. Proskurnin suggests, embodies the historical future, thus being a "middle" character [3, p. 20]. *Ivanhoe* helps resolve the political struggles of England and sticks to his own ideas and beliefs, which do not always coincide with those of the majority. As for *The French Lieutenant's*

Woman, Sarah Woodruff, one of the main characters of the novel, with her wild spirit and controversial behavior, signals the disparity between Victorian and contemporary social norms and gender roles and becomes Fowles's tool of contemplating on both the past and the present.

Belarusian researcher of the historical novel I. Pasyukevich singles out historicism as the main feature of the historical novel, meaning its temporal characteristics, vision of historical perspective, reproduction of the spirit of the era, its historical and cultural realities. She also defines the relationship of historical fact and fiction in the historical novel as "synthesis" [7, p. 39]. She suggests that historical novels are not necessarily determined by the presence of historical characters in them, but some level of historicism is required, so the main character is created through combining features characteristic of the historical epoch and those imagined by the author. Sarah Woodruff may serve as a good example of how fictitious elements can dominate over historical ones, as her moral standards are closer to those of the 20th century.

Characters in fiction are often bound to the chronotopes they are set in, and A. Fleishman proposed such characteristics of the historical novel as a realistic setting, a specific connection to history (that is, there must be at least one "real" historical character), and a feeling of what it was like to live in another era [8, p. 3–4]. Like many researchers of the historical novel, Fleishman attaches great importance to conveying the spirit of the era, however, this understanding of the historical novel is strongly tied to the novels of W. Scott and significantly narrows the scope of the genre, attributing to it the strictly realistic technique of writing, as well as to the obligatory presence of historical heroes. Many postmodernist historical novels could easily be excluded from the genre (like Fowles's historiographic metafiction and that of other authors), as the way postmodernist writers create their novels' historical chronotopes is often misleading to the reader, and it acts as a device through which the author's point of view is transmitted.

Another key feature of the genre is that historical novels reconstruct the spirit of the historical epoch. But it is important to compare the expected spirit of the epoch (the one that is common knowledge to the nation) and the spirit of the epoch formed in the literary work. This way, if students first research the various aspects of the historical epoch and then compare it with its representation in the novel, they are enabled to grasp the author's unique point of view on history, or, in other words, the author's "philosophy of history" [9, p. 21]. *Ivanhoe*, as a classical historical novel, uses the spirit of the epoch to captivate the readers and to raise interest in the country's past, as at the time when the novel was published there was no free access to historical archives. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, on the contrary, was created in the 20th century when history became a discipline widely studied at schools and universities. Fowles's recreation of the spirit of the epoch is underlined by the attempt to question the norms and stigmas of that time.

The historical novel connects the past, the present and the future, so another task for the students could be to find out how the novel is connected to the time in

which it was written and then what the novel hints about the future. W. Scott points to the further progress of England as a nation, but J. Fowles challenges that idea and accentuates the relativity of social norms.

In connection with vocabulary work, we can say that, although the historical novel does not, as a rule, try to fully imitate the speech and language of the historical period it describes, it does contain words and expressions connected to the objects and circumstances of that time. These words often require explanation to foreign language students and, in some cases, translation and commentary (especially if they correspond to historical realia of the students' own national culture).

In conclusion, we can assert that a “deeper” interaction with the historical novel needs to be implemented into our linguistic education, as it offers so many benefits for the students, and its study should be based on the current research on this genre. We propose the above-mentioned definition of the historical novel that will give guidance to the students and teachers. The way to organize class work is to make a worksheet with a suggested list of focused questions to be asked during the study of a historical novel. These questions could be about the character's social and personal tendencies, about his/her universal human nature and how it is reproduced by the writer, about the author's representation and vision of the particular historical epoch and his/her connection of the past, the present and the future in the novel. A separate worksheet could be dedicated to vocabulary work that should be discussed in the classroom. Another task could be to create group projects in which the students play the role of historians and research historical facts on their own, which will provide more engagement with the novel and its themes and ideas.

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