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"REASONABLE ABERRATIONS" OF THE GOTHIC: A CULTURAL INSIGHT INTO NARRATIVE THROUGH ALLEGORICAL AND SYMBOLIC MODES OF INTERPRETING RECURRENT TOPICS

Ihina Z.

Статтю присвячено вивченню способів інтерпретації рекурентної теми Готичної традиції (помсти) на матеріалі тематично релевантного нарративного фрагменту з роману Дж. Мартіна "Буря мечів". Аналіз здійснено шляхом виявлення в нарративі алегоричного й символічного модусів інтерпретації помсти та співставлення отриманих компресивних і семантичних варіантів інтерпретації з прецедентними текстами всесвітньої культурної спадщини.
Ключові слова: тема, помста, нарратив, алегорія, символ, модус.

Статья посвящена исследованию способов интерпретации повторяющейся темы Готической традиции (мести) на материале тематически релевантного нарративного фрагмента романа Дж. Мартина "Буря мечей". Анализ осуществлен путем выявления в нарративе аллегорического и символического модусов интерпретации мести и сопоставления полученных компрессивных и семантических вариантов интерпретации с прецедентными текстами мирового культурного наследия.
Ключевые слова: тема, месть, нарратив, аллегория, символ, модус.

The article is dedicated to interpreting such a recurrent topic of the Gothic traditions as revenge the way it is realised in a narrative fragment of G. R. R. Martin's novel "A Storm of Swords". Revenge as a Gothic topic is interpreted allegorically (as a parable) and symbolically and thus compared with its comprehension in precedent texts of universal cultural legacy.
Key words: topic, revenge, narrative, allegory, symbol, mode.

The **purpose** of the article is to suggest and elaborate on the hypothesis that the topic of revenge, viewed as a precipitating element of obsession and aberrant behaviour in *the Gothic tradition* [8, p. 291], is on the contrary not anomalous and is based on the cold light of reason as universal cultural legacy suggests. The Gothic tradition includes literature up to the modern period characterised by plots and techniques from medieval ballads, Renaissance writing, the prose of XVII–XVIII centuries [1, p. 4–10]. This tradition is associated with signs of challenging physical laws and indulging in scary ideas of the supernatural. Hence recurrent topics of the Gothic tradition (*blood, castle, curse, cannibal, death, revenge, witch, etc.* [8; 1]) proved to have a certain cultural background, there emerged a motivating prerequisite for comparing cultural peculiarities of the same topics by determining their influence on lingual expression and thus enriching the study with cultural connotations that root in legends and folklore.

The topic of revenge is inherent in the Gothic tradition and is realised, inter alia, in a fragment of G. Martin's "A Storm of Swords" about *the Nightfort*.

Revenge is connected with nursing a bitter grievance against somebody for having been dishonestly treated, with a wish to inflict a punishment in requital for those past wrongs [8, p. 291], to make the offender suffer badly. The worse the affliction, the sweeter the revenge, therefore avengers mature their retribution plans by studying all points of tenderness any reckless offender may light-heartedly flaunt. Still, the idea of the severest torment does not need that meticulous brainwork of combining observation keenness with a steadfast logic of vindictive cruelty if the enemy has children. As in the Gothic tradition *the pall* (an oppressive, grave atmosphere) is sustained by the most dreadful, shocking events, and texts are made lurid by "a profusion of cannibalism, hanging, murder, rape, sadism, etc." [8, p. 353], the goriest and wickedest revenge ever described is through making enemies eat their kin, especially children, e.g.: *The Nightfort had figured in some [...] scariest stories. This was where the Rat Cook had*

served the Andal king his prince-and-bacon pie [...] The Rat Cook had cooked the son of the Andal king in a big pie with onions, carrots, mushrooms, lots of pepper and salt, a rasher of bacon, and a dark red Dornish wine. Then he served him to his father, who praised the taste and had a second slice [...] Afterward the gods transformed the cook into a monstrous white rat who could only eat his own young. He had roamed the Nightfort ever since, devouring his children, but still his hunger was not sated. It was not for murder that the gods cursed him [...] nor for serving the Andal king his son in a pie. A man has a right to vengeance. But he slew a guest beneath his roof, and that the gods cannot forgive [4, p. 755–773].

Frightening as this description may seem at first sight, the act of revenge accomplished by the Rat Cook still appears as fair as the gods' retribution that follows, and both are accomplished in cold blood. To uncover culturally significant knowledge that sustains this idea of reasonable justice, the structure of the text fragment should be analysed as a narrative structure, where 'narrative' is understood as *any text that recounts some story illustrating a certain event* [14, p. 11–15]. Narrative structure analysis helps to segregate the message rendered by the narrative and thus formulate what revenge actually is (how it may be understood) in the given fragment organised as a number of *complicating actions*. Complicating actions are chronologically ordered sentences (clauses) providing *the referential function* of the narrative and reporting some next event in response to the question, *what happened then* [6, p. 473]. Thus, the place is mentioned first (the Nightfort), then the event that happened there (the Andal king ate a pie), the history of that event (the Rat Cook vindicatorily killed and cooked the Andal prince), the gods' reaction to that treat (they transformed him into a rat to ever eat his children), and the reasons for this kind of retribution (violation of hospitality laws). In addition to the referential function, any narrative is characterised by *the evaluative* one stating the point why something is told [6, p. 474]. The obvious *raison d'être* this story has is to say that a bad man was punished by good gods. Still, it remains not quite clear why that man is actually thought bad: because of his capability of violating hospitality laws or killing innocent children and feeding their fathers on them. This cliff-hanger (an uncertain situation) leaves the question open why the gods did not punish the cook for his having murdered the prince.

A closer examination of the narrative structure (Smith: *ibid*) should be done to resolve it. *The abstract* (the clause opening the narration – *The Nightfort figured [...]*), as well as *the coda* (the closure – *[...] that the gods cannot forgive*) fail to be elucidated by *the orientation section* (the setting that serves to orient the reader as for characters (the Rat Cook, the Andal king and prince, the gods), place (the Nightfort), time (long ago), behavioural situation (taking revenge and being revenged on)). This fact stipulates that the real enigma – the reason for the Andal prince not to be paid back – is hidden exactly in the orientation section and concerns prerequisites of the deific revenge, which permit them to tolerate or even ignore infanticide. They are not explicated directly and thus are given to the reader to be, probably, recognised subliminally. The message may be formulated as follows: revenge as an act of inflicting harm (by the Rat Cook) for the harm received (from the king), even via feeding an innocent child (the prince) to his father, is acceptable unless these father and child are the avenger's guests. This formulation may serve an operational definition of *revenge* as it is represented in the fragment. *Revenge is a natural right, whatever brutal its consequences are.*

The very word 'revenge' contains a preliminary perceptive image that gives rise to ways of configuring meanings, i.e. is a vector of accumulating knowledge. Thereupon an idea (here – the topic of revenge) is a unit of cultural code based on a system of *fixed and flexible identifiers*. Fixed identifiers are generally recognised and definite in their reference to a certain sphere; flexible identifiers rely on individual experience and are referentially indefinite, presupposing interpretation ambiguity [10, p. 19–20, 121–222]. Embedded into fiction, recurrent topics are subject to interpretation through allegorical and symbolic modes. The allegorical mode presumes interpreting something conjured up in a vivid parable form characterised by applying a communicative strategy of guessing riddles with only one answer. The symbolic mode is obligatorily conditioned by numerous ways of interpreting the same

idea [10, p. 47–62]. Thus, treating revenge as a certain ethical point (i.e. do not violate laws of hospitality, otherwise gods will revenge on you) that induces to make a correct choice (laws are not to be violated) is an allegory (parable). As parables may often be reduced to proverbs [10, p. 80], the story about the Rat Cook may acquire the following form: *revenge on your guests brings gods' revenge on you*. Such an allegorical interpretation is possible due to a number essential elements composed in a certain order and presented linguistically. The elements essential for understanding the initial perceptive image are *an ominous castle, an old grudge of its owner against his guests, infanticide, cannibalism, innocent victims, vigilant fair gods*. All these elements make the narrative scary. Besides, they are organised so accurately that disclose actions of the Rat Cook as very well-considered and thus even more malicious, grisly, and deserving further deific revenge. Linguistically the elements are represented the way to show:

1) that the Cook was a nasty villain: his old grudge made him scheme a *prince-and-bacon pie* (even this compound can make the narratee shudder);

2) the king and his son were innocent victims to be sympathised with: the scene of infanticide and cannibalism is meticulously described by means of various nouns and adjectives denoting the Andal prince as a tasty dish that makes the situation still more horrible (*a big pie with onions, carrots, mushrooms, lots of pepper and salt, a rasher of bacon, and a dark red Dornish wine*) and the Andal king who did not imagine what he was eating – more ruthless; otherwise he would not *have praised the taste and had a second slice*);

3) gods' revenge was just: the Rat Cook was a monster, hence he was transformed into a *monstrous white rat*, The Nightfort started figuring in the *scariest* stories, and fair gods *cannot forgive* those who violate their rules.

Besides, the deific revenge is justified (*he slew a guest beneath his roof, and that the gods cannot forgive*), though it still leaves without comment (only mentioning that *a man has a right to vengeance*) why child-slaying was left unnoticed. These elements are fixed identifiers that make the following parable out of this narrative: *revenge on your guests brings gods' revenge on you*. To see this proverb in the parable, there is a necessity to have minimal comprehension skills. They are limited by two orientation points: 1) a man has a right to vengeance, but 2) gods' rules should never be violated. These are rigid appellation limits of *superficial knowledge* [10, p. 225–237]. The type of interpretation expected by using superficial knowledge may be squeezed into the following formulation: if you do no revenge on your guests, the gods will not unleash their revenge on you, and thus *revenge is a natural right of a man limited by gods' rules*. Interpretation associated with superficial knowledge is known as *compressed* [Ibid.].

Since symbol differs from allegory by the plurality of treatments, it is interpretation that is the crucial aspect among knowledge and comprehension in reconstructing the symbolism of revenge, which is entrenched into the story. Weird as it is, the whole conception of this short narrative exposes the situation of cannibalism as normal, i.e. the fact of eating a child always stays in the backdrop, never entering the foreground, though it looms from there as an element of the pall. But the things in the foreground, meant to strike more dread into readers than murder and cannibalism, are the details of transforming the Cook into a rat and his keen, never sated hunger. Why does the act of deific revenge take the shape of the Cook's and is also realised as eating children if the Cook is punished not for the murder, but for a seemingly different matter – transgressing hospitality laws?

In contrast to compressed interpretation, *semantic* (individual, situational) one is based on *amplifying understanding* which may be employed only in case of having deep, *fundamental knowledge* [10, p. 229–237]. This mode of interpretation is daintier and needs more flexible identifiers. Such, for example, that will allow to see that the described revenge type is not an atrocity (though a way to fulfil one's right), but a positive act, good enough to demonstrate one's superiority.

The symbolic interpretation of revenge via infanticide and cannibalism in this narrative is that *any man is equal to gods, and they grant him whatever unless he infringes upon their interests* (in the described case – a convention to honour guests). Observing mutual interests suggests equality of parties, including, strange as it may seem, divine connivance in child-slaying cases.

Revenge as a symbol of human rights egalitarian to gods is a cultural universal, realisation of metapsychological substratum of human cognition reflected in literary legacy [9, p. 119]. It amplifies revenge as an archetype (inflicting harm for the harm received) with cannibalistic details that have stayed time stable since antiquity.

Though repulsive at first sight, barbarous exercise of making parents unsuspectingly feed on the flesh of their unfortunate progeny is galore reflected in European myths and even in "The Histories" by Herodotus as a habitual way of improving fathers' manners. This fact permits to assume that taking vengeance on one's enemy by making him eat his child is typical of European culture, for it is realised in various Greek myths (e.g. Atreus and Thyestes, Tereus and Procne), "The Histories", "The Poetic (Elder) Edda" and is preserved as an inspiration source in modern fiction. It appears contrary to the suggestion that revenge is an element of aberrant behaviour. Rather, in "The Histories", "The Edda" or separate myths (as well as in "A Storm of Swords") it proves a time-tested mode of action performed in cold blood for demonstrating doubtless supremacy over the rival since a good parent is very unlikely to survive the pain and shame afterwards. The Greek myth about Atreus and Thyestes dwells on the antagonism between two brothers who could not cede the throne to each other. The *dish* was a revenge for the death of Atreus' son, caused in part by Thyestes: *Atreus [...] slaughtered [...] Thyestes's sons [...] He hacked them [...] set chosen morsels of their meat to a dish boiled in a cauldron, before Thyestes, to welcome him on his return. When Thyestes had eaten heartily, Atreus sent in their bloody heads and feet and hands, laid out on another dish, to show him what was inside his belly. Thyestes fell back, vomiting, and laid a curse on the seed of Atreus* [2, p. 46].

Another similar myth about Tereus and Procne tells how Tereus fell in love with Philomela, the sister of his wife Procne, sent the latter away and announced that she had died. Later on he also cut out her tongue and confined to the slaves' quarters, but Philomela found her sister, and they revenged on Tereus by slaying Itys, the son of Procne and Tereus: *"Oh, to be revenged on Tereus, who pretended that you were dead and seduced me!" wafted Philomela, aghast. Procne [...] flew out, seized her son Itys, killed him, gutted him, and then boiled him in a cauldron for Tereus to eat on his return* [2, p. 166].

Herodotus tells how Astyages made Harpagus put Cyrus (the newborn grandson of Astyages, whom he feared as a rival) to death, but Harpagus pursued the order obliquely. Cyrus consequently survived, and Astyages took vengeance on Harpagus for his disobedience: *Astyages [...] took the son of Harpagus and slew him, after which he cut him in pieces, and roasted some portions before the fire, and boiled others [...] The hour for the banquet came, and [...] on the table of Harpagus nothing was placed except the flesh of his own son. When Harpagus seemed to have eaten [...] and enjoyed it, the basket was brought where the hands, feet and head of his son were* [3, p. 48–49].

In Scandinavian heroic epos Gudrun slew her sons by Atli, her husband and king, and served their hearts to him to revenge for his having killed her brothers:

*Thou, giver of swords, of thy sons the hearts,
All heavy with blood in honey thou hast eaten;
Thou shalt stomach, hero, the flesh of the slain* [5, p. 296].

The upper fragments confirm the idea that it was not a rare decision to yield to such an "aberrant" behaviour so that offenders might feel their guilt in full. Even mothers, the way they are shown in these texts, do not seem to have agonising doubts before gutting their sons and pangs of conscience after, for they consider it worth while doing by all means. As it appears, to make an enemy eat the flesh of his kin was thought not only an acceptable, but a valorous, heroic act of vengeance [13, p. 413] and not an aberration despite all gruesome Gothic details. For this reason Harpagus *being asked by Astyages if he knew what beast's flesh [...] he had been eating, answered he knew well, and that whatever the king did was agreeable* [3:ibid]. The Andal prince, slain by the Rat Cook, remained not revenged for, since Rat Cook (though cursed) was not punished for the murder itself. The Cook fed one of his guests to the other one, and the gods punished him. But the situational factor important for understanding this act of divine revenge is the Nightfort, since if it had

not been for the place, the Cook, having fed the king (father) on the prince (son), would not have been punished. Hospitality laws are thus more rigorous than those forbidding to murder people in the world of "A Song of Ice and Fire", and any castigatory atrocity may be justified if it does not violate the commandment of respecting one's guests.

To explain this rigorosity, the implicit question asked above should be recalled. Why does the act of deific revenge take the shape of the Cook's and is also realised as eating children if the Cook is punished not for the murder, but for having transgressed hospitality laws? An adequate answer may also confirm the fact that the divine act was not a mere punishment, but revenge *sensu stricto* (inflicting harm for harm received).

Gods in the philosophy of antiquity were treated as a source of sublime symbols, called *synthemes* [12, p. 273–305; 11, p. 15–21], embedded into ordinary, well-known things. Such is, for example, light – thereby gods expose beings (created by them) and it becomes a unifying image of gods and men; they are thus reflected in men and world. A name is also a *synthème* if it corresponds to a thing it denotes at the most. Thought this interpretation may seem close to *icon*, the really ideal correspondence, however, emanates only from the deific mind, whereof human mind is a vague reflection.

Communication between gods and men is accomplished via *synthemes*, images of human-divine confluence. Fair divine punishment is a *synthème* of gods being dissatisfied by the Cook's violation of their laws. As they are capable of making absolute correspondences, their punishment becomes a reproduction of what the Cook has done to his victims and by this very act simultaneously offended them. His cruel revenge is refracted through deific mind to become his punishment. On this evidence it appears that it could never be otherwise.

The results of the analysis demonstrated in this article may be used in the course of Communicative Linguistics ("Narrative Communication") as well as the special course "Interpreting Fiction".

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