

NATURALISTIC SYMBOLS IN THE LATE 19TH – EARLY 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

The article deals with the study of naturalistic symbols in the fiction of the United States of America of the late 19th – early 20th centuries. The *aim* of the research is to analyze functional assignment of the symbolic images in Frank Norris's novels «The Octopus» and «McTeague», Theodore Dreiser's «Sister Carrie», and Stephen Crane's «The Red Badge of Courage». Naturalistic «matter-of-factness» of the styles of the narratives under study is combined with poetic «height» of romanticism and symbolism, thus, details, things and facts of reality get the status of Dingesymbols. The role of such symbols as «octopus», «gold», «rocking-chair» and «red badge» in the corresponding works of the American authors has been analyzed in the article. The American literary naturalism has been proved to carry its national and author's individual peculiarities connected with its close links with romanticism and peculiar concept of a man doomed to resist overmastering influence of determinism. The article *is of interest* to those dealing with literary studies, literary criticism and text analysis.

Key words: poetics, symbol, naturalism, realism, romanticism.

РЕФЕРАТ

Наталія Венгринович. Натуралістична символіка в американському романі кінця XIX – початку XX століття.

Статтю присвячено вивченню натуралістичної символіки у художніх творах Сполучених Штатів Америки кінця XIX – початку XX століття. *Мета* роботи – аналіз функціонального призначення образів-символів у романах Френка Норріса «Спрут» та «Мак-Тіг», Теодора Драйзера «Сестра Керрі» та Стівена Крейна «Червоний знак звитяги». Натуралістична «приземленість» стилю досліджуваних творів поєднується із «високолетністю» поезики романтизму та символізму, а найбуденніші деталі, речі, події реальної дійсності отримують статус Dingesymbol'ів. У статті проаналізовано роль таких образів-символів як «спрут», «золото», «крісло-гойдалка» та «червоний знак» у відповідних творах американських авторів. *Доведено*, що становлення натуралістичного напрямку в літературі США має свою національну й індивідуально-авторську специфіку, пов'язану з тісним зв'язком американського натуралізму з романтизмом та своєрідною концепцією людини, приреченої протистояти всепоглинаючому впливу детермінізму. *Результати* дослідження можуть бути використані у викладанні зарубіжної літератури, літературознавства та аналізу тексту.

Ключові слова: поезика, символ, натуралізм, реалізм, романтизм.

The most prominent stylistic peculiarity of the late 19th – early 20th century naturalistic novels of the United States of America, namely Frank Norris's «The Octopus» and «McTeague», Theodore Dreiser's «Sister Carrie», and Stephen Crane's «The Red Badge of Courage», is their tendency towards synthesizing ideological and esthetic system of naturalism with the elements of other poetic systems. High concentration of symbols in the mentioned above texts points out to their relation to romanticism tradition. In principle, such an amalgamation looks unnaturally only at first sight since not merely confrontation was between such dialectical antipodes as romanticism and naturalism but there was some sort of unity between them as well.

Besides genetic and typological affinity of realism and naturalism, American literary critic Charles Child Walcutt takes notice of naturalism and romanticism propinquity. While investigating naturalism phenomenon, the scientist, generalizing his thoughts on conceptual categorical apparatus, summarizes, «I use the term *naturalism* to indicate a philosophical orientation; *romanticism* to indicate extremes or intensities of effect; *realism* to indicate the apparent fidelity, through style, to details of objects, manners, or speech» [8, p. 23].

It is curious that Frank Norris supposed naturalism to be an ideal literary form which combined realism accuracy and romanticism faithfulness. US specialist in literature Donald Pizer pays attention to the fact that in his works «A Plea for Romantic Fiction», «Zola as a Romantic Writer», «Weekly Letter» F. Norris differentiates such notions as realism, romanticism, and naturalism. He «places realism, romanticism, and naturalism in a dialectic, in which realism and romanticism were opposing forces, and naturalism was transcending synthesis» [6, p. 120]. Moreover, naturalism abstracts and adopts the best from realism and romanticism, namely detailed accuracy and philosophical depth, but it differs from both modes in one important characteristic of its subject matter [6, p. 122].

The following is an abstract from Norris's essay «Zola as a Romantic Writer», «Naturalism is a form of romanticism, not an inner circle of realism. Where is the realism in the Rougon-Macquart? Are such things likely to happen between lunch and supper? That Zola's work is not purely romantic as was Hugo's lies chiefly in the choice of Milieu. These great, terrible dramas no longer happen among the personnel of a feudal and Renaissance nobility, those who are in the fore-front of the marching world, but among the lower – almost the lowest – classes; those who have been thrust or wrenched from the ranks, who are falling by the roadway. This is not romanticism – this drama of the people, working itself out in blood and ordure. It is not realism. It is a school by itself, unique, somber, powerful beyond words. It is naturalism» [3, pp. 86-87]. In other words, admitting self-sufficiency of naturalistic tendencies in the French author's creative work, F. Norris didn't set aside evident relationship between Zolaism and romanticism and realism.

US critic and biographer Carl Van Doren believes that one of the main causes of romanticism continuous prevalence in the American literature is the fact that along with the poetics of realism first-rate writers of the century – including Frank Norris and Jack London – manifested two seemingly incompatible, but in fact closely intertwined tendencies – romantic and naturalistic [7, p. 67].

Such an amalgamation of romantic and naturalistic tendencies we can trace in «The Octopus» (1901), «McTeague» (1899), «Sister Carrie» (1900), and «The Red Badge of Courage» (1895). In each of these predominantly naturalistic novels there is a persistent and remarkable romantic symbol which either accompanies a series of events in the protagonist's life or gives emotional weight to the forces which play so large part in the movement.

From the first to the last page F. Norris's novel entitled «The Octopus» is abundant in images symbolizing capitalism monstrous force inexorably sucking blood from its victims – «the iron-hearted monster of steel and steam, implacable, insatiable, huge – its entrails gorged with the life blood that it sucked from an entire commonwealth, its ever hungry maw glutted with the harvests that should have fed the famished bellies of the whole world of the Orient» [5, p. 153].

The Railroad symbolizing malignance and evil, adjectives like «iron-hearted», «implacable», «insatiable», «inexorable», «pitiless», «soulless» are constantly applied to that «galloping monster, the terror of steel and steam, with its single eye, Cyclopean, red, shooting from horizon to horizon; ... the leviathan, with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus» [5, p. 25].

F. Norris depicts railroad lines marked on the map as «ruddy arteries» of a «sprawling organism» – «It was as though the State had been sucked white and colourless, and against this pallid background the red arteries of the monster stood out, swollen with life-blood, reaching out to infinity, gorged to bursting; an excrescence, a gigantic parasite fattening upon the life-blood of an entire commonwealth» [5, p. 137].

Thus, the general symbolism of the reviewed episodes is concentrated upon a binary opposition of two opposing forces: brutal, bloody force having created the civilization and eternal, almost mystical, all-conquering power of nature over which the first has no power. Such an opposition completely corresponds to the programme principles of naturalistic doctrine: personal must retreat from the species – for naturalism it was an axiom.

In another F. Norris's novel – «McTeague» – there is also an obvious naturalistic symbol present. It is that of gold – the gold McTeague works with as a dentist, the gold of Trina's cache he later craves for so much, the gold mine that he discovers late in the novel, and especially the advertising sign of a gold tooth that to him is an embodiment of success, fame and prestige in his career and therefore a validation of his shaky sense of personal and social sufficiency.

In the first few pages of the novel the reader finds key facts about McTeague's personality – his appearance, education, habits and, what is the most important, at least for our study, his dreams and ambitions. This «too hopelessly stupid» «young giant» dreams «to have projecting from that corner window a huge gilded tooth, a molar with enormous prongs, something gorgeous and attractive. He would have it someday, on that he was resolved; but as yet such a thing was far beyond his means» [4, p. 3].

A major characteristic of this «gold» symbol is its ironic function within the structure of the novel. McTeague obtains gold at a continually increasing rate. The author transfers the protagonist from his initial small dental supply to the «huge gilded tooth» to Trina's gold coins to an entire mine. «Yet despite his gain of this symbol of wealth and therefore presumably of class and esteem, his movement from midway in the novel is downward both socially and personally until he reaches his final condition of a pursued animal» [6, p. 105].

All over the text, the reader encounters such synonyms as «gold», «golden», «gilded», «gilt». Even the last paragraph of the novel contains an allusion to the protagonist's passion for gold and what it leads to – «McTeague remained stupidly looking around him, now at the distant horizon, now at the ground, now at the half-dead canary chattering feebly in its little gilt prison» [4, p. 327].

On the whole naturalistic Theodore Dreiser's novel «Sister Carrie» also contains a romantic symbol that of the rocking chair in which the main character frequently sits and muses about the happiness that she longs for. Caroline Meeber looks out over the teeming streets on her first night in Chicago and rocks and dreams of a happiness that consists of fashionable clothes, ostentatious men, and evenings at the vaudeville theatre. This is an abstract from Chapter 4, «Indeed, as she sat in her rocking chair these several evenings before going to bed and looked out upon the pleasantly lighted street, this money cleared for its prospective professor the way to every joy and every bauble which the heart of woman may desire. 'I will have a fine time', she thought» [2, p. 31].

Carrie retreats to the rocking chair time and time again to seek comfort and contentment in the overwhelming and sometimes dream-crushing world of the industrial city. This rocking chair, instead of representing pure escape, becomes a safe space to process the overwhelming experience of city life that so many late 19th century Americans were coming to share.

Eight years later, at the close of the novel, Caroline Meeber is a famous New York musical comedy actress and has acquired all she desired and even more but she still rocks and dreams of a happiness that might be hers if only she could devote herself to the art of dramatic expression. These are the last words of the narrator, «In your rocking chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long, alone. In your rocking chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel» [2, p. 501].

By registering carefully Carrie's reaction to specific details, Dreiser shows her moving from her early naive optimism to her final disillusionment and despair. Carrie's sensitivity to details provides the emotional center of the novel. The most important patterns of details, in addition to clothing and money, are the theater, hotels, and restaurants. These comprise the walled and gilded city to which Carrie seeks entrance. But the most important single group of objects is the various rocking chairs upon which Carrie rides to dreamland, beginning in her sister's flat, continuing through the several rooms and apartments where she lives, and culminating in her vast suite in the Waldorf.

The key symbol in Stephen Crane's «The Red Badge of Courage» is that of Henry Fleming's wound that testifies to his friends that he is not the coward he fears he may be. Having run from the battlefield in terror, the protagonist of the novel acquires his red badge by a blow from one of his own retreating fellows who «adroitly and fiercely swung his rifle» and suchwise «it crushed upon the youth's head» [1, p. 258]. But when his red badge of disgrace is separated from its source, it quickly begins to act upon others and ultimately upon Henry as a sign of his glorious and admirable participation in battle.

Of course, these symbols and the novels in which they occur are not entirely analogous. Obviously, there is much difference in tone, in depth of implication, and in literary success between Norris's often exaggerated symbolism of that of power and gold, Dreiser's reminiscent use of the rocking chair, and Crane's reliance on an intense both verbal and structural irony when describing the effects of Henry's wound. Yet the symbols perform similar roles in their respective narratives in that «they structure and inform our sense not only that human beings are flawed and ineffectual but also that experience itself does not guide, instruct, or judge human nature. One of the principal corollaries of a progressive view of time is the belief that man has the capacity to interact meaningfully with his world and to benefit from this interaction. But the effect of the naturalistic novel, as is suggested by its symbolic structure, is to reverse or heavily qualify this expectation» [6, p. 106].

Each of the mentioned above symbols show vainness of endeavor and attempts to change something. In Norris's «The Octopus» the narrator says that «every State has its own grievance. If it is not a railroad trust, it is a sugar trust, or an oil trust, or an industrial trust» [5, p. 144] or «another head of the same Hydra» [5, p. 257]. McTeague, Caroline Meeber, and Henry Fleming are also in a sense stationary in time. They have moved through experience but still only dimly comprehend it and themselves, and thus their journeys through time are essentially circular journeys that return them to where they began. McTeague returns to the mountains of his youth and stands dumb and brutelike before their primeval enmity; Carrie still rocks and dreams of a happiness she is never to gain; and Fleming is again poised between gratuitous self-assurance and half-concealed doubt.

Therefore, the late 19th – early 20th century naturalistic novel engages us in a somewhat different aesthetic experience than does the 18th or 19th century conventional novel. The naturalistic novel creates an effect of ambiguity, uncertainty, and doubt. Naturalistic narratives produce an impression of bewilderment, about whether anything can be done to cope with the «power», whether anything can be gained or learnt from experience. Actually, they make an imprint of astonishment if experience has any meaning aside from the existential value of a collision with phenomena. For what do the tremendous symbol of the octopus and ironic symbols of McTeague's gold, Carrie's rocking chair, and Fleming's wound tell is but that life is sliding or drifting rather than marching and that the ultimate direction and possible worth of experience are immense and unbounded.

So, the Railroad that transports goods, the Carrie who rocks in her rocking-chair, the Fleming who is proud of his red badge of “courage”, and the McTeague who stands clutching his gold in the empty desert represent both the pathetic and perhaps tragic worth of the seeking, feeling mind and the inability of experience to supply a meaningful answer to the question that is human need.

«Alles Künstlerische ist Symbol» said Goethe ... The study of the late 19th – early 20th century American naturalistic novels proves that naturalistic «matter-of-factness» of their styles is combined with poetic «height» of romanticism and symbolism, thus, details, things and facts of reality often get the status of Dingessymbols having their own cultural, historic and aesthetic meaning and value.

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