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Genre Diversities in English Postmodern Discourse

Abstract

The article analyses genre diversities in English postmodern discourse, and singles out main features of such genres as novels, fairy tales and detective stories. In postmodern literature classical characteristic features of these genres are subverted and new genres appear with merged characteristic features.

Key words

Genre, diversity, postmodern discourse, characteristic feature, a novel, a fairy tale, a detective story.

In literary studies the term '*genre*' has many definitions. Genre forms are mobile and easily transformed depending on changes in the external sociocultural context. The genre is always conditioned by such circumstances as the environment and the objective qualities of the described or analyzed object, phenomenon, process, furthermore as being ideological, moral, ethical, aesthetic, professional and individual psychological features of the author (Bychkov, Mankovskaya, Ivanov 2007: 106-107).

Genre, as a rule, is always historical, has typological characteristics, a predetermined epistemological nature, and contains axiological accents. In literature, the genre is defined as a historically developing type of literary work, where the characteristic features of a more or less extensive group of texts are generalized. Any genre is an exact unity of special properties of a form in its basic moments - a peculiar composition, imagery, speech, rhythm (Bychkov, Mankovskaya, Ivanov 2007: 105-107). Mankovskaya points out the existence of the following stylistic variants of postmodern prose: narrative postmodernism, lyrical postmodernism, post philosophical postmodernism, psychoanalytical postmodernism, and melancholic postmodernism (Bychkov, Mankovskaya, Ivanov 2007: 95). Bakhtin states that not a single historical aspect can stand in its pure form, but it is characterized by the predominance of one or another principle of a character embodiment (Bakhtin). Gromov has a similar point of view regarding the purity of the genre. He points out that every stage of life of a genre absorbs attributes, characteristics and features of the epoch along with the elements pertinent to already established genres.

The genre of a novel in postmodern discourse.

In Bausch's opinion, the novel is the most capacious and widest among all types of poetry, and it allows a great number of variations and derivations as far as it may include poetry of all types and kinds (Kozhevnikova, Nikolaeva 1987). Rymar does not contradict the previous statement and adds that on the basis of the novel there is a synthesis of dramatic and lyric tendencies with epic structure (Rymar 1978). In this piece we will support the ideas of Bakhtin and other scholars, that under all circumstances and

tendencies of evolution and development of the genre system, the purity of genre is impossible.

Modernism, with all its wealth, was nevertheless dictatorial. It is a powerful and strong, albeit strongly varying, generating line of modernist perception of the world. This enables the understanding of the constructions through the conditional optics of modernism and vice versa, which exist in one single field. Although modernism rejected the position and creation of the world, it spoke of pure reflection and attempted to remake and abandon the classical understanding of art. And this is how it became united in its image of the world. The interpretation of modernism was the novel *Ulysses* by James Joyce. Modernism, unlike post-modernism, existed in the single field of the genre.

Modernism was constructed "through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture. ... One endorses the concept of such a divide, it is no longer useful to trace a singular history of high art; one must, instead, examine the bifurcated lineage of art and its relations to mass culture" (Friedberb 1994: 165). The definition of *Ulysses* as a post-modern work is not accurate. The text is different from other modernist texts, such as Kafka's "castle", but it should be considered as bringing the ideas of modernism to its very limit. Joyce's next novel *Finnegans Wake* was very coldly received, because Joyce in *Ulysses* had already developed modernism so much that he began to destroy it, not by abandoning the ideals of modernism, but namely the destruction and absorption of himself. Post-modernism exists in the genre, like a genre film, but it is not a pure genre, it absorbs other genres, whereas meta-modernism can exist in the genre using it.

In the convergence of post-modernism genres there are two parts: primary and secondary convergence. Primary convergence is when there is a genre of romantic comedy, and the whole text continues as a romantic comedy, but in the last half-hour it turns out to be the most terrible horror, which stretches beyond its genre and so diverges from its own structure, and becomes a different genre which cannot be distinguished. These genres do not occur in synthesis with each other, but go through a sequence. Secondary convergence takes place when we cannot determine the genre, because there is too much information within it. Primary is most often found in post-modernism, secondary in meta-modernism. But since this change is far from an exact distinction, they can vary by convergence, which of course calls into question the whole interpretation. For example if we take the two novels, *History of the World* in 10/2 chapters and the late novel *Anticipation of the End* by post-modern British writer Julian Barnes for comparison, *History of the World* refers to the so-called "New History", the notion proposed by American philologists, and shows history as a view of one particular place and point. In *History of the World*, we see the world from the point of view of the Worm and each time differently, and the genre is different every time. In the *Anticipation of the End*, the genre is very difficult to determine, this is a detective story without a crime.

A key feature of postmodern fiction is its discontent with classical modes of representation, which often go by the name of literary realism. Realistic representation no longer holds in a world where the sense of a single, knowable reality is replaced by the conviction that everything is a construct shaped by language and discourse. Patricia Waugh discusses the changes in the postmodern novel as being an "... uncertain, insecure, self-questioning and culturally pluralistic" period, which may be considered quite illuminating in this

respect (Waugh 1984: 6). "Contemporary writing is both a response and a contribution to [a] thoroughgoing sense that reality or history are [sic.] provisional: no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures. The materialist, positivist and empiricist world-view on which realistic fiction is premised no longer exists. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that more and more novelists have come to question and reject the forms that correspond to this ordered reality (the well-made plot, chronological sequence, the authoritative omniscient author, the rational connection between what characters 'do' and what they 'are', the causal connection between 'surface' details and the 'deep', 'scientific laws' of existence)" (Waugh 1984: 7).

A characteristic feature, the "ordered reality", of modernism is alien for postmodern writings. Mark Currie labels metafiction as a most distant antonym of realism, emphasizing the form's potential to constitute a serious challenge to realistic discourse (Currie 1995a: 15). Patricia Waugh's explanation of the term similarly suggests its subversive potential:

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which selfconsciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text (Waugh 1984: 2).

In postmodern novels, conventional literary-fictional discourse is often targeted through metafiction, which is almost always coupled with parody. The parodic kinds that appear to pervade such examples are genre parody and, to a lesser extent, text parody. It should be remembered that the conventions of literary-fictional discourse are best exposed and undermined through parody directed at genres or texts which are typical representatives of this discursive realm. Postmodern fiction often employs genre or text parody not to parody a specific genre or text, but to parody traditional literary-fictional discourse through metafictional devices. Any instance of genre or text parody is thus subordinated to larger metafictional concerns aiming to challenge literary-fictional discourse, which often manifests itself in the conventions of realism.

This argument is also corroborated by Patricia Waugh's suggestion that metafiction often targets "the 'language' of the literary system itself, including the conventions of the novel as a whole or particular forms of that genre". Such targeting, of course, often takes the form of parody commenting "... on a specific work or fictional mode ..." and exposing novelistic conventions by drawing attention to the processes of construction (Waugh 1984: 4).

Mikhail Bakhtin's argument about the "auto-criticism of discourse" in the novel is similarly pertinent. To him, "one of the primary distinguishing features of the novel as a genre" is its potential to "foreground a critique of literary discourse" in general and "novelistic discourse" in particular. It is as though Bakhtin's argument made in the 1930s anticipates postmodern concerns about reality, fiction, and the discourse of literature:

[In the novel] Discourse is criticized in its relationship to reality: its attempt to faithfully reflect reality, to manage reality and to transpose it (the utopian pretenses of discourse), even to replace reality as a surrogate for it ... (Bakhtin 1992: 412).

Most of the time, of course, the "laying bare of the device" is achieved through genre parody, which exposes generic conventions and draws attention to the writing process. The illusion of reality is broken, and genre parody again serves the larger parodic aim of targeting literary-fictional discourse. Literary-fictional discourse is also a significant object of parody in most of the novels analyzed in the preceding sections of this article.

In all these novels, genre and/or text parody are employed as major metafictional devices challenging the discourse of realism. In other words, all may be said to parody literary-fictional discourse by subordinating genre and/or text parody to their wider metafictional concerns. One such novel is Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince* (1973), which may be said to subvert the genre of the cheap romance novel, especially through the way its plot develops. What is special about *The Black Prince*, however, is the way the novel simultaneously employs and subverts the conventional romance novel plot. The foreword of the main character's book, for instance, directly begins with metafictional remarks serving to remind the reader of the constructed nature of the story that will follow:

Although several years have now passed since the events recorded in this fable, I shall in telling it adopt the modern technique of narration, allowing the narrating consciousness to pass like a light along its series of present moments, aware of the past, unaware of what is to come. I shall, that is, inhabit my past self and, for the ordinary purposes of story-telling, speak only with the apprehensions of that time, a time in many ways so different from the present. So for example I shall say, 'I am fifty-eight years old', as I then was. And I shall judge people inadequately, perhaps even unjustly, as I then judged them, and not in the light of any later wisdom. That wisdom however, as I trust that I truly think it to be, will not be absent from the story (Murdoch 1975: 11).

This is one way Pearson draws attention to his own writing process, preventing the reader from treating what will follow only as a thrilling story where, engrossed in the narrative, one continually wonders what will happen next. Devices serving similar functions exist within Pearson's narrative, too. Throughout his narration, Pearson fairly regularly interrupts the story-line in order to engage not only in lengthy evaluations of his own narrative but also in highly sophisticated philosophical commentary on concepts like art, life, truth, beauty, and love. Of course, such interruptions may be said to subvert the romance novel plot by breaking the illusion of reality, but this is not their only parodic function. The highly explicit incongruity resulting from the juxtaposition of such sophisticated commentary with the relatively simple and superficial story-line makes an even more significant contribution to the parodic nature of Pearson's story. Bradley

Pearson's narrative is not followed by the editor's postscript only. *The Black Prince*, then, may be labelled as a parody of the romance novel genre.

David Lodge's *Changing Places* (1975) is yet another novel that subverts literary-fictional discourse by employing genre parody closely intertwined with metafiction. The third chapter of *Changing Places* is titled, "Corresponding", and in keeping with this title, the novel suddenly changes form and remains epistolary for a whole chapter. Such an abrupt shift in form coupled with the often comic content of the letters that keep going back and forth between the characters turn this chapter into a subverted epistolary novel. It is, however, essential to note that genre subversion is primarily a tool to serve the larger metafictional concerns of the novel. In his book, *The Art of Fiction*, David Lodge himself explains that in *Changing Places* he "... felt the need to provide some variety and surprise for the reader ... and accordingly wrote each chapter in a different style or format" (Lodge 1992: 227). Such a strategy, of course, breaks the illusion of reality for the reader, continually reminding him of the fictional and constructed nature of what he is reading. The four characters' final conversation is somehow directed towards the question of "endings" and it developed a heated (and metafictional) discussion about how novels and films end. This discussion is stopped abruptly, in *medias res* and this is the point where *Changing Places* ends, too:

PHILIP: You remember that passage in *Northanger Abbey* where Jane Austen says she's afraid that her readers will have guessed that a happy ending is coming up at any moment.

MORRIS: (nods) Quote, 'Seeing in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity.' Unquote.

PHILIP: That's it. Well, that's something the novelist can't help giving away, isn't it, that his book is shortly coming to an end? It may not be a happy ending, nowadays, but he can't disguise the tell-tale compression of the pages.

HILARY and DESIREE begin to listen to what PHILIP is saying, and he becomes the focal point of attention. I mean, mentally you brace yourself for the ending of a novel. As you're reading, you're aware of the fact that there's only a page or two left in the book, and you get ready to close it. But with a film there's no way of telling, especially nowadays, when films are much more loosely structured, much more ambivalent than they used to be. There's no way of telling which frame is going to be the last. The film is going along, just as life goes along, people are behaving, doing things, drinking, talking, and we're watching them, and at any point the director chooses, without any warning, without anything being resolved, or explained, or wound up, it can just ... end.

PHILIP shrugs. The camera stops, freezing him in mid-gesture.

THE END (Lodge 1978: 251)

David Lodge ends the novel and the film script by surprising the reader, thereby creating a 'metafictional joke'. This and all other metafictional devices subvert the genre as a tool for its own purpose. Genre

subversion in this novel may be regarded as an essential component of a much larger project - the project of exposing and subversion of traditional literary-fictional discourse which is firmly rooted in the conventions of realism.

The genre of a fairy tale in postmodern discourse.

An example for subversion of the fairy tale genre is Salman Rushdie's *Shame* (1983). The first-person narrator sets the fairytale atmosphere right at the beginning where he introduces the story he is going to tell: "*In the remote border town of Q. ... there once lived three lovely, and loving, sisters*" (Rushdie 1995: 11). This atmosphere is reinforced throughout as the narrator insists on being non-specific about the setting of the story. "Once upon a time" is a phrase he employs fairly regularly, and his occasional references to the timespan covered by his story are made using the Hegiran rather than the Gregorian calendar - a practice which disorients especially the Western reader, who clearly represents the majority of the novel's reading public.

Throughout, the fairly regular repetition of such phrases continually reminds the reader of the fairy-tale quality of the story he is reading. The use of these phrases in sentences like the following, however, reminds the reader at the same time that this is no regular fairy-tale:

And once upon a time there was a retarded daughter, who for twelve years had been given to understand that she embodied her mother's shame (Rushdie 1995: 135). There was once a wife, whose husband injected her with knock-out drugs twice daily (Rushdie 1995: 242).

In *Shame* the author uses allusions to well-known fairy-tales, which serve another function - to subvert the fairy-tale genre. The first of these allusions is to *Beauty and the Beast*, which the narrator cites in relation to the retarded Sufiya Zinobia's split personality. This aspect of the girl becomes clear for the first time when, one night, she commits a most violent act of tearing off the heads of the two hundred and eighteen turkeys that Pinkie Aurangzeb, the widow of the late Marshal Aurangzeb, is raising in the neighbourhood. Everybody is shocked, unable to understand how such strength and violence can issue from an otherwise harmless twelve-year-old girl. It is here that the narrator interferes and accounts for Sufiya's personality by alluding to the well-known fairy-tale: "*The beast inside the beauty. Opposing elements of a fairy-tale combined in a single character*" (Rushdie 1995: 139).

The narrator makes a self-conscious attempt to interpret and analyse his own story, making contradictory remarks throughout the narration. Sufiya retains her split personality, getting more and more dangerous in time, and directing her violence no longer to animals but to human beings. Upon realizing that his daughter is responsible for the serial murders happening in town, Raza Hyder asks Omar Khayyam, Sufiya's husband,

to inject her with a deadly drug. Khayyam is unable to carry out this request, but he makes sure that Sufiya sleeps permanently by administering daily injections to her. The narrator again interferes here, alluding this time to another well-known fairy-tale:

... twice in every twenty-four hours, Omar Khayyam would go unobserved into that darkened room, that echo of other death cells, to inject into the tiny body lying on its thin carpet the fluids of nourishment and of unconsciousness, to administer the drugs that turned her [Sufiya] from one fairy-tale into another, into sleeping beauty instead of beauty-and-beast (Rushdie 1995: 237).

The allusion this time is to *Sleeping Beauty*. Fairy-tales like *Beauty and the Beast* and *Sleeping Beauty* are parodied through the narrator's ironic comparison of these with his own story. The parodic allusions in *Shame*, however, serve exactly this purpose, exposing the fictional and intertextual nature of not only the narrator's story but also the fairy-tales alluded to.

The genre of a detective story in postmodern discourse.

A widely parodied genre in postmodern fiction is the detective novel. The world in detective stories might be presented as a closed community - both in the sense of the number of clues, suspects and space (e.g. *Ten Little Indians* by Agatha Christie - a group of people imprisoned on the island cut off from the world). The novelty is the world presented as the area of full cognition, ordered as a result of the investigation, which restores its order, demolished only temporarily. Sometimes the presented world in detective stories might be described as a morally ambiguous world, where the investigation reveals the truth, and the crime itself is pure evil.

The protagonist in detective stories is usually an amateur detective (Miss Marple, Dr Gideon Fell), who stands as a guard over morality or a private detective (H. Poirot, S. Holmes, Sir H. Merivale). The novelty is that the story's structure could be divided into:

- the reversed structure order, going deeper and deeper (in the last chapter, the reader learns what really happened),
- numerous flashbacks,
- the feature dominant: emphasis on the investigation, the crime itself is hygienic, described at random,
- the method of narration: deductive (*The riddle is complicated, because it was made so. But we'll think about it* (Christie 2000: 190).

The events described by the narrator have "a double bottom", whereby the reader realizes that something is hidden from him. Such technique is also called "an updating act", which makes a reader curious about the ending, and during the reading tries to predict it. The goal is achieved by the author in giving some hints

about the solution, but does so in such a way that a reader considers them misleading or irrelevant (Zabski 2006: 301).

The fundamental element of every detective story is clearly outlined, with cohesive and dynamic action, developing in the order of searching. The basic element of this dynamic action is recognition, which is characterized by a sudden turn of the story, thus leading the reader (also the protagonist) to a full understanding of events and individual sequences of the story, while introducing certain elements of uncertainty and mystery.

The enigma is a murder (most often), which in most cases in classic detective stories, is committed at the beginning of the story, and this is the element that reinvigorates the story. The investigation is surmounted with the answer to the question: "*Who and why did they kill?*" However, as it turns out, the very solution to the puzzle is not a fundamental question of a detective story. The essence of the work lies in the entire action preceding the event.

The magic of mystery relies on maintaining, as long as possible, this dreamy, elusive awareness of time before recognition. The reader, like the detective, must cross a wide river unknowingly kept alive. The stifling, risky night before recognition, even in its most terrible moments, preserves the charm, the seductive power of self-sustaining, unconscious memory. Recognition is only a reference point, because without it a longed-for return will not occur (Stachura 2006).

In the traditional detective story, there is first a homicide, followed by an investigation and the solution to the riddle. However, before the finale culminates in discovering the secret and catching the murderer, actions are carried out in the course of the investigation that refer to the past. The fact is that the finale of each story must have a successful ending - the puzzle is resolved, the murderer caught and punished. The order and peace of citizens must be restored and justice triumphs. In the classic version of the detective story, because this genre stands out not only by formal conservatism, but also concerning outlook - the world order destroyed at the beginning of the story by crimes, must finally be restored.

Catching the murderer is a consequence of the pursuer's actions (most often it is a detective) who, like the reader, does not have the key to solve the puzzle. The only possessor is the criminal. S. Lasić, a well-known literature researcher, argues: "the key is the strength of the murderer, but also his weakness. His omniscience demands a suitable partner: a persistent detective" (Lasic 1976: 34). So the pursuer walks in the footsteps of the murderer bravely, but is usually far from the idealized superhero. In the classic and contemporary detective stories, detectives are not deprived of flaws (Holmes' morphine addiction, Poirot's egotism, Hole's alcoholism, Kurt Wallander's self-deprecation and self-destruction).

The explanation of the puzzle does not bring the expected relief, because there is no black and white world, so it is not easy to return the order from before the event, because "normality", so glorified, even by Miss Marple, simply does not exist. The world of gentlemen like Hercule Poirot lays in the ruins of World War II. Contemporary investigators are savaged by life protagonists introducing the reader into the world of mundane reality.

The contemporary detective story has partly seized the tasks that belong to the *belles lettres*. This describes, explains and allows us to understand the existing reality. It has good conditions for this - a loyal and wide

public, efficient and intelligent creators. There is no doubt, this literature still remains a form of entertainment that is scrumptious and interesting.

It is characteristic that in many classical detective stories the narration of a crime at the end of a story is superficial and token, many times incomplete. Whether reported stories are complete or not, depend on how these regularities are respected or avoided. This is not present but guarantees infinitely many possible variations of one story. Reconstruction of the unsaid clues allows the unidentified in a story's skeleton to be a rigorously calculated scheme, which still has new areas of possible contents.

It might be said that the content of detective stories exists thanks to receiving a new form of assimilation of real-life actions and environments. This happens not only because of psychological, sociological or ethnological reasons but also because of the topographic settings of the story. The last element was widely described by Benjamin in *One Way Street*, which could be described as an older type of detective story. He claims that:

The furniture style of the second half of the nineteenth century has received its only adequate description, and analysis, in a certain type of detective novel at the dynamic centre of which stands the horror of apartments. The arrangement of the furniture is at the same time the site plan of deadly traps, and the suite of rooms prescribes the fleeing victim's path. That kind of detective novel begins with Poe - at a time when such accommodation hardly yet existed - is no counter-argument. For without exception the great writers perform their combination in a world that comes after them, just as the Paris streets of Baudelaire's poems, as well as Dostoevsky's characters, only existed after 1900. The bourgeois interior of the 1860s to the 1890s, with its gigantic sideboards distended with carvings, the sunless corners where palms stand, the balcony embattled behind its balustrade, and the long corridors with their singing gas flames, fittingly houses only the corps. "On this sofa aunt cannot be murdered". The soulless luxuriance of the furnishings becomes true comfort only in the presence of a dead body. Far more interesting than the Oriental landscapes in detective novels is the rank Orient inhabiting their interiors; the Persian carpet and the ottoman, the hanging lamp and the genuine Caucasian dagger (Benjamin, 1979).

Summarizing the detective stories' characters provide investigation in their own style. Some of them are elegant detectives with impeccable manners while others seem to be rather abrupt, but they have a corporate goal: to reveal the truth and punish the villain. They strongly believe that the world should be cleaned from such offensive individuals to be a better place to exist.

The structural peculiarities of detective stories are the exciting plot and twists of action, but also through the socio-moral background which, apart from crimes, becomes the main component of the story. All these features allow the understanding of people's behavior, their motives, and based on that, building a structure of functions, sequences and blocks.

The structure of the detective story, extended with a social and moral background and great psychological portraits of criminals and positive characters, becomes a psychological story. This is evidently one of the basic principles of telling a story: cause and effect. In detective stories a reader notices more than in any

other genre that each scene must be justified - each fictional event must be right in the story, because a reader or an audience perceive each scene as a potential cause of the effect that appears in the story. Having analyzed postmodern variants of different genres we came to the conclusion that it is impossible to put any postmodern literary work in the frame of one genre. The number of topics and issues a postmodern writer touches in his or her work may be infinite, thus genre characteristic features or attributes of a literary work illustrate that under postmodernism the text itself is omnipotent and cannot be restricted to one genre.

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