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Theatre and reality in the novel by barry unsworth “morality play”

Olga A. Baratova¹, Vera B. Shamina¹,

1 Kazan Federal University, Institute of Philology and Intercultural Communication,

info@ores.su

Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to analyze the novel by the British writer of the late 20th – early 21st century Barry Unsworth – "Morality Play" (1995), which takes place in the late Middle Ages, in terms of its theatricality. Theatricality in the English literature of this period becomes the significant art category. In this work the concept of theater permeates all levels of the novels' structure – thematic, lexical, psychological and philosophical, resulting in the ultimate theatralization of the text. Theatricality becomes its fundamental principle, which reflects itself in visualization, dialogization, attempts to orchestrate individual lives and life at large, etc. In Barry Unsworth's novel it contributes to the creation of a metatheatrical picture of the world, when the border between theater and reality is completely blurred – life and theatre are interchanging and eventually theatricality increasingly develops into a postmodern carnival, which is characterized by multiplicity, lack of clear ideological orientation, mixture of high and low, overlapping game nature.

Keywords: postmodernism, metaphor, theatricality, theatralization, metatheatre



Introduction

Diverse palette of drama techniques has been repeatedly used in literature introducing them into the semantic field of the works of fiction. In the literature of the past we can find many images related to the theatre, emblematic both for particular works and for the creativity of the author at large. In the era of postmodernism theatricality becomes a way of expressing the game nature of postmodern texts and one of the typical features of contemporary literature. The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate it on the bases of the analysis of the novel by the modern British writer B. Unsworth – "Morality Play" (1995). This author has not yet been studied in Russia, among the works written abroad we referred to the essay by C. Plasa, which addresses the problem of theatricality [9].

Methods and Materials

One of the most characteristic features of recent British literature is addressing history, the aim of the authors being not so much the reconstruction but rather a deconstruction of historical events. In this respect we fully agree with the opinion of L.F. Khabibullina that historical events in a postmodernist novel serve as an instrument used for realization of the author's intention [7]. Here we may speak about the phenomenon referred to as "conceptualization of history" as T.N. Breeva puts it [4]. This is also connected with the problem of different strategies used in postmodern fiction, which has been taken into consideration in our research [8] and we'll try to show how using theatricality as one of the main strategies the author creates a metatheatrical picture of history, which in its turn represents the game nature of postmodern literature as such. Concerning medieval culture we studied the works of M. Bakhtin, his concept of carnival was especially relevant for our research [1].

Results

The novel by B. Unsworth "Morality Play" is set in medieval England. The main character – Nicholas Barber, a runaway priest, joins a company of itinerant players at the moment of death of one of the actors of the company – Brandon. The intention to bury the dead in accordance with Christian traditions brings the players into a the small town, in which the day before a mysterious murder of a twelve year old boy named Thomas Wells occurred. Hunger and poverty push the players on a risky move — they almost unanimously make a decision, instead of the rehearsed *the Play of Adam*, to show a new play *the Play of Thomas Wells* based on the terrible event that recently occurred in the town. During the play the actors with the help of the audience, gradually begin to lift the veil of mystery that hides the true motives of the crime and the killers. Thus, a theatre performance becomes the major element in the artistic structure of the whole novel.



In his novel B. Unsworth refers to a special kind of theatrical performance –*morality play*, which originated in the Middle Ages in France and was the next important stage of development of theatre art, which brought it much closer to real life [6].

In the novel we see how the author using this kind of theatrical turns life into a stage. Unsworth leaves allegorical personages but orchestrates with their help a new story based on real events, which was not characteristic for morality plays.

Theatricality permeates every bit of the novel beginning from the death of the actor Brendan, which looks to Nicholas similar to a scene from a morality play [10, 1]. Such examples in the novel are numerous, which shows a particular psychology of a theater person who perceives everything that happens around as an action on stage. It is first person narrative, which makes the narrator a spectator and commentator of the events, who subsequently himself joins the play. It is he who notices that the actors never come out of their parts: “all the members of this company were playing parts even when there was no one by but themselves” [10, 34]. And given the fact that “Each had lines of his own and was expected to say them” [10, 34] as well as gestures, intonation and other expressive means it was possible to orchestrate any dispute that arose within the company, which was often used by the head of the company, Martin.

Special attention in this regard should be paid to the episode in which Martin persuades the company to stage *the Play of Thomas Wells*. The idea of a new play visited Martin while discussing the failures of the previous performance of *the Play of Adam*. The members of the company discuss how to spice up their game to attract more viewers. At this moment Martin suddenly realizes that the root of the problem lies not in their acting but in what happens on stage:

“They know how the story ends,’ Martin repeated” [10, 48]. He suddenly realized that the finals of all the games that they showed were well known to the audience. He comes up with the idea to show a new story the end of which is obscure and as it later turns out not only for the spectators but for everyone else, including the players themselves. The mystery of the finale of the play bears special relevance for their show. While in mystery and morality plays the meaning was always well known there was no need to search for answers or understanding: the stories of the plays based on biblical subjects bore no questions, they immediately gave the answers. The meaning was interpreted long before the performance and did not tolerate rethinking. This was not the case with *the Play of Thomas Wells*. Its meaning was shaped in the course of acting and it happened through the interaction with the public. In this novel theatre as an argument, as a dialogue in search of truth extends far beyond the



conventional boundaries separating the stage from the audience, and the idea, which originated in the players' dispute and was embodied in their play later enveloped the whole city.

For the realization of his purpose on the stage Martin exhibits remarkable abilities as a director – first to convince the company and secondly to implement his idea on stage. For the first goal he chooses for himself the role of a Serpent, tempting with freedom. When the time of the show comes Martin presents to the actors his idea seducing them with freedom, which they lacked before and which their new roles will grant them in *the Play of Thomas Wells*. The only one who objects is Nicholas, but his voice is lost in the general excitement. Thus under the disguise of morality play the comedians perform something radically new. Martin also uses his talent to manipulate people: since the play is in its most part an improvisation he calculates what each of the players is capable of in his new part.

Nicholas gets the role of Good Counsel, whose counsel, both on stage and outside it is mostly rejected by the company.

However, the performance is not limited to improvisation. *The Play about Thomas Wells* is an interactive performance that is not just a representation, in which the audience is passive but a play, in which the outcome depends on the audience's reactions. In the course of the show the players get not only the response of the audience, but a whole series of questions and comments about the veracity of the events portrayed which every time lead the players to an unplanned finale. Each subsequent presentation gets closer to reality and in the end the border line between life and the performance is completely blurred. As a result, according to Unsworth theatre becomes the only way to expose the lies of the criminals and tell the truth. Thus, theatre becomes a magnifying glass through which the author shows the vices of society.

During the first performance the audience points the players to their mistakes: urging them to show true events. The play in its attempt to recreate the past gradually brings the actors to the recognition of the truth. The result is that the players suddenly one by one begin to remove the mask and question their own play thus becoming spectators of their own performance. Stephen delivers his line taking off the mask: “Gentles, after deed so fell Why not hide the money well?” [10, 97]. Straw removes the mask and says: “Who knows the riddle, he can tell. What brought the Monk to that place?” [10, 97]. So the first *Play of Thomas Wells* ends up with all the comedians without preliminary agreement appearing before the audience without their masks: “Without any previous agreement among us and without being properly aware of how it was managed, we were all five of us now standing side by side facing the people, and the effigy of the boy lay there before us” [10, 97].



This scene becomes a summary of their first presentation and the planned ending of the execution of the girl suspected in the murder is cancelled by itself. The demands of the audience to recreate true events on stage encourage the players to search the truth; theatre once again expands beyond the scenes.

The second presentation of *the Play of Thomas Wells* is sharply interrupted by another frightening event thus once again changing the Play's finale. It is the appearance of the riders carrying the body of the dead monk. The news that the monk who was the key prosecution witness in the case of Thomas Wells is the dead is spread through the crowd and through the audience comes to the players. But the Play does not end there. This interruption does not destroy the overall pattern of the Play but only supplies it with a new event.

The third performance of the comedians engages in their Play the ruler of this city – Lord De Guise. The name of the Lord is telling. “Guise” in English means “semblance”, “pretense” or “mask”. It was *New Guise* who stood for one of the vices in an English morality play “Mankind” written in 1470. If in the previous presentations and preparations for them the players using the possibilities of the theater crept closer and closer to the truth, later being forcibly brought to the castle of the powerful Lord they used theater primarily as a mask: first, to communicate with the authority, and secondly to protect themselves from it. At the same time, theatre performance allows the prisoners of the castle to involve the Lord's steward and then the Lord himself in their Play, and turning them into comedians to engage them in dialogue on an equal footing: “You are the one who came to see the lad buried (...) Was it you that hanged the Monk? (...) What was his crime?” [10, 153-154], – the players boldly bombard the Lord's steward.

The Play which they started before the appearance of the Lord's steward protected them and gave them courage. Stephen wearing the mask of *Truth* confidently pronounces his text: “Truth sets no store by gold or riches, Nor by emperors, kings or princes...” [10, 157]. The mask of *Truth* frees Stephen from conventions, gives him the freedom which seduced the whole company when they agreed to present the Play of Thomas Wells. “Stephen had forgotten himself, he was Truth” [10,157], — says Nicholas. Captives they were before the play, but having started the play, they acquired freedom: “A mask confers the terror of freedom; it is very easy to forget who you are” [10, 43].

Martin, desperate being sure that the condemned girl could not be saved, goes for broke. Appearing in the mask of *Pride* he drastically alters the course of the play. He intends to expose to the Lord the perpetrator of the crime, which according to Martin, is the Lord himself: “I am called by many names,” Martin said. ‘As Pride and Arrogancy, Lordship and Sway. (...) Pride it was that held the court,



that buried the boy in dark of night, that hanged the traitor Monk in his shift” [10, 161]. The task of an actor is to perform the role as true to life as possible. Martin copes with this task: he deliberately pronounces his lines trying to portray the voice of the Lord, and the light of the torches makes their faces look alike, that is the face of the Lord and the mask of *Pride* on of Martin’s face.

It seems that death is close; in fact what the players allowed themselves was a deadly insult. But in their acting is interrupted by another play. On the eve of the last performance of the company in the courtyard of the castle a knights’ tournament takes place. Nicholas’ reflections of tournaments make us understand that tournaments were the same plays but without any meaning. Moreover, like the travelling players the knights use all possible ways to attract the audience, that’s why in their procession the players recognize themselves: “They are like us, they are travelling players. (...) All they need they carry with them, just as we do” [10, 60].

The tournament takes place under the watchful eye of the players watching the knights from the top of their captivity. However, the spectacle ends in tragedy, which again breaks the conventional boundaries between theater and life -- one of the knights receive a mortal blow. For all its authenticity, this tragedy is theatrical because it also happens on stage, and also becomes a part of *the Play of Thomas Wells*. Shriving the dying knight Nicholas manages to escape from the castle for the decisive scene of the meeting with the Royal Judge.

It was before their first show of the Play that the comedians heard about the arrival of the Royal Judge in the town. The solemn drum beats, which called the citizens to attend the first *Play of Thomas Wells* and the roar of the crowd, announcing the arrival of the Royal Judge merge symbolizing close link between theatre and life. So it is quite according to the genre that the Royal Judge appears "wearing" the mask of *Justice* at the end of *the Play of Thomas Wells* to play the key role, and to administer justice.

The rest of the time he is a spectator. Nicholas telling him about their adventures watches how the Judge exposes the crime. However, the role of the Judges is much broader than Nicholas originally assumed: “You thought I was one of your company, one of the players, somewhat belated, come to put on the mask of *Justitia* in your *True Play of Thomas Wells*. There was the Monk and the Lord and the Weaver and the Knight. And now the *Justice*, who sets all things right in the end. But I am in a different play” [10, 174], he says, proving once more that theatricality has acquired a universal character, defining the specific behavior and attitude of a person.

Thus, the Play does not end even on the last pages of the novel, when the comedians seem to have begun to retreat from their roles and, consequently, from the Play. But, as the Judge comments they don't stop acting but just change for new roles.



Summary

As we have tried to show theatricality permeates all levels of the artistic structure of the novel – thematic, lexical, psychological and philosophical. Besides, although Unsworth creates a very convincing and reliable picture of a certain period of English history, English theatre of the time in particular, we can't fail to feel that the story is narrated by a modern author. This reveals itself not only in the absence of archaisms and attempt to stylize the narrative but in the depiction of theatre and acting. Although the intervention of the viewers in the course of the play in the form of comments and jokes were common enough for the medieval theater, what Unsworth, describes is nothing but a modern interactive theatre, which appeared only in the late 20th century, where each viewer can become a co-author and radically change the course of the play; and the performance, in which the actors one by one take off the mask and directly appeal to the audience, expressing their personal attitude to the impersonated characters is fully consistent with the principles of Bertolt Brecht's theatre [3].

Conclusion

The relevance of this study is determined by the fact that theatricality has become an emblematic sign of modern culture, both elite and mass. Diverse palette of drama techniques has been repeatedly used in literature introducing them into the semantic field of the works of fiction. In the era of postmodernism theatricality becomes a way of expressing the game nature of postmodern texts and is often one of the typical features of the literature of our time. In the process of our analysis of the English novel “Morality play”, which belongs to the postmodern age we have come to the conclusion that the concept of theatre provides a theatrical view of the world, demonstrating the penetration of spectacle into life and thus referring to what Debord called “the society of the spectacle” [5].

The conflict of interests

The authors confirm that the data presented do not contain any conflict of interests

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