THOMAS HARDY'S LATE-VICTORIAN NOVELS: THE PICTURE OF THE EPOCH

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Abstract: The paper deals with the novels of Thomas Hardy written in the Late Victorian period and united as a cycle of Wessex novels. The paper attempts to reveal the peculiarities of new trends in British literature in the last three decades of the XIX century, the characteristic features of the main personages, as well as the factors that influenced the literary process known as Late-Victorian period.

Keywords: Late-Victorian novel, Thomas Hardy, Wessex novels

I. INTRODUCTION

The last three decades of the XIX century in Great Britain was the time rich in brilliant writings and various movements. After Dickens and Thackeray it was the turn of prominent novelists of the Late-Victorian period who created their works in the atmosphere determined by historical and cultural factors that characterized the final stage of the Queen Victoria reign (1837-1901). The culture of the late XIX century was penetrated with the spirit of Victorian age as personification of moral and religious values in their specific British variant. The literary map of the last decades of the XIX century is multicolored and various, the leading role being played by the Late-Victorian novelists.The realistic traditions developed by Charles Dickens and William Thackeray were enriched with new trends of the time: the poetics implied some stylistic peculiarities of neo-romanticism, naturalism, and symbolism.

It was the period when different philosophical conceptions (such as new-Darwinism, Schopenhauer philosophy, the aesthetics of decadence) appeared as well as new bright names in literature: O'Wilde, representative of colonial literature R. Kipling, A. Conan Doyle, philanthropic novelist Humphrey Word, the author of social-and-psychological novels George Meredith and many others.

THOMAS HARDY'S LATE VICTORIAN WESSEX CYCLE

The creative output of Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) has been attracting the attention of literary critics for more than a century. A lot of researches were devoted to Hardy's novels both in Great Britain and overseas. But still there are some issues concerning social and humanistic aspects of his writings. Thomas Hardy depicted rural England at the time of new social and economic reality. New powerful players – the USA and Germany – appeared in the world market, becoming serious competitors of the British Empire, while the latter was loosing its former industrial monopolies.

The consequences of the crisis of 1873 were obvious for almost two following decades. Many old communities' rights were liquidated and many landlords stopped cultivating their soil and began to lend it. All this influenced the life of farmers and workers involved in agriculture. As the result small peasants' farms were substituted by big rural ones.

The most famous novels by Thomas Hardy describing the last decades of the XIX century and, in particularly, some events of the middle of the century are united by the general title "Wessex Novels", narrating about the events, that take place in the semi-fictional countryside in the south-west of England ("Under the Greenwood Tree", 1872, "Far from the Madding Crowd", 1874, "The Mayor of Casterbridge", 1876 and others. Thecycle also includes the Novel "Tess of the d'Urbervilles", 1898.

Wessex cycle was created as a result of the author's true knowledge of life. The originality of the Wessex novels is explained not only by their subject matter, which is connected with depicting of contrast between calm and peaceful nature and severe conditions of life. The Wessex novels are united by common themes and unified philosophical conception. If tracing the plots of the novels, one can notice the existence of social contradictions that interfere lives of people. It is the intrusion of urban industrial forces uncanny to rural surroundings. Citizens coming to the countryside bring sufferings to rural people. Hardy admires high moral and spiritual qualities of people from the village – their stoicism, "honesty, goodness, manliness, tenderness, devotion". Hardy's tragic understanding of life can be explained by realizing of inevitable going to dogs of patriarchal village which he admired so much. Nevertheless, small dramatic conflicts that characterize the Wessex cycle turn into greater ones, that evidence the destiny of English peasantry in general. Peasants' financial problems, their migration to cities is one of the main themes of Hardy's novels.

It was not typical only for Wessex, but also for the majority of British villages.

The creative output of Hardy is traditionally divided into two stages – his early period which covers three novels from the Wessex cycle: "Under the Greenwood Tree" (1872), "Far from the Madding Crowd" (1874) and "The Return of the Native" (1878). A lot of attention in the first three novels is paid to producing the visual or outer effects both in the plot development and the detailed descriptions. It helps to remember quite well some of the episodes of the narration, but sometimes can distract the reader's attention. For example, "playing with light and shadows" creates grotesque gloomy and mysterious pictures ofthe author's passion for siluettes on the light background. After hostile urban lifethe village seems to be a calm peaceful surroundings for the author, and the life of peasants at the beginning is depicted as almost idyllic. There are secondary characters in all three novels who explain the events and the heroes' behavior. They are not the participants of the described events, but witty and shrewd narrators who attract readers' attention. Sometimes the hero is introduced by such a secondary personage. Thus, tragic and sad extracts are followed by humorous explanations. Like witty and skeptical characters of servants created by Shakespeare of Lope de Vega, Hardy depicted representatives of lower social classesmore sensible and psychologically balanced than the main characters of common sense. In the first novels (as there are no main characters who embody the idea of the novel) these personages become the central figures of the narration. In the first three novels fatality or occasion often plays the leading role in most important situations of the character's life.

In "The Mayor of Casterbridge" (1885) the behavior of the main personage is strictly motivated: the idea that "the character is the destiny" is developed throughout the whole novel. The realist's approach of the author is supported by the figure of the main personage, who made a career thanks to his own will. Hardy does not mention any mystical forces, which influence his life. Although the personages admit the fatality of people's life, they do their best and fight what seems to be fatal.

The character of Tess is considered to be the most realistic of all the characters created by Thomas Hardy. The whole plot is subjected to the revelation of the inner world of the main female character, evolution of her ideas and spiritual growth. The drama of Tess at the same time illustrates social relations typical for English village of the time. Taking life-stories from ordinary peasants' living Hardy built his novels on strong characters and deep dramatic conflicts. A lot of attention is given to a chance, or occasion, as the narrator considers it to be one of the most natural factors that influence person's life. Hardy was convinced that fiction is to satisfy the reader's interest to everything unusual as the work of literature stops being attractive without it. Thus, the task of the writer is to find the right proportion of usual and unusual for evoking the readers' interest and creating true-to-life realistic picture. Besides, the unusual should be in events, but not in a character. Hardy follows this principle: his personages often find themselves in extraordinary situations, remaining quite natural and ordinary at the same time. For example, many episodes from Jude's life were quite extraordinary, while his destiny is a typical destiny of the whole generation of shallow people – representatives of lower classes, who try to find their place in life.

The Wessex cycle demonstrates the evolution of Hardy's world outlook. In the first two novels the patriarchal life is almost completely idyllic: it seems to be possible for his characters to stay in their small world, where there is no dangerous impact of outer factors on their happy life and wellbeing. In the novel "The Return of the Native" one can feel some anxiety because of the troubles described. In the next novels of the series the tragic figures became the victims of new social order and new relationship between people. Thus, the novels of the second period of Hardy's literary activity are characterized by changings in aesthetics of Hardy, which cannot be merely descriptive any longer.

The targets of Hardy's criticism were first of all moral standards of Victorian England, but at the same time he creates the picture of social drawbacks of the end of the XIX century as he accentuates deprivation of rightsof ordinary farmers and women's dependence. So fatality and pessimistic attitude to .life is a reflection to the reality of the time. Living in a village for a long time, Thomas Hardy could watch the everyday life of British peasants so that his own ideas are interlaced with their views. The most evident trait of a peasant's character is the fatal passiveness of rural people who suffered from a long-lasted economical dependence. People from a village explain most of disasters by fatality as there is no other explanation of them from elementary logical or religious point of view. It is quite clear that a peasant cannot influence his life, and this characteristic is considered to be typical. There is a close connection of fatal world perception and the fact of belonging to peasants' class in the novel "Tess of the d'Urbervilles". For Hardy's narration it is quite natural to combine fatality and realistic motivation of events and people's behavior. Tess is characterized as believing in fatality as this belief was typical for those who have closer connections with nature than with other people. The description of the conflict between Grace and her husband in the novel "Woodlanders" is called by the author as the fatal touching and simultaneously analyzing of the reasons that caused contradictions between them.

Some pessimistic aspects of Hardy's attitude to life can be explained by the influence of Schopenhauer philosophy, thought the writer himself objected such

an interpretation of his works because of the absence of skepticism in his writings. Tragic ends of some novels can be explained by mutual penetration of humanistic ideas and tragic world perception. The heroes of his novels are rather victims than fighters as they cannot change the existing social evil. The interference of nature sometimes prevents people from realizing their best ideas not because of hostility of nature, but because of the nature independence on people's wishes. It should be mentioned that such demonstration of uncanny nature are very seldom in the novels of Wessex series. The nature in the Hardy's novels is first of all a source of calmness and peace.

The characters of the Wessex cycle (Grace, Angel, Donald)arecontradictive: they make other people unhappy but feel unhappy themselves. The author is continuously trying to find out what makes people cruel and who is responsible for people's sufferings and grief. Such psychological analysis can be found in the novels of John Galsworthy and George Meredith as well and is always connected with the problem of person's quilt and his responsibility. TheWessex novels reveal the social roots of the vices (пороки), tragic circumstances that led to people's mistakes. The hostile influence of the society on people lives is one of the main problems of the Hardy's Late Victorian writings.

The typical personage of Hardy's novel of this period is an ordinary person. At the same time their simplicity does not mean their shallowness, but only a tool that helps to demonstrate circumstances and conditions that characterize certain period of time. The range of problems being solved in Wessex novels is wider than that of one region. It can concern any citizen of any country. The problem of guilt and responsibility to some extent is similar to those investigated by Fyodor Dostoyevsky in his works of the same period.

The 1880s were characterized in Great Britain by appearance of the movement of neo-romanticism, which was based on the statement of contrast between heroic, ideal and spiritless being. It was to some extent a reflection to pessimism and hopelessness, typical for decadence. It was also a period of fruitful critical and aesthetical thought. Some statements by the most famous representatives of the movement John Reskinwere shared by another prominent writer and thinker Leo Tolstoy.

CONCLUSIONS

Unlike his contemporaries Thomas Hardy believed in rural people, in a good man, and depicted his characters with deep understanding of human soul, without any attempt to escape from difficult social situation to the sphere of pure art, exotic world or inner world of personages. He was following the best literary traditions: as a bright representative of his time he deepened psychological analyses and the plots of his best novels are closely connected with the subtlest nuances of the inner life of his heroes. Hardy revealed connections between tragic conflicts of people's lives and social-and-political factors that influenced them. Spending the major part of his life in the countryside, he devoted his literary works to village, which became a permanent source of his inspiration.

The variety of literary and cultural phenomena, change of schools and movements, bright talents and appearance new important methods in literary criticism create a unique literary image of the XIX century in Great Britain. It was characterize by an absolutely new poetics, which implies new types of consciousness. In the XIX century the process of appropriation of literature and reality became obvious. The type of artistic consciousness in the second half of the XIX century differs from the earlier period of romanticism. As far as it concerns Thomas Hardy's novels of the Wessex series, literary "hero" looses his heroic characteristics and begins to resemble a man from a crowd, ordinary creature who can be met in the street. Natural sciences and philosophy were still making great impact on artistic consciousness. The reality penetrating fiction resulted in deeper typization of characters and filling them with social content. The religion after Darwin's discoveries did not have consolidation power any more.

Poetics of every-day-life and phenomena reflected common tendency to democratization of literature in the end of the XIX century.

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