Postmodernist features in *The Girl Who Raised Pigeons* by Edward P. Jones

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**Abstract**

*The article is on the story The Girl Who Raised Pigeons by Edward P. Jones, which is one of the short stories collection Lost in the City, and it is considered as a postmodernist creative work. The main method of the work is the hermeneutical method.*

The research, made on the story, touches such problems, as the problem of interpretation of a postmodernist fiction, the problem of the integrity of a creative work, the problem of an author’s role and position in a creative work.

*The Girl Who Raised Pigeons by Edward P. Jones is the story that tells us about Betsy Ann’s life and the lives of those people who surround her. The work has the fragmented composition, its construction is made in a way of rhizome principle, its timeliness is relative, because we do not have definite dates and notifications, except some of them: 1957, 1960, 1961. There are just different scenes that change each other unpromptedly. Despite this fact, the story has its own logic which can be interpreted by the readers and researchers.*

*This work can be used by the researchers, who make their papers on modern African American literature, postmodernist fiction, and it can be useful in the classes, devoted to African American literature.*

**Keywords:** modern African American literature, modern literature, postmodernist features, postmodernist literature, postmodernism, problems of postmodernist literature.
Introduction

Edward P. Jones is a modern African American writer, who received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction (The Known World¹), National Book Critics’ Circle Award (The Known World), MacArthur Fellowship etc. His first book Lost in the City, which is a collection of short stories, was published in 1992. [11, 172]

The relevance of the research is that the story The Girl Who Raised Pigeons will be considered as a postmodernist fiction. And there are no researches on that story as a postmodernist fiction.

The aim of the research is to consider the story The Girl Who Raised Pigeons, which is one of the short stories that are included in Lost in the City, as a postmodernist fiction and point out main features of being a postmodernist creative work.

This work can be used by the researchers, who make their papers on modern African American literature, and on the classes devoted to African American literature.

Methodological frameworks

The story The Girl Who Raised Pigeons is considered in the paradigm of postmodernism. The main method of the research is the hermeneutical method, which includes further interpretation of the creative work, considering the author’s role in the story, the problem of the form and the content. There were used as foreign as Russian specialists’ works on the theme of postmodernist African American literature and postmodernism, and postmodernist fiction.

Results and Discussions

There is no the position of the author in the story The Girl Who Raised Pigeons. He stays aside and lets the plot develop in its own way. We do not feel and do not see his presence. It is one of the postmodernist features, when an author ‘should be dead’, and it was stated by one of the most famous post-structuralists, by Roland Barthes: ‘Probably this has

¹ The novel The Known World was observed by Sabirova Gulina in Peculiarities of the Plot and Composition of The Known World by Edward P. Jones. Tatyanin Den’. Sbornik statey i materialov konferencii. Vipusk 12. Kazan. 2016.
always been the case: once an action is recounted, for intransitive ends, and no longer in order to act directly upon reality — that is, finally external to any function but the very exercise of the symbol — this disjunction occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death, writing begins.’ [13] And almost the same idea was expressed by Umberto Eco in his Postscript to the Name of the Rose, when he asserted that ‘The author should die once he has finished the writing. So as not to trouble the writing.’ [12], [15, 17] He also says that the author should not interpret his or her own work [15, 10], or he or she should not explain, but he or she can tell why and how he has been working. [15, 23]

The composition of the story is quite fragmentary: there is no a linear depiction of the plot. It is separated into several parts, sometimes in a chaotic way. And there are no clear mentions of dates and their connections with the characters’ age and the stages of their lives, except some pointing facts that help to make a ‘construction’ of The Girl Who Raised Pigeons. The plot and the construction, or the form should be observed a little bit to make it clear. The narration begins with Betsy Ann’s father Robert’s reminiscence about his daughter’s night visitings the birds. But the girl was sure that those visits were real: ‘But the night visits were not dreams, and they remained forever as vivid to her as the memory of the way the pigeons’ iridescent necklaces flirted with light.’ [6, 1] Then barber Miles Patterson appears, ‘a bachelor, and some women said, a virgin (it is very interesting allusion to Christian motives, because of the state of Miles and his life among the pigeons - such a coexistence of innocence and purity), was fifty-six years old and for the most part knew no more about the world than what he could experience in newspapers or on the radio and in his own neighborhood, beyond which he rarely ventured.’ [6, 3], who offered Betsy Ann to take pigeons. He asked her about pigeons when she was five, then when she was eight and when she was eleven. And there are three years between each offer, and it is also such an allusion to Christianity’s Trias or Triplicity, when the girl was becoming closer and closer to her desired pigeons, which symbolize purity and Holy spirit. [3], [5] Miles had such a big love to his birds, he called them ‘oh, my babies’. It is a kind of pure love without any sins.

Betsy Ann was pesterling his father Robert about taking pigeons for her. She had so impulse toward those birds. The more he told her no, the more the girl desired to have them. Then we see that situation when Robert Morgan rose every morning before his daughter, went out onto the roof and checked if there was a dead pigeon. And then we know about Robert
and his wife Clara’s relationships and that she died of the tumor. The young father after his wife’s death was frustrated, he thought that it was his guilt, he did not have any idea how to live with a new born daughter Betsy Ann: ‘Each time he managed to get the baby back to sleep after he fed her or changed her diaper, he would place her in the crib in the front room and sit without light at the kitchen table listening to the trains coming and going just beyond his window.’ [6, 7] ‘He was the only moving object within her sight and she watched him intently, which made him uncomfortable. She seemed the most helpless thing he had ever known.’ [6, 8] Next parts are about Clara’s death, again Miles’s giving two yearling pigeons to Betsy Ann, and her kind of struggling with that birds. She decided that they did not like her because the left her. And the fall of 1957 is then, and the depiction of Myrtle Street, and the nest where were two eggs. They were those creatures, which made Betsy Ann happy: ‘She got pleasure just from the mere presence of the pigeons, a pleasure that was akin to what she felt when she followed her Aunt Thelma about her house, or when she jumped double dutch for so long she had to drop to the ground to catch her breath.’ [6, 15] After that a crushing moment in Betsy Ann’s and Robert’s lives takes place, when the girl with her friend Darlène stole some candies from the candy store. It was a critical moment, that ‘killed something between them [Betsy Ann and Robert], and more and more he began checking up on her.’ [6, 20] Spring and summer of 1961, when Myrtle Street emptied of people. The houses were abandoned and there were more dead pigeons in the coop. ‘Though there were bodies with holes so deep he saw white flesh, essence, it was the sight of dozens of detached feathers that caused his body to shake, because the scattered feathers, more than the wrecked bodies, spoke to him of helplessness.’ [6, 22] Robert Morgan tried to hide those bodies from his daughter, because he did not want to hurt her, make her suffering. The story is concluded with the scenes, where Betsy Ann and her father noticed two pigeons, which were totally unharmed. Ant they were gone. The girl missed them more as if she could imagine. And one day one of the birds unharmed came back to her, and Betsy Ann just followed him ‘with her eyes, with her heart, as far as she could.’ [6, 25] And there are always different characters appearing in the text, so that it rises some questions about their place in the story.

It can be said that the text or the plot of the story is made in rhizome principle. [8] Rhizome is organized in such a way, that there is no center, no periphery, no exit. [15, 110] As Kuchmenko M.A. mentions in Principle of a rhizome as structure-forming factor of post-
modernist text, the concept of rhizome signifies or expresses a fundamental deconstructive guideline on the presumption of deconstruction of traditional understandings and ideas about the structure of the text as a semantically centralized unit. And the mainest thing about rhizome is an idea about impossibility in modern life to start explaining all the phenomena just basing on only point of view. [10]

Tarasov A.N. says in his article Poststructuralism as a philosophical basis of artistic culture of postmodernism, that accident, fragmentarity, emotions and feelings are the concepts that have become main ideas in postmodernism. [14] As for Umberto Eco, he confirms that postmodernism is not chronologically fixed phenomenon, but a kind of spiritual state. [15, 131]

It can be observed in The Girl Who Raised Pigeons. During the first reading, it may be difficult to catch the logic of the story, but then it becomes a unit, that, despite the fact that it is fragmented, gives a bunch of interpretations and allusions on different cultural and historical facts (as pigeon’s symbol in Christian religion and Holy Bible motives). All the scenes are connected with each other and create a hard and interesting composition.

Betsy Ann with her love to pigeons, Robert Morgan and his relationships with his daughter and the birds, different characters that have their own lives, but who have also opinion about pigeons (for example, Miss Jenny, Ralph, two girls from Myrtle Street, who ‘were comfortable about pigeons’ etc. [6, 16]), Miles Patterson, who is a barber and raises pigeons - all of them are connected with the birds. The symbol of pigeon can be interpreted as wishing development, spiritual and material (for example, Robert Morgan thinks about mowing away from Myrtle Street), or as a way to escape the real world and find an own one. And these birds play an important role in the lives of those characters of the story, who have a personal tragedy, who have had a loss and begun to continue the life given (Betsy Ann lost her mother from her first day on the Earth, Robert lost his wife Clara etc.). At the same time it also can be seen that pigeons are hated by some characters. (‘gotdamn pigeons’ as a boy whose name is Ralf calls the birds) [6, 10 ] Here we see all the features, mentioned above, and the spiritual state, even the development of that state.

Observing the postmodernist fiction, it should be asked, if the story is nothing but an experiment, or it is a play with the readers, or it is altogether. And there is the problem of the correlation of a sign and a signifier, the existence of such a correlation. In case The Girl Who
Raised Pigeons the correlation is not clear, we can guess, interpret, read Holy Bible and express opinion, what does the author want to say or, on the contrary, why does he prefer to stay aside. Rhizome principle helps to look at the story from different angles, points of views and it makes possible to find out new understandings and explanations, when we are given such an old question, like ‘What did the author want to say in this work?’

Acknowledgments

The work is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.
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