

THE IMAGE OF “AN ORDINARY AMERICAN” IN J. UPDIKE’S SHORT STORIES**Olena Bezhan**

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Summary

The article is devoted to the study of the short story genre in the context of the second half of the twentieth century American literature, an attempt is made to show the way of the genre from the form of standard story to so called “psychological sketch”. The short story manifested the national originality of American prose, the peculiarities of the national character and local color earlier and more fully than other forms. It developed the traditions of folk stories, folk humor, and satire. The object of analysis is J. Updike’s short story "Pigeon Feathers", that is concentrated on the middle class problems of American society and the “ordinary Americans”. Updike became an innovator in the short story genre, embodying the best ideas of his predecessors and developing his own ideas of genre diversity. According to both national and American critics, the main stylistic feature of Updike's short story collections is the close connection between them, most of them continuing each other, leaving behind a through plot and a single emotional experience.

Key words: short story, standard story, “psychological sketch”, “ordinary American”, national originality and national character

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1. Introduction

The twentieth century American short story century occupies a special place in the literary process of the United States. The tendency to fill the twentieth-century American short story genre with elements of poetic narrative brings it closer to lyrical genres and inspires American writers of this period to create novelistic cycles. The peculiarities of the short form – its mobility, flexibility, and ability to respond to important events of the time – also helped to establish the short story in the American literature. The short story manifested the national originality of American prose, the peculiarities of the national character and local color earlier and more fully than other forms. It developed the traditions of folk stories, folk humor, and satire. Despite its close connection with European literature, the American short story has been overestimating the artistic experience of the Old World since its inception. The works of John Updike were no exception; it is the appeal to the writer's works in the genre of short fiction that gives a more complete picture of the artistic world, the peculiarities of world perception and stylistic features of the writer's fiction.

2. The American “short story”: from standard story to “a psychological sketch”

Despite its rather “modest scope”, the short story genre has a complex dialectic: every era leaves its mark on it, and life requires not only expressing new relationships and contradictions but also rethinking them in a new way. The definition of the short story and its specifics are the subject of much debate in both national literary studies and foreign literary criticism.

In this regard, the critic Mikhail Bakhtin wrote: “A genre is always both this and that, always old and new at the same time. The genre is revived and renewed at each new stage of the development of literature and in each individual work of this genre” (*Bakhtin, 1975*). The specificity of the American short story development is that it was and remains simultaneously in the realm of literature and journalism, and many short story writers are, were, and remain journalists at the same time. The demand for short stories by American magazines has always been high, and in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the proliferation of commercial publications that sold at cost, it grew as never before. In the nineties, the process of merging the American short story with journalism reached its highest level, and numerous guidelines appeared on the content and technique of story construction. Editors developed their own templates according to which they selected stories for magazines, which often led to the leveling of writers' creativity. The standardization of such a dynamic literary genre as the short story reflects the process of standardization of all of American life during the period of industrialization. At the beginning of the century, this process led to the psychological story underestimation as pioneered by W. Irving and N. Hawthorne, and this leads to the absolutization and idealization of the fabulist short story.

But numerous instructions for writing short stories did not bring anything new to the theory of the fabulist short story. They mechanically transferred the principles of constructing Aristotle's dramatic works to short stories, and provided for the obligatory presence of a “happy ending” and suspense. However, the artificial spread of the standard story with an unexpected ending did not stop the development of the psychological tradition, which is continued by the masters of American short fiction, such as H. James, T. Dreiser, S. Anderson, and others. The dominance and influence of the constructive fabulist short story was such that any story that did not conform to the canon was not considered a story. It was called a “mood piece”, a “realistic sketch”, a “psychological confession”, but in no way it wasn't associated with the classic American short story.

Gradually, the American reader began to feel that constructive storytelling sacrificed psychologism for structure and that the inability to delve into human psychology within the tight confines of the conventional model largely “robbed” the story and made it look “limited” in a sense. Non-standard stories, devoid of exposition, often without a climax in the conventional sense of the word, and without the unexpected that was popular at the time, very O. Henry-like, were becoming more and more common in the United States. A significant event in the literary life of America was the publication in 1919 of the “Winesburg, Ohio” by Sherwood Anderson, who opposed the dominance of the fabulist novel in US literature, denied the need for a storyline in the conventional sense, and believed that the main thing was not to create an interesting intrigue but to convey the depth of feelings and impressions. However, it should also be emphasized that in addition to a powerful social coloring, the twentieth-century short story is characterized by a significant weakening of the plot action, an increase in psychological side, and an active lyrical current. That allows critics to call this type of short story “a psychological sketch” (*Pattee, 1923*).

3. J. Updike: “a barometer of American sentiment”

A worthy follower of the classics became the American writer John Updike, known to the general public as the author of the Rabbit Tetralogy, the first volume of which was published in 1960. He also became an innovator in the short story genre, embodying the best ideas of his predecessors and developing his own ideas of genre diversity. In the English-speaking world,

John Updike (1932–2009) is consistently associated with the mainstream of “serious” American literature, and was considered a classic during his lifetime. Awarded all the honorary American prizes, two Pulitzer Prizes, the National Book Award, and the Howells Medal of Honor, the writer left behind a significant literary body of work: poetry and short story collections, essays, and 23 novels.

As for Updike's aesthetic preferences, critics consider him to be a writer who personifies “pure American realism”, the object of his work being mid-twentieth-century America and ordinary Americans. J. Updike belongs to the postwar generation of writers whose work largely determined the philosophical orientation and aesthetic level of the literary process in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century. His works are the subject of attention not only of journal reviewers, but also of university and academic criticism.

An important stage in Updike's development as a writer was his experience gained at the renowned *New Yorker* (American weekly magazine that publishes reports, commentary, criticism, essays, fiction, humor, etc.), where he began his career as a cartoonist, and, more than twenty years later, he acted as an art critic who commented on art exhibitions – most often for *The New York Review of Books* (*The New York Review of Books* is a magazine that publishes articles on literature, culture, economics, science, etc.) It was in the early period of the writer's work, approximately between 60–70 years, that the first short story collections of the writer appeared, such as “The Same Door” (1959), “Pigeon Feathers” (1962), “The Music School” (1966), “Bech: A Book (1970), “Museums and Women” (1972), “Too Far to Go” (1979) and “Problems” (1979).

The writer's work is represented primarily by socio-psychological and ironic prose about the attempts to atone for the modern soulless life and the search for moral pillars of resilience by the “ordinary American” provincial. The main themes of his works are the fears and hopes of his characters, which are activated in their perception of the latter through the prism of religion, family relationships, intimate relationships and death. Confirming the author's interest in cutting and observing the ordinary and everyday life, critic T. N. Denysova wrote that “in literary circles Updike acquires a stable reputation as a “barometer of American sentiment”” (*Denysova, 2002*), and the researcher of the writer's work D. Gardner, in turn, noted: “Updike's fiction ... is social and is a metaphor for mid-century America” (*Gardner, 1962*).

According to both national and American critics, the main stylistic feature of Updike's short story collections is the close connection between them, most of them continuing each other, leaving behind a through plot and a single emotional experience. His stories usually resemble instant sketches, miniatures imbued with the longing to say goodbye to childhood and youth. Thus, our appeal to his early short stories is explained by the fact that it determines the tone of his later work, in particular, the gap between the cozy, warm, humane world of childhood and the harsh reality of adults.

4. In search of an “ordinary American” in J. Updike’s “Pigeon Feathers”

The short story “Pigeon Feathers” (1962), which will be discussed in the article, is the title of the writer's collection of the same name, and this undoubtedly indicates its importance in the author's intention in general. The first thing that comes to mind when analyzing the text is that it is narrated in the first person, so we perceive life through the eyes of a 14-year-old boy, David Kern, an “ordinary American” teenager who grew up in the small Pennsylvania town Olinger. Circumstances force his parents to move to a farm owned by his mother's relatives. For the boy, this means not only an actual change of residence, but also the need to reconsider his

skills, views, and preferences. Moving to the farm, he grows up and experiences an internal crisis. The change of environment, the memories of his past in Olinger, and the difficulties of getting used to the new place are perceived by the boy as quite painful: "WHEN THEY MOVED TO FIRETOWN, things were upset, displaced, rearranged. A red cane-back sofa that had been the chief piece in the living room at Olinger was here banished, too big for the narrow country parlor, to the barn, and shrouded under a tarpaulin. Never again would David lie on its length all afternoon eating raisins and reading mystery novels and science fiction and P. G. Wodehouse" (*Updike, 1962*)». This quote indicates that the move was not easy for the teenager, that the family's material conditions had deteriorated significantly, which also had an impact on a person who was just preparing to enter life.

In this case, the choice of narrative is not accidental, because it is aimed at bringing the author and the hero closer together, and if the author and the hero are the same, the meaning of personal presence in the work is enhanced. In addition, this form allows the writer to show reality through the individual experience of the hero, enhancing the lyrical flow of the work. The other side of this type of narrative is confessionality. Realizing the great gap between himself and his parents and his unwillingness to accept reality, David admits that he misses a past he never knew: "The odor of faded taste made him feel the ominous gap between himself and his parents, the insulting gulf of time that existed before he was born. Suddenly he was tempted to dip into this time" (*Updike, 1962*). The novel outlines the theme of the relationship between parents and children, which is a classical in the literary world in general, but also becomes one of the leading themes in Updike's work in particular.

By merging with the image of his hero, John Updike seems to be writing about himself, but at the same time, looking at the world through the eyes of the hero, he talks about Americans and the middle century American life, and activates the problems that concern his generation. In addition to the narrator, "ordinary Americans", the "middle class" is represented by David's parents, and the views of the "parents and children" differ significantly. The father is a typical city dweller, opposed to the mother in his perception of the provinces: "A city boy by birth, he was frightened of the farm and seized any excuse to get away. His father expressed his feelings of discomfort by conducting with Mother an endless argument about organic farming" (*Updike, 1962*). The author himself comments on the position of the mother, a woman who dreams of rural life and is happy to move to a farm: "The farm had been David's mother's birthplace; it had been her idea to buy it back. With a determination unparalleled in her life, she had gained that end, and moved them all here – her son, her husband, her mother" (*Updike, 1962*). Quite conservative in her views on the future of the United States, which she believes is impossible without environmentally friendly farming, the mother actively argues with the father when he states that: "the earth is nothing but chemicals" (*Updike, 1962*). She argues otherwise: "George, if you'd just walk out on the farm you'd know it's not true. The land has a soul" (*Updike, 1962*). There was a lot of progressive ideas in her mind, which in a sense anticipated the times of Updike himself, in the words of a woman who foresaw the author's foresight, who felt that the victory of technology and industrialization would sooner or later have negative consequences and that the salvation of humanity – would be a return to nature.

Let's us remind that the leading problems of the writer's short stories of this period are the problems of adolescent personality formation, self-determination, search for one's place in society, and the problem of family relationships. But the most important thing for a person, according to Updike, is to master the basic existential truths of life, which pass through and are embodied in personal relationships. Eternal truths, such as questions of religion, goodness, and death, also concern his character David. Thus, having come across a

book by H.G. Wells, the young man is struck by the writer's atheism, which is based on his thoughts about the person of Christ and his miraculous deeds. Condemning this position, Updike describes the young man's feelings as follows: "It was as if a stone that for months and even years had been gathering weight in the web of David's nerves snapped them and plunged through the page and a hundred layers of paper underneath [...] it was the fact that they had been permitted to exist in an actual human brain" (*Updike, 1962*). And with David's characteristic childlike spontaneity, he proves the strength of his faith: "Had Christ ever come to him, David Kern, and said, "Here. Feel the wound in My side"? No; but prayers had been answered" (*Updike, 1962*).

The acute desire for spiritual independence literally permeates the characters of Updike's stories, but this path is always sown with doubts, searches, and constant obstacles. That is why, despite his strong faith in God, David asks himself eternal questions: "Well, where is our soul, then, in this gap? Where will Heaven be?" (Книга;9). It is at this transitional age, in a new place, that you first think about death: "Without warning, David was visited by an exact vision of death: a long hole in the ground, no wider than your body, down which you are drawn while the white faces above recede. You try to reach them but your arms are pinned. Shovels pour dirt into your face. There you will be forever..." (*Updike, 1962*). The dramatic worldview characteristic of Updike's hero, born in a confrontation with reality, also has an autobiographical tinge. In many of his interviews, the writer noted that he was greatly influenced by the events of his childhood, which were marked by two catastrophes: the Depression and World War II. This, apparently, contributed to the acute sense of lack of harmony in life inherent in Updike and his characters. The author comments on David's condition as follows: "As David ran, a gray planet rolled inches behind his neck. If he looked back, he would be buried. And in the momentum of his terror, hideous possibilities – the dilation of the sun the crabs on the shore in *The Time Machine* – wheeled out of the vacuum of make-believe and added their weight to his impending oblivion" (*Updike, 1962*).

Parents react differently to their son's unexplained behavior. The mother starts talking about God and answers questions about the existence of a higher power: "But, David, you have the evidence. Look out the window at the sun; at the fields" (*Updike, 1962*). My father speaks openly and directly about his atheistic attitude to death: "Is the kid worried about death? Don't give it a thought, David. I'll be lucky if I live till tomorrow, and I'm not worried. I think death is a wonderful thing. I look forward to it" (*Updike, 1962*). But all these thoughts of his relatives do not suit the guy, he feels immensely lonely: "Nowhere in the world of other people would he find the hint, the nod, he needed to begin to build his fortress against death. They none of them believed. He was alone. In that deep hole" (*Updike, 1962*).

The above confirms that in the context of Updike's moral and spiritual issues, the author pays great attention to the psychology of adolescence, and one of the main features of his literary talent can be considered a subtle sense of time and interest in the depiction of everyday details. The culmination of Updike's short story is the day of his 15th birthday, on which David receives a gun as a gift, and his grandmother, wanting her grandson to overcome the fear of death, asks him to kill the pigeons that have settled in the pantry. Updike describes the bird hunt in detail and with his characteristic precision: "A pigeon appeared in one of these holes, on the side toward the house. It flew in, with a battering of wings, from the outside, and waited there, silhouetted against its pinched bit of sky, preening and cooing in a throbbing, thrilled, tentative way. David tiptoed four steps to the side, rested his gun against the lowest rung of a ladder pegged between two upright beams, and lowered the gunsight into the bird's tiny, jauntily cocked head" (*Updike, 1962*).

Thus, the bird is not an accidental symbol in Updike's short stories. It should be emphasized that birds are an essential element of various mythopoetic traditions; they are widely represented in symbolism and emblematics. Birds as embodiments of deity play an important role in myths about the creation of the world: the cosmic spirit in the form of a bird or a bird as an assistant to the divine creator, a giant bird as a common image of the Creator.

The most famous "function" of the bird is its personification of the human soul. The idea of the soul in the form of a bird is present in ancient cultures, such as Egypt, Greece, China and Siberia, South America, etc. Thus, the bird is a symbol of the soul, and in the Bible it is a dove that arrives with the news that Mary will give birth to the son of God. The fact that the boy has to shoot the pigeons and is forced to experience all these negative emotions, combined with the impressive hunting scene that the reader watches, can-and should-be interpreted as David being required to part with his soul in order to move into the adult state, but as we see, he cannot get rid of his soul. However, it turns out that killing birds does not help the hero come to terms with the thought of death-the expected mental breakthrough did not occur. Realizing this, we can say that the mystery of death, as well as the desire to live, remain constant categories for the writer, in his opinion, this mystery accompanies a person all his life: "with a feminine, slipping sensation along his nerves that seemed to give the air hands, he was robed in this certainty: that the God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy His whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever" (*Updike, 1962*).

5. Conclusions

Thus, having analyzed one of J. Updike's short stories, we can draw the following conclusions. The writer's focus on depicting the life of provincial America and "ordinary Americans" in the context of literary searches of the 50s and 70s is quite natural. Therefore, the family relationships of "ordinary Americans", the issues of youth education, and its formation are an important part of the writer's attention and his work. Unlike many other authors, J. Updike's work shows an aggravation of existential and moral and spiritual problems of existence, namely: human loneliness, faith or disbelief, fear of death. It is worth noting that the characteristic features of Updike's short story are psychologism, tragedy of the worldview, and a tendency to detail. The author's "I" in the text is as close as possible to the character's personality, even to the point of becoming one "consonance."

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