PHILOLOGY

MAJOR THEMES IN GRAHAM SWIFT'S 'WATERLAND'

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Abstract. The analysis deals with major themes in Graham Swift's *Waterland*. The complex relation between modernism and postmodernism. The novel represents a mixture of genres. The novel was investigated through the prism of historical prose, a fusion of family, psychological novel and novel ideas.

Key words: *Waterland*, theme, postmodernism, narrative, history.

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Graham Swift's 1983 novel *Waterland* is a wonderful amalgam of postmodernism and magical realism. It has been favorably accepted by critics ever since it was first printed. Despite the fact that the book has been the object of literary research for quite a long time (George P. Landow, 1990; Elisabeta S. Catană, 2011; Margaret G. Champion, 2015; John Burnside, 2018, etc.), today it remains one of the most versatile, enigmatic and underexplored novels in modern British fiction.

Before trying to analyze the major themes the novel deals with, it is important to understand clearly, what were the prerequisites for creating a plot filled with traumatic reminiscences, self-discovery and outrageous behavior of the characters. In the second half of the 20th century the UK found itself at a turning point: serious changes in the social and political spheres, which led to the decay of the British Empire, the loss of the status of a powerful empire, and catastrophic consequences of two world wars had the public consciousness develop new values; simultaneously, the process of rethinking the past began. The change of the ideological paradigms always leads to a crisis of credibility in the social ideology, thus the tendency of escaping the traumatic reality becomes obvious [7, 141].

The 20th century seriously changed the perspective of history and literature. The problem of fictional interpretation and accuracy of historical facts was raised. From now on, it is believed that those who write history and those who write fiction are not oppositional, but rather deal with different discourses telling the truth. Hayden White writes: "We cannot easily distinguish between them [history and fiction] on formal grounds unless we approach them with specific preconceptions about the kinds of truths that each is supposed to deal in" [8, 121]. In his retrospective discourse, Graham Swift masterfully alternates historical facts with fiction creating a magical atmosphere. Public and private

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history are intertwined in *Waterland* in that it is the story of two families, of an entire region in Eastern England called the Fens ('*We lived in a fairy-tale place. In a lock-keeper's cottage, by a river, in the middle of the Fens.*' [6, 10], '*And since a fairy-tale must have a setting, a setting which, like the settings of all good fairy-tales, must be both palpable and unreal, let me tell you.*' [6, 15], of England from the industrial revolution to the present, of technology and its effects, and it is, finally, a meditation on stories and story-telling [5].

All of Swift's work tends to deal with family and moral issues, which determine such specific features of his novels as investigation of the time category and historical process and the author's close attention to the relationship within the family.

Waterland is a novel of family issues, but portrays the family in a negative moral and emotional way: family for his characters is the focus of conflicts, misunderstandings. The historical problems of the novel *Waterland* should not mislead the researcher: despite the fact that the novel is devoted to the theme of history, the essence of the conflict lies in the psychological fracture of the protagonist, his "incompatibility" with the world, immersion in reflection, paralyzing the ability to act. In this respect, *Waterland* is a novel where a kind of metaphor for the "jamming reflection" of the protagonist is an allusion to the image of Hamlet.

In *Waterland*, Tom Crick, a teacher, reflects on the turning points in the history of the "marshy land", but the story is updated only as part of the private history of the Crick and Atkinson families; the author places under almost equal scrutiny the private lives of ordinary people and significant historical events, and from the point of view of understanding the essence of the historical process – a small degree of involvement of people in these significant events.

Typical of modern British prose is the loss of a single perspective in the vision of the historical process, the disintegration of universal history into private, local, independent stories. S. Connor notes that "the localization of history leads to the strengthening of the role of collective memory, which makes it impossible to think about things differently from the standpoint of history" [4, 8].

The meaning of the lesson, which the teacher tries to give to his students, is to proclaim the right to knowledge, on the one hand, and on the other hand, to explain to them that there is a heavy burden of responsibility of people for their actions. Through the example of his life, Tom Crick shows his students that knowledge always imposes a huge responsibility on a person. But Tom does not forget to tell his students about the saving circle of ignorance, which is usually "thrown" to a person by the philosophy of common sense. *Waterland* is a novel not about high-profile historical events, and about human life in the aftermath of those events. First and foremost, it states that performing some actions a person is not always able to predict their implications and importance within the private and public history. Swift illustrates the postmodernist idea that the grand narrative is an illusion, that the various instances of historical reality presented in stories and the various interpretations of historical events must be put together in order to understand the present which is another image of the past [2, 7]: '*history merges with fiction, fact gets blurred with fable...*' [6, 208].

The story of the family (actually Tom himself) in the novel is presented as a constant struggle of two types of relationship with reality. The Atkinson family (the mother's side) are people who choose deliberate action, they try to influence and transform their

world. The Cricks (the paternal line) are phlegmatic people who prefer to fight humility; with patient wisdom they accept their lot and their position in the world. This symbolic confrontation ends with the destruction of the Atkinson Empire, it is stated that history represents an endless process of impact on the environment.

It is safe to say that *Waterland* is dominated by the sphere of intellectual; there is an appeal to the study of “ideas” (or rather, a number of ideas: history, the cost of curiosity and the cost of error, the inextricable connection of all things in the world, and so on).

As in his other novels, Swift places the characters in mundane everyday situations, which, nevertheless, organically allow them to persistently reflect on serious ontological and historiosophical problems. For example, in *Waterland* the very profession of a history teacher, his work at school naturally leads the protagonist to a constant reflection on the history of the “swamp land”, his family, and ultimately – the history of civilization.

Lewis, the headmaster of the school where Tom works, is the antagonist; despite the contradictions that exist between the two characters, Lewis does not embody a “bare idea”, which is convincingly shown by a few psychologically precise strokes: his unwarranted cheerfulness, his struggles and fears of the students.

The traditional conflict between a teacher and a student in the novel is represented by the ideological dispute taking place between Tom and his student Price. Price, on the one hand, represents the obstinate, intelligent student, present in almost any class, and on the other hand, in the text of the novel he is the carrier of eschatological concepts, fear of the future.

Thus, the author focuses on different historical concepts, represented by the characters: linear concepts of the movement of history with the opposite emotional types – optimistic (chiliastic) Lewis, pessimistic (eschatological) Price, and “loop” (to use the definition of Tom Crick himself), taking into account the uneven movement of time, its jumps and intricate moves, repetition and reverse.

The spatiotemporal organization of the novel *Waterland* is based on the laws of retrospection. In addition, in the novel there are several spatial and temporal layers, interfacing with the “real-time” life of the main character; only domestic time in the novel unfolds linearly. This, apparently, embodies the author's ideas about two types of time: real (everyday) and “imaginary”. The “real time” of the character can exist only in accordance with the properties of time which can flow from the past to the future, i.e. linearly, whereas the time of the “historical past” is subject to the whims of memory and can change its course depending on the mental state of the character, slow down, “jump” through decades, etc. The real time reflects disparate retrospectives: on the basis of the psyche of the character, his memory forms a special space-time continuum in which all events coexist simultaneously. In depicting the subjective perception of time and space, the selectivity and unpredictability of involuntary memory, Swift draws on the legacy of M. Proust. The temporal perspective, opened in this novel, takes the character deep into the centuries, to the time of the first settlements in the Fens. Each historical event is interpreted by Tom, inscribed not only in the “big” history, but above all – in the history of the family.

From the point of view of genre, *Waterland* is of great interest. It reflected many typical features of English literature of the 1980-90s: close attention to historical concepts and historiographical problems, philosophical, ideological issues, close attention to the

question of the place and importance of man in the historical process, a complex spatial and temporal organization.

In our opinion, the complex genre nature of Swift's novel is largely determined by his desire to "tell everything". Philosophical and historiographical concepts embodied in *Waterland* reflect what had already become almost traditional for the 20th century: ideas of fundamental ignorance of history, its impenetrability to the view of the researcher. The flexibility in the interpretation of the meaning of history, "walking" of the historical process circles, the constant return to past historical experience is stressed by the author.

As the analysis of the writer's works shows, the novel *Waterland* is a search for a genre form that would most fully meet Swift's intentions and approaches to the image of "a man in the flow of history". As the synthesis of family saga, a socio-psychological novel, a historicized narrative, a special artistic space is born, in which the characters reveal their inner world, demonstrating the richness of philosophical content, coupled with a reliable psychological pattern of character, and the author gets the opportunity to express his ideas.

Along with the problematic aspect and peculiarity of the nature of the conflict the novel represents a mixture of genres. Family saga and family chronicles are characterized by the interpretation of the conflict in the psychological plane. Swift's characters suffer primarily from a lack of inner harmony, which does not allow them to go beyond their "I" and determines their "autism". At the same time, it is important to emphasize that not only the plot development matters but also the logic of the philosophical idea that runs through the whole novel. So, the plot develops due to the confrontation of the characters in accordance with the actual plot movement.

Analysis of the novel *Waterland* leads to the conclusion that although Swift's novel is saturated with historical concepts, it is not historical prose in the strict sense of the word, but rather, as has been said, a fusion of family, psychological novel and novel ideas.

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