

US FAIRYTALES OF THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY: CONSTRUCTING THE NATIONAL (STYLISTIC AND PLOT PECULIARITIES)

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Abstract. In the early twentieth century, American writers first started looking for a manner to describe the national, partially breaking away from the European canon, yet still following it to an extent. The literary fairytale is particularly interesting when considering this issue, as children's literary genres can be characterized by the authors' more pronounced intentions to portray society in the way it would like to be seen.

This article considers the ways of representing national identity with reference to fairytales written by US authors (L. F. Baum, C. Sandburg, J. Thurber, E. B. White). The article aims at exploring the multitude of means employed by the authors to establish a new national tradition of the genre (the correlation between fantasy and realism, the system of characters, poetic onomastics, style and plot characteristics of the literary fairytales of the first half of the twentieth century, etc.). The analysis makes it possible to single out a number of peculiarities typical of the fairytale discourse in the works of American writers, such as a tendency to ironically reconsider the canons of the genre and combine the features of fantasy and realism in the narrative, which makes the role of colloquial linguistic means more significant. The desire to create a nation-specific type of the genre brings about the problem of nomination. Acting in the roles of new 'Adams', who are naming objects around them, American fairytale authors come up with occasional ways of naming their characters and topoi. On the one hand, names may be completely devoid of any etymological basis, and, on the other hand, they may evoke associations with typical phenomena of the New World. The characters bear features reflecting the peculiarities of American mentality (practicality, pragmatism, confidence in their own abilities). The space of the fairytale is transformed as compared to the traditional chronotope. Now, miracles either happen in a metropolis of the times of the author or in rural areas, at a farm where, as it turns out, miracles can also take place. However, making the setting of their narrative clearer poses new challenges to the authors, as their narrative may include topics typical of traditional realist fiction, such as growing up, friendship, loss, and compassion.

Keywords: US literature; children's literature; literary fairytale; national identity; poetic onomastics.

КОНСТРУИРОВАНИЕ НАЦИОНАЛЬНОГО В СКАЗКАХ ПИСАТЕЛЕЙ США ПЕРВОЙ ПОЛОВИНЫ XX ВЕКА (СТИЛИСТИЧЕСКОЕ И СЮЖЕТНОЕ СВОЕОБРАЗИЕ)

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Аннотация. В начале XX в. американские писатели впервые начинают поиск новых форм передачи национального, отчасти отрываясь от европейского канона, а отчасти все еще ему следуя. Литературная сказка представляет собой особенно интересный материал для изучения данной проблемы, т. к. в жанрах детской литературы наиболее сильны авторские интенции изобразить общество таким, каким оно само хотело бы себя видеть.

В статье рассматриваются способы репрезентации национальной идентичности на примере жанра сказки, представленном в творчестве писателей США (Л. Ф. Баума, К. Сэндберга, Дж. Тербера, Э. Б. Уайта). Цель работы – изучить разнообразие используемых авторами способов утверждения новой национальной традиции жанра (соотношение фантазийного и реалистического, систему образов персонажей, поэтическую ономастику, стилистические и сюжетные особенности литературных сказок первой половины XX в.). Анализ позволил выявить такие особенности сказочного дискурса в произведениях американских писателей, как тенденцию к ироническому переосмыслению канонов жанра, к совмещению реалистического и фантастического в повествовании, в результате чего усиливается роль языковых средств, принадлежащих к разговорному регистру. Отчетливое желание создать собственный национальный тип жанра вызывает к жизни проблему именования. Выступая в роли новых Адамов, как бы впервые дающих имена предметам, американские сказочники изобретают окказиональные способы номинации персонажей и топосов: имена, с одной стороны, могут быть полностью лишены этимологии, а с другой – отсылать читателя к типичным реалиям Нового Света. Сами персонажи наделяются такими чертами характера, которые отражают свойства американского менталитета (практичность, прагматизм, уверенность в своих силах). Пространство сказки также видоизменяется в сравнении с традиционным хронотопом. Теперь волшебство происходит либо в крупном мегаполисе, современном автору сказки, либо в типичной сельской местности, на ферме, где, как оказывается, тоже есть место чудесам. Тем не менее, конкретизация пространства ставит перед авторами новые задачи: в повествование могут быть вплетены такие традиционные темы реалистической подростковой литературы, как взросление, дружба, утрата, сострадание.

Ключевые слова: литература США; детская литература; литературная сказка; национальная идентичность; поэтическая ономастика.

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The emergence of the first fiction works meant specifically for children both in Europe and in the US in the nineteenth century took place in the age of romanticism. In that period and later, writers and researchers paid attention both to the children's world and the 'childhood of culture', i.e. folklore. Traditionally, American children's literature is considered to have manifested itself in the sphere of realism (adventure novels, family sagas, etc.)¹, while fantasy literature is thought to be dominated by European authors who base their works on European folklore, e.g. that of Great Britain. Together with that, American fairytale writers of the first half of the twenti-

eth century (Lyman Frank Baum, Carl Sandburg, James Thurber, Elvin Brooks White) persisted in consciously creating nation-specific fairytale discourse [American Myths... 2016: 1084; Thacker 2005: 85; Hourihan 1997: 212]. This article considers the peculiarities characteristic of the construction of the national in the US children's literature of the first half of the twentieth century and the connection between US children's literature with the folklore and literary tradition of Great Britain. The analysis is based on the works by the said authors as L. F. Baum, C. Sandburg, J. Thurber, and E. B. White are classics of children's literature who further developed the genre

¹ For more information about the establishment and national peculiarities of realism in US literature and, more particularly, in youth literature, see [Balditsyn 2004: 83-93, 123-128].

of the literary tale and contributed to its transformation in the US literary context.

In the past few decades, considerable attention has been paid to national identity both in the works of national and foreign scholars [e.g. Gillingham 2000; Gachev 1998; Lukina 2004; Zadornaya 2017, etc.]. In their research, authors refer to different social phenomena [Ariely 2018], images of remarkable personalities [Taylor 2000], and works of visual art and music [Zhukova 2014]. Many studies focus on exploring the means used to represent national identity in fiction [Popova 2004; Sidorova 2007; Buckley 2018].

In its turn, the literary fairytale has also been studied by Russian [Lipovetsky 1992; Ovchinnikova 2003] and non-Russian scholars [Lerer 2008; Zipes 2012; Bottigheimer 2004; Beveridge 2014]. In foreign scholarship, the genre has frequently been used as a «reference point» of American culture and society» [Junko 2003]. However, the literary fairytale as a genre is also often examined through the prism of text linguistics [Stephens 2004; Tananykhina 2007; Brandausova 2008; Namychkina 2011], while it is mostly non-Russian scholars that focus on the peculiarities of national identity representation with reference to children's literature [Knowles 2003; Stewart 2009].

Unlike grown-up literature, works of children's literature have more potential for constructing an ideal image of society. As Peter Hunt, one of the first scholars who treated children's literature as an object of academic study, puts it: "they [books for children – T. K., O. O.] reflect society as it wishes to be seen, and as it unconsciously reveals itself to be" [cit. ex: Knowles 2003: 61]. Researchers maintain that the linguistic means employed by an author in a work of literature may serve to express their national identity [Popova 2004: 50]. The American fairytale is particularly interesting material to explore this issue due to the fact that over time, literature in the former British colonies and dominions started looking for its own artistic method but also defying the traditional images of the British fairytale [Gilerdale 1996: 847].

In the nineteenth century, US literature was almost entirely rooted in the European tradition [Griswold 1996: 863]¹, which is why until as late as the early twentieth century, all American children's writers to a certain extent used classical fairytale plots and characters. However, this connection is the most noticeable in the fairytales of L. Frank Baum, the most renowned American fairytale writer. This paper will consider a collection of fairytales the author entitled *American Fairy Tales* (1901). Even though the title of the collection refers to the new American origin of the texts, in the fairytales, the author does not completely break away from the European fairytale tradition. In his stories, one can still find princes, princesses, characters' miracle-making associates and wizards who are particularly important to Baum. Alongside with that, some other motifs rooted in European folklore and literary fairytale are to be found in Baum's works, namely the motif of the forbidden door² (*The Box of Robbers*, *The Girl who Owned a Bear*), the motif of the unconvertible coin (*The Queen of Quok*), the motif of the main character promising something to their antagonist (*The Laughing Hippopotamus*), and the presence of miracle-making associates (*The Queen of Quok*), etc.

However, in the early twentieth century, authors started working on the poetics and plots of the American fairytale proper. Thus, while in American writer and illustrator Howard Pyle's collection of fairytales *Pepper and Salt* (1883)³ the characters' names are still reminiscent of the German fairytale tradition associated with that of the brothers Grimm, L. Frank Baum's literary onomastics demonstrates originality in character naming (*Popopo*, *Gouie*, *Glinkomok*, *Nep*, etc.) and toponyms (*Bilkon*, *Quok*, *Mulgravia*, *Junkum*, *Macvelt*, etc.) which cannot be attributed to any tradition. Similarly, Baum came up with the name of the main country of American fairytales, the marvelous land of Oz, by accident, which complies very well with the demands of the American fairytale as it brings about no associations with the preceding tradition. Tradition-

¹ In its turn, everything that followed in the American tradition of the literary fairytale was influenced by the outstanding American romanticists, i.e. W. Irving, N. Hawthorn, and E. A. Poe. According to Ju. V. Kovalev, all American fairytale writers "referred to the legacy and achievements of romanticists, using their techniques and innovations, their aesthetic principles and narrative constructions, their means of dealing with life-related material" [Kovalev 1992: 12].

² The motif of disobedience which is directly connected with the motif of opening a forbidden door (book, chest, etc.) is further developed in *Jumanji*, a popular book by American writer Chris Van Allsburg.

³ For more information about Pyle's fairytales, see: [Dunayevskaya 2019: 17].

al names perform a topologizing function while unusual names are a feature of the reconsidered genre tradition¹. James Thurber, American writer, journalist and artist also follows this trend. Although the fairytale characters in his books are presented in the traditional roles of the European fairytale (princes, princesses, kings, monsters, etc.), their names undergo several changes from minor phonetic alterations (King *Clode* instead of traditional spelling with *au*: *Claude*) to more complex cases of semordnilap (*Nagrom Yaf*, *Tarcomed*, *Nacilbuper*). The latter examples demonstrate not only a connection with the European folklore tradition (*Nagrom Yaf* spelt backward is *Morgan le Fay*, a powerful enchantress of the Arthurian legend), but also an allusion to the contemporary US political system (*Tarcomed* and *Nacilbuper* are *Democrat* and *Republican* reversed respectively).

The new tradition in the onomasticon of the fairytale is shaped by words that have an obvious local colouring in other American fairytales. Thus, in the title of his collection *Rootabaga Stories* (1922), American poet, folklorist and fairytale author Carl Sandburg uses a North American name of a typical plant of the continent, rootabaga. The protagonist's name in this book, *Gimme the Ax*, is a reference to the traditional occupation of pioneers of land development, i.e. cutting down forests². What is noteworthy about the name is its unusual morphological status and phonetic frame. It is not only the author but also the characters themselves who name other characters in the text:

Gimme the Ax decided to let his children name themselves <...> When the first boy came to the house of Gimme the Ax, he was named Please Gimme and the girl was named Ax Me No Questions [Sandburg 1990: 97].

The similarity of names which lies in the recurrence of lexical elements and in their phonetic

and grammatical anormality testifies not only to the fact that all the characters are members of the same family but also to their belonging to a certain group of American society.

In this way, establishing an original American tradition, authors come up with inexistent names which bear no associations whatsoever with a particular tradition (Baum, Thurber) or give their fictional characters or settings names which are directly associated with the everyday life, culture, flora, and fauna of the New World (Sandburg).

The plot of their fairytales is set against a reality contemporary to that of the authors. In Baum's stories, wizards live in metropolises, the king's ministers buy lozenges on their way to work while characteristic features of the American landscape (such as cornfields) become an integral part of both Baum's³ and Sandburg's⁴ characters' appearance descriptions. In their fairytales, literary topoi include both the countryside and the city. For instance, Sandburg's fairytale *How Two Skyscrapers Decided to Have a Child* tells a story of two skyscrapers becoming parents to a long-distance train. As a result, the main characters are indicative of the development of American society: on the one hand, there are skyscrapers reaching for the sky in a densely populated metropolis as symbols of the urban and industrial development of the country, and, on the other hand, there is a train which covers huge distances and discovers new spaces as a symbol of developing new lands. These two vectors determine the narrative in American fairytales which sometimes go far away from the traditional plots and poetics of the British fairytale. The first vector, which had existed in European and American literature long before the twentieth century (see, e.g. works of Charles Dickens and Horatio Alger) and expressed itself throughout the twentieth century (R. Sawyer, B. Smith) continues to

¹ Rather paradoxically, Pamela S. Gates suggests that despite all the merits of Baum's fairytales (extravagant names, comic situations, interesting characters), his 'unexciting style' may have been the reason why for a long time, critics had to "to lump the Oz stories with more pedestrian series fiction" [Gates 2003: 17]. However, his matter-of-fact style did not prevent him from becoming a classic of American literature, a situation which was far less probable in the national variants of the literary fairytale in Europe.

² As a collector of American folklore and with an aim to contribute to the new children's folklore, Sandburg uses the names of his characters as a reference to the image of the logger from American tall tales. An indispensable attribute of such folklore characters as Paul Banyan, Tony Beaver, Cordwood Pete, etc. is an ax. Using one, Paul Banyan, according to one of the tall tales, dug the Grand Canyon.

³ Baum's negative characters are "... ugly enough to scare away the crows from the royal cornfields" [Baum, 2015: 33].

⁴ One of the characters of *Rootabaga Stories* is described as follows: «Her eyes are so blue, such a clear light shining blue, they are the same as cornflowers with blue raindrops shining and dancing on the silver leaves after a sun shower in any of the summer months» [Sandburg 1990: 100].

set the tone for the urban theme in US children's literature both in the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries (books by M. Curato, E. Konigsburg, J. Woodson, L. Fitzhugh etc.). The other vector directed into the American states focuses on life outside the city, another important topic in US literature. The latter vector developed not only a definite set of themes, but also a recognisable style with an inevitable abundance of dialogues, everyday scenes from ranch or farm life, all of which were quite different from the ones of a fantasy¹.

The beginning of E. B. White's *The Charlotte's Web* (1952) whose action takes place on a farm, for example, in no way looks like that of a fairytale:

"Where's Papa going with that ax?" said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast.

"Out to the hoghouse," replied Mrs. Arable. "Some pigs were born last night."

"I don't see why he needs an ax," continued Fern, who was only eight.

"Well," said her mother, "one of the pigs is a runt. It's very small and weak, and it will never amount to anything. So your father has decided to do away with it."

"Do away with it?" shrieked Fern. "You mean kill it? Just because it's smaller than the others?"

Mrs. Arable put a pitcher of cream on the table.

"Don't yell, Fern!" she said. "Your father is right. The pig would probably die anyway." [White 1990: 237].

Simple syntactic structures, everyday vocabulary describing the activities of farm workers, and the expression 'do away' which the little girl fails to understand completely are characteristics of the style of the work which make the reader experience the anxiety of a girl who can only guess why her father is heading to the newborn piglets carrying an ax. As if to counterbalance the imaginary, the first few chapters of the fairytale are written in a realistic manner. In this way, despite employing traditional fairytale means (search of a name, talking animals), *The Charlotte's Web* touches upon real problems, including true friendship, parting with one's childhood, growing-up, and death.

This combination of fantasy and realism in a fairytale is characteristic of many US authors. In its American variant, the genre brings the real world and the world of miracles together, a fea-

ture that is more typical of young adult literature. The main character of *The Charlotte's Web* is a girl that has a defined historical and geographical setting as do many characters of L. Frank Baum's fairytales. And while in White's stories, growing-up issues come to the fore (e.g. at first Fern preoccupies her mother by the fact that she will only communicate with animals and by the end of the book she makes friends at school and gradually leaves the imaginary world of talking animals), in Baum's works the main girl characters are inventive and practical. Being down-to-earth is a distinctive feature of the American national character² which could not suit the image of the main character of children's literature better as they know how to find a way out of difficult situations.

Its turn to realism in American literature may be explained by its special treatment of the legacy of romanticism. For US fairytale writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the only way to interact with the traditions of romanticism was their reconsideration through the prism of satire. Thus, in Baum's *The Box of Robbers*, the narrative follows a traditional pattern. Out of curiosity, the main character, Martha, opens a wooden chest which had been sent by an uncle of hers from Africa, and sets free some pirates. They rob her house and start talking about where to hide the stolen things, and the girl courteously suggests that they hide them in the only cave she knows of, Mammoth Cave, a national park in Kentucky. In this way, the author ironically reconsiders some persisting associations of adventure literature: a real practical young dweller of Chicago upsets the canon of children's literature with her observations and twists the bandits around her finger when things seem to have gone awry. The moral at the end of each fairytale only adds to the author's irony: in this story it shifts the focus from issues that, according to the logic of the narrative, need to be taken into consideration in such a situation, i.e. safety and obedience, to insignificant things as if the only negative outcome of Martha's behaviour was going to be the need to tidy up:

This story should teach us not to interfere in matters that do not concern us. For had Martha refrained from

¹ Some of the representatives of this direction (L. I. Wilder, C. Rylie Brink) paved the way for the further development of the Children's Frontier Narrative (R. Moody, J. Van Leeuwen, etc.).

² About this, see: [Kovalev 1992: 8].

opening *Uncle Walter's mysterious chest she would not have been obliged to carry downstairs all the plunder the robbers had brought into the attic* [Baum 2015: 15].

When speaking about the ironic reconsideration of the canons of the genre, it is important to say that the specific type of humour in the works studied characterises them as American texts proper. According to A. I. Lavrentyev, humour expresses the basic feature of American culture and national character; it questions the pretended feeling of comfort, wellbeing, and safety, pragmatically reconsidering the universal system of values and destroying the ideas of truth, good, and beauty which did not stand the test of real life. [Lavrentyev 2009: 42]. Irony bordering on black humour is characteristic of the manner of some American fairytale writers (J. Thurber, J. Collier). For example, in James Thurber's creative work, one can find both the poetic *The White Deer* and *Many Moons* and somber stories which

only remotely resemble classical fairytales [Kovalev 1992: 17–19].

American fairytales can be characterized by a non-uniform nature, however, the period in question demonstrates a tendency to a gradual intensification of the national component. In literary onomastics, the authors diverge from traditional nominations and prefer to come up with intricate unusual names and call their characters in an American way. The US literary fairytale is characterized by a combination of realist and fantasy narration elements. While still retaining some features of the traditional fairytale (talking animals, typical functions, etc.), they consider issues that are more typical of realist narratives, while their characters are realistic and demonstrate features of the national mentality. The extreme point of the fairytale genre reconsideration by US authors is different variants of the ironic interpretation of traditional plots.

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