

PHENOMENON OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN PERCIVAL EVERETT'S NOVELS

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Abstract. The article deals with two mostly well-known novels *American Desert* and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* by Percival Everett. Nowadays he is one of the most accomplished and prolific American writers and belongs to a “new” generation of black writers. In his novels the author addresses the phenomenon of the American Dream which is one of the most widespread themes in the literature of the USA in the XX-XXI centuries. The authors of the article come to the conclusion that the novels are based on the same plot structure demonstrating the compelling impact of this phenomenon on the protagonists’ lives. The main aim of appealing to the phenomenon is to present author’s views upon this question, to give the way of its new interpretation, to discuss the related problems of American society. The writer also presents the transformation of the phenomenon of the American Dream into American tragedy. This way of interpretation is based on postmodernist aesthetics mostly.

Key words: Percival Everett, American Dream, American way of life, American tragedy, self-made person.

1.Introduction. Percival Everett (born 1956) is an American writer and Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Southern California. Originally, a musician, Everett also is an abstract painter, but remains best known as a novelist [1]: the author of some nineteen novels – from *Suder* (1983) to *So Much Blue* (2017) – and three collections of short stories, three collections of poetry, as well as a book for children, with training in philosophy and a degree in science. Most of the critics regard Everett as an African American writer of a “new generation” as in his creativity he addresses traditional themes and conflicts of African American literature, sometimes rejects, deconstructs or plays with them. The question of his African American origin and the expectations it raises in his readership cannot be avoided, nevertheless, it is necessary to analyze some of his novels from the point of American literary tradition. Moreover, in some interviews he states it is indeed to be considered for him to be an American writer [2]. Consequently, in his creativity Everett appeals to traditional themes of the USA literature as the phenomenon of the American Dream.

2.Methods. The given article is based on those Everett's novels represented a new interpretation of the American Dream in the modern American society. As literature reflects social processes, we affirm that this problem is relevant for the American society today, when the constituents of it predominate in social, political and cultural life of the nation. There is an undeniable dominant in these questions mostly represented in author's novels – *American Desert* (2004) and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009). These novels distinguish among Everett's literary works because the author addresses directly the phenomenon of the American Dream and we point our attention to the forms of its representation in the works of fiction. We follow the traditional methods of analysis (cultural-historical, comparative) that are used in the researches on different segments of contemporary Literary Studies. This allows us to identify the way of development of this phenomenon, its embodiment in Everett's novels.

3.Results And Discussion. The phenomenon of the American Dream is a factor in the national ideology and culture of America. This is “one of the main components of the mentality, culture, history, social and political life of the United States; it is a myth which is deeply rooted in the mass consciousness, predetermined the perception of the world by Americans. The American Dream played a major role in the formation of the American state and nation, had a decisive influence on the formation of the American national character, determined the US relationship with the world around us” (3). *It is originated in the Declaration of Independence, which proclaims that “all men are created equal” with the right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” [4]. A well-known American critic and politician L. Trilling also writes of the “exclusivity” of this phenomenon. “Americans are the only nation who has the concept of dream entered the national moral code and became a symbol of American opportunities. Americans are proud of their dream” [5].*

Traditionally, the phenomenon of the American Dream is associated with certain components: the national ethics of prosperity; the concept of equal opportunities with the pursuit of success; a kind of utopia, a belief in America's better future; the American dream is equivalent to the *American way of life* with wealth, expressed in such possessions as “house-family-car”. In addition, the concept of is based on the idea that every person who has abilities, energy is able to succeed in life, and at the same time succeed in an honest way. Americans believe that a person's success depends on his personal abilities and honest work and not on his initial membership in a particular social class or group. Therefore, the phenomenon of the American Dream is closely related to the notion of a *self-made person*, that is, a person who is determined and hard-working and is oriented toward personal success. It is also necessary to mention an individual and individualistic way of actions that does not allow the dissolution into others. Individual freedom is freedom of self-expression, creativity and entrepreneurship.

The components of the American dream are also the ideal of equality for all before the law, regardless of ethnicity and social status, as well as the veneration of symbols common to all Americans, specimens and heroes. As a part of world culture and art, literature has been always inseparably bound with all of the processes and phenomena taking place in the society [6]. That's why a lot of American authors added American Ideals to their works as a theme or other reoccurring idea. Numerous scholars mention its traces from the Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin to Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925), John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey Into the Heart of the American Dream* (1971) and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977). In his creativity Percival Everett refers to the theme of the American Dream as an American literary tradition. The writer offers not only a classical interpretation of this phenomenon, but also describes his own understanding. The novel *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* fully appeals to the phenomenon of the American Dream and to some of its components.

The main character of the novel is a young man with a strange name Not Sidney Poitier, which becomes the cause of many misunderstandings in his life. Sidney Poitier is a famous African American actor in the United States who received Oscar for Best Actor in 1963. Not Sydney really looks like a famous actor, and besides, like the characters of other novels P. Everett, has outstanding abilities. His mother died when he was a little boy and he had to move to his mother's best friend Ted Turner. In the first chapters the main character tells about his experience living in Turner's house. The image of this person is a possible implementation of the phenomenon of the American Dream. It is not accidental that Everett addresses precisely this image. Today Ted Turner is one of the most famous and prosperous businessmen in the United States. He is an American media mogul and philanthropist, known as founder of the Cable News Network (CNN), the first 24-hour cable news channel. His way was difficult, but the individualistic character helped him to succeed. Both competitors and friends have always recognized that Turner is an example of a real, constantly risking and winning businessman. He is a man who works hard, independently and achieves prosperity.

The next example of the self-made person in the novel is the image of the mother of Not Sidney. Portia Poitier came from a poor family, lived in a poor neighborhood. Through the novel the author emphasizes her desire to change her life. Acting in the economic sphere and showing initiative, personal orientation to wealth, she was able to survive in the harsh American reality. Relying on her own strength, abilities and capabilities, she invested all her money in CNN Company and enriched, while "in her life, she did not go beyond the kitchen" [7]. The image of Portia is an example of a woman who "made herself", or enriched herself, relying on her own strength and luck. Describing the characters of the novel, it is appropriate to refer to another famous principle of the American mentality as the principle of self-help concept. The central problem of the novel is the problem of self-identification. Being the owner of a strange name with a negative particle, Not Sydney always tries to find himself, to find his place in a society. He is arrested in Alabama, gets education in Morehouse College. He describes his relationships with professors and students, travelling around the country. The main character of the novel and his life are also an example of the fulfillment of the American dream. Eventually, his strange name and outward resemblance to the famous actor plays a trick on him. Not Sydney experiences many difficulties in his life and finally at the end of the novel he receives the main US film award – Oscar. It is obvious that the writer's appeal to the image of the film prize is not accidental. For most Americans, getting Oscar and belonging to Hollywood is associated with the phenomenon of the American Dream. Oscar is the most prestigious award in the film industry. A victory in one of the nominations is the highest point in the career of an actor, the personification of professional success, a symbol of well-being. Oscar is the symbol of the American Dream. However, the main character receives this Oscar by mistake, instead of the real actor and director Sidney Poitier, thus not finding, but losing himself, turning from Not Sidney Poitier into Sydney Poitier. At the end of the novel the protagonist possesses all the components of the American dream. He is a well-known and wealthy person. But Not Sidney does not seek enrichment or fame. Thus, we come to the conclusion that in the novel P. Everett presents to the reader different kinds of the formation of the life and different ways of the American dream's realization. In the case of Ted Turner this is the result of a long and hard work, a focus on success. In the case of Not Sidney's mother success comes in a situation where the character has equal conditions and opportunities in relation to other members of society. In these cases the fulfillment of the American dream does not bring inner satisfaction and does not give the desired result. Portia Poitier dies of a serious illness and does not have time to take advantage of her wealth. Ted Turner, a successful businessman and politician, is disappointed in his immense wealth. He does not know how to spend money; fame does not bring him joy. He tries to learn how to enjoy a life of ordinary people. Finally, fame and wealth does not bring any satisfaction to the main character. The implementation of the American Dream, as getting Oscar as a famous actor, leads him to the inner conflict, to the loss of his own identity. Nowadays a lot of scientists are discussing significant changes in the phenomenon of the American Dream. There is an evolution of the phenomenon and its transformation into *American tragedy*, *American nightmares*. The novel *American Desert* is also devoted to the American Dream and its new interpretation. Appealing to the phenomenon can be traced already in the title of the novel. Through the title the author directs readers to the American continent. America seemed to be a remote desert for first immigrants from Europe. They traveled to a new continent with a dream, hoping to find a new home, to start a new life.

The main character of the novel is Theodore Street. He is a good professor at the university but he does not have enough scientific papers to get another post at the university. Problems at work and in the family lead him to the idea of suicide, but he gets into a terrible car accident and dies horribly - his head is cut. But later being dead with a head hastily sewn to the body by the pathologist, he resurrects in the grave during his own funeral service in the church, takes his children and his wife calmly and goes home, where he tries to lead a normal life. However, he does not

succeed. A lot of journalists disturb Ted's house. A variety of institutions also show interest in Theodore. Firstly he is kidnapped by a religious group whose leader the Great Pope declares that Ted is an antichrist and is going to kill him. Fleeing sectarians, the main character enters a secret science center, which is located in New Mexico, near the town of Roswell. In the underground laboratory he finds scientist who carries out the secret task of the government. He is cloning of Jesus Christ. He is also interested in the incident with Theodore because it is the first case after Jesus' resurrection. In the end the character manages to escape and return to his family. By coincidence he rescues a group of children who were kidnapped by the Great Pope. Thus, Ted, who was a loser in his lifetime, becomes a national hero as a "living corpse". It shows Everett's irony in relation to modern society and media which hunt for sensations.

P. Everett constructs the novel in such a way that in the image of Ted Street the reader can observe three ways of fulfilling the American dream. The first example is Ted's basic life values, which can be expressed by the formula "house-family-car". "Ted was one of those guys who always live in the house opposite, a part of the American way of life. His house is two-stored, in a missionary spirit, a monument to middle-class values. At that time Ted hated the house with all his heart, but at the same time he was terribly proud of himself" [8]. His great desire to conform to these values so deprived him that has led Ted to the thought of suicide. He suffers from lack of personal freedom and freedom of thoughts [9]. Only his resurrection and abduction help him to realize that such life is the worst thing that can be. His life is full of boredom, misunderstanding, and routine. The desire to possess a set of material objects, such as a house, a car, a job made Ted "dead". After his death Ted becomes a caring and decent person, he saves children, treats the family with tenderness, and rediscovers life values for himself. According to Everett, a modern person needs to die and resurrects in order to change himself, and, consequently, to change the mores and customs of society. The second example of the American Dream is fame and popularity throughout the country. But Ted does not fancy his fame because it deconstructs his life. At first, the main character becomes a subject of journalists, religious groups, and government troops' hunt, who use terrible measures, to capture Ted. He is viewed by society as a unique person. But gradually the attitude towards the character is changing. "He suddenly realized that he was indeed a monster that arouses fear of anyone, whether his own daughter, or sectarian, or Dr. Lyons, or guards, everyone" [8].

The last interpretation of the phenomenon of the American Dream is at the very end of the novel. Ted rescues a group of children who were kidnapped by the religious group. In this situation the paradoxical nature of American society is fully manifested. Being a loser during his life, Ted succeeds first as a "living corpse", he and Lucifer's messenger, and the son of the Lord God, and then he becomes a national hero. The writer shows the mechanisms for creating the image of a national hero, where the hero becomes due to various oddities and abnormalities.

4. Summary. In his novels *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* and *American Desert* Percival Everett addresses the phenomenon of the American Dream, one of the most traditional problem of American culture and literature. The writer describes several models of development and achievement of success, wealth and prosperity and he uses largely similar plot twists and techniques [10]. He is interested in the concept of "self-made person". Everett writes about a significant role of the American dream and its transformation into a phenomenon of the American tragedy.

5. Conclusions. Thus, we come to the conclusion that the phenomenon of American Dream has a special interpretation in the novels of Percival Everett. The writer touches on the various components of this phenomenon, but the achievement of the American dream does not bring moral satisfaction for characters and causes their internal conflicts. Deconstructions of the phenomenon, postmodernist irony become the way to understand the main problem and conflicts of the novels. None of these plot structures correspond to the inner state of the main characters and don't allow them to solve the conflicts in themselves. The author's reflection of this phenomenon can be defined as a kind of critical cultural reflection [11] of modern American state and society.

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