

INFLUENCE OF F.M. DOSTOEVSKY ON THE WORK OF D. TARTT

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Abstract

The article examines the influence of the novels of F.M. Dostoevsky on the work of the American writer Donna Tartt. The writer actively uses allusions to Russian literature, reinterpreting their plot and adding new meanings. Perception of F.M. Dostoevsky's works is manifested through narration and intertextuality, which perform several functions in the novel: plot-forming, compositional and ideological.

Keywords: F.M. Dostoevsky, D. Tartt, "The Secret History", "The Goldfinch", "Crime and Punishment", "The Idiot".

Introduction

An American writer Donna Tartt has created three novels that have received recognition among both literary critics and readers. Her work "The Goldfinch" was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 2014. Tartt's works are characterized not only by fascinating plots and memorable figures, but also by soulful psychologism and vividly expressive language. As for the "Russian" theme, it is consisted in all her three novels. Tartt's knowledge of Russian world is surely based on her acquaintance with Russian classics and literary critics. Some critics point to the significant influence of Fyodor Dostoevsky on Tartt's work, especially on such novels as "The Secret History" and "The Goldfinch". For example, "Crime and Punishment" is a precedent text for the novel "The Secret History" since the theme of both works is deliberate murder for philosophical and religious reasons, as well as spiritual punishment befalling the criminal. The plot of her third novel is largely referred to "The Idiot".

«The Secret History» and «Crime and Punishment»

The novel "The Secret History" by D. Tartt was published in 1992 and became the forerunner of a new phenomenon in literature as "dark academia". The writer's debut novel represents a multifaceted literary work, a new interpretation of ideas from ancient tragedies, Nietzsche's concept of the "Übermensch" and Dostoevsky's novels. The novel takes place at Hampden College, where a group of students study ancient Greek language and culture under the guidance of eccentric professor Julian Morrow. Morrow, a charismatic and manipulative professor, becomes the central figure who leads his students into exploring ancient rituals and traditions. Under his influence, students begin to experiment with ancient Dionysian practices, seeking to achieve a state of ecstasy and transcendence. The students' experiments ultimately lead to a tragic event: during a nighttime mystery, they inadvertently kill a local farmer. To cover up their crime, the students, torn by guilt and fear, decide to kill their classmate, Bunny Corcoran, the only one who did not participate in the ritual but guessed what happened.



The novel begins with the reader learning about a committed murder, and then follows how the main character tries to explain his act and cope with its consequences. The author's focus is not on the investigation of the crime, but on the consequences, it has on the characters. The main figure, like the character from "Crime and Punishment", is experiencing a moral crisis. He constantly reflects on murder, his role in it and the possibility of redemption: «<...> it wasn't until I had helped to kill a man that I realized how elusive and complex an act a murder can actually be, and not necessarily attributable to one dramatic motive» [4, p. 214].

The similarities between "The Secret History" and Dostoevsky's novel "Crime and Punishment" are based not only on the general theme, which is reflected in the similarity of genres, but also on the antithetical structure of the plot of "The Secret History", as well as in the use of Dostoevsky's stylistics to express the author's position in novel. In "Crime and Punishment" the main character, a student Raskolnikov, asks himself a question about the moral right to kill: "<...> whether I am a trembling creature or whether I have the right..." [1, p. 425]. However, after committing the murder of a pawnbroker woman, he realizes that the formulation of such a question demonstrates he is not an *Übermensch* who has the right to take people's lives. Raskolnikov's conscience bothers despite logical reasoning. Admitting his guilt becomes the beginning of a long and tragic rethinking for him. And now he personally experiences how murder destroys the killer's soul and violates the most fundamental principles of the universe. The commandment "thou shalt not kill" is at the core of the essence of the universe. The novel ends when Raskolnikov begins his journey along a new road, where the Christian idea of the brotherhood of people and the pricelessness of human life will allow the damaged world to be restored and reborn to a new life.

In Donna Tartt's novel "The Secret History" we also meet a group of students who commit a murder, but their attitude towards their act is completely different from Raskolnikov's. They do not question the moral justification of their actions, but are confident in advance that they have the right to kill. For them, killing the farmer is just a way to get rid of an obstacle to their goal - creating a new world in which they will rule as *Übermensch*. Unlike Raskolnikov, who experiences pangs of conscience and internal conflict after committing a crime, the students from "The Secret History" do not feel any remorse. They believe that their intelligence, education and belonging to the intellectual elite give them the right to overstep generally accepted norms. They are not afraid of punishment because they are sure that no one can catch them. However, their overconfidence ultimately leads to their downfall. The murder of the farmer becomes the beginning of their self-destruction. In the end, the deserving punishment overtook the murderers: Henry commits suicide, Francis tries to commit suicide, Charles becomes a drug addict, Camilla refuses the joys of life and communication with people, and Richard suffer from loneliness. Thus, Donna Tartt shows that murder not only destroys the person who committed it, but also destroys the entire world around him. It also shows that no superiority of intelligence, education or social status can justify murder, and that each person must be responsible for his actions. Consequently, Donna Tartt creates a new type of hero - the collective antihero of Raskolnikov [5, p. 149], which embodies the idea that murder can be justified to achieve a higher goal.

Richard, on whose behalf the story is told, witnesses the grief of the family of a classmate who was killed by their peers. And unexpected feelings are awakened in his soul: «Suddenly, and



for the first time, really, I was struck by the bitter, irrevocable truth of it; the evil of what we had done. It was like running full speed into a brick wall. I let go his collar, feeling completely helpless. I wanted to die» [4, p. 365]. And here, at the moment of the highest tension of history, Tartt quotes Dostoevsky: «It was I killed the old pawnbroker woman and her sister Lizaveta with an axe and robbed them» [1, p. 541]. This is an explicit quote, literally taken from the dialogue between Raskolnikov and Porfiry Petrovich, in which the former confesses what he did. Moreover, not only the hero-narrator recalls about Raskolnikov, but also other heroes of the novel who participated in the crime. Even the mastermind of murder, whose image allows us to draw direct parallels with the hero of the Russian novel, demands from main character, tormented by his conscience, to «stop Dostoevshchina». Unlike Raskolnikov, Tartt's characters do not reveal themselves to the police and the relatives of the murdered man; they prefer to keep secrets. These secrets metaphorically kill them: where Rodion turns to faith and sincerely repents, the company of friends remains silent and falls apart, their connections with the world and with each other gradually crumble.

The desire to go beyond the human with the help of the ancient rituals of Dionysus leads students to the destruction of all opportunities to preserve human communication, both within their small team and outside the micro-community. The attempt of the loner Raskolnikov to decide from his own experience the question of the admissibility of murder, based on his own ideas, turns in the American novel into communication between students and teacher Morrow, who preaches a phenomenon of *Übermensch*. Raskolnikov himself came to his ideas and must resolve them himself, but students are not obliged to agree with Morrow, they have the opportunity to reject his views and save themselves, but they miss this opportunity.

«The Goldfinch» and «The Idiot»

The conflict of the novel is built on the archetypal model of crime and punishment: on the fateful day of the explosion a mysterious dying old man asks Theo to take Fabricius's painting "The Goldfinch" out of the museum, and the boy fulfills this request in a state of shock. For many years he will be tormented by the fear of exposure and the inability to "leave" the painting, which his mother, who died in the explosion, especially loved.

"The Goldfinch" is also interesting in terms of quotes and allusions: the characters reflect on "The Idiot." They remember Prince Myshkin, and the main character, Theo, is a kind of parody of him: he also wants to help the people around him, which leads him to commit one crime after another. One of the chapters of "The Goldfinch" is even called "The Idiot". In this chapter the main character is preparing for his wedding with Kitty, which allows us to draw a parallel with the storyline of Prince Myshkin and Aglaya in Dostoevsky's novel. Researchers compare them using the term "Dostoevsky code": this is a special connection at the semantic and figurative levels.

Boris, Theo's friend, who represents Russian culture and asks questions that inevitably lead to Dostoevsky: «What if — is more complicated than that? What if maybe opposite is true as well? Because, if bad can sometimes come from good actions? where does it ever say, anywhere, that only bad can come from bad actions? Maybe sometimes — the wrong way is the right way? You can take the wrong path and it still comes out where you want to be? Or,



spin it another way, sometimes you can do everything wrong and it still turns out to be right? » [3, p. 828].

The most important element of the narrative consists of fragments of the characters' reflections about Dostoevsky. Here is Boris's remark based on reading "The Idiot," uttered in one of the most difficult moments for Theodore, when after an involuntary murder, he was contemplating to leave his life - "empty, futile, unbearable": «Even the wise and good cannot see the end of all actions. Scary idea! Remember Prince Myshkin in The Idiot? <...> Myshkin ever did was good... unselfish... he treated all persons with understanding and compassion and what resulted from this goodness? Murder! Disaster! <...> What if all your actions and choices, good or bad, make no difference to God? What if the pattern is pre-set? No no – hang on – this is a question worth struggling with. What if our badness and mistakes are the very thing that set our fate and bring us round to good? What if, for some of us, we can't get there any other way? [3, p. 828].

Because of Boris Teo admits his flaw of one-dimensional perception of the world and calls himself an idiot. At the end of the story, the hero, who was already ready to die, accepts its contradictions, refuses terrible conclusions about the meaninglessness of existence.

Theodore Decker was also ready to slide into death and madness, unable to bear his own guilt, but in the end, unlike the hero of *The Idiot*, he implements a cyclical plot - the plot of resurrection and he accepts a life in the most catastrophic scenario.

The scenes in the Amsterdam hotel room, that loop the story, are the most tragic pages of the novel: the hero admits the meaninglessness of human existence, which he himself complicates with crimes. However, Boris, who appears in a moment of desperation, dispels the darkness: he tells how he returned the painting to the authorities calling Theodor as a savior. As a part of this Christmas scene, the hero is reborn: charged with Boris's confidence that the contradictory nature of life is its ontological quality, and bad can lead to good, he begins to work on redemption for his guilt.

On this basis, one can argue with the statement that a pessimistic mood prevails in the novel. The acceptance of the idea of the tragedy of human life corresponds to the Gospel thought about overcoming death. It is no coincidence that the final episode of Theodore's manuscript ends with a monologue, which is meaningfully connected with Boris's idea that fate creates "something lofty" through the experience of despair and death: «That Nature (meaning Death) always wins but that doesn't mean we have to bow and grovel to it. That maybe even if we're not always so glad to be here, it's our task to immerse ourselves anyway: wade straight through it, right through the cesspool, while keeping eyes and hearts open. And in the midst of our dying, as we rise from the organic and sink back ignominiously into the organic, it is a glory and a privilege to love what Death doesn't touch» [3, p. 864].

In D. Tartt's latest novel "The Goldfinch," the presence of Russian literary allusion has not only a characterological function, but also the function of saturating the plot with the deep meanings of "Christological initiation" [6, p. 130].

Conclusion

Thus, the influence of Dostoevsky's work on Donna Tartt's poetics is quite widely represented at the ideological, thematic, plot, compositional, and figurative levels of the literary text. The



writer raises the same topics as the Russian classic: the problem of the frailty of human existence, impunity for criminals, suicide, repentance and retribution. The plots of the novels “Crime and Punishment” and “Secret History” revolve around two murders; the authors focus the reader’s attention not on the investigation, but on the moral and ethical aspect of the crime. In the novel “The Goldfinch” by D. Tartt, one can distinguish entire layers of references to Dostoevsky “The Idiot”. The main character associates himself with Prince Myshkin and considers him as his moral guide. Thus, we can say with confidence that Dostoevsky’s novels stand out clearly in the work of D. Tartt.

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