

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NOVELS BY MARGARET ATWOOD

СПІЛЬНІ ХАРАКТЕРИСТИКИ РОМАНІВ МАРГАРЕТ ЕТВУД

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The article underlines that Canadian literature is not well-researched in Ukraine but it is worth of being analyzed as it can boast of many outstanding writers. The oeuvre of one of them, the most famous and prolific Canadian authoress Margaret Atwood, has been chosen as the material for this article. Four novels by Atwood are discussed in terms of common characteristics that are a trademark of the writer and these include *Lady Oracle*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Blind Assassin*, *The Year of the Flood*. It has been underlined that Atwood writes about women and women in her works present a symbol of all changes in the Canadian society. Such typical peculiarities of Atwood's style are emphasized as the usage of epigraphs, the presence of the method "a story-within-a-story", female characters quoting someone from their past, the depiction of a woman as a tool for conceiving a baby, absence of understanding and warmth between parents and their daughters, the loss of a beloved person, disgusting descriptions of food, flowers as symbols of hope in the novels.

Key words: Canadian literature, Margaret Atwood, writing style, common characteristics of novels, *Lady Oracle*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Blind Assassin*, *The Year of the Flood*.

Стаття підкреслює, що канадська література не є достатньо добре дослідженою в Україні, проте варто продовжувати рухатися в цьому напрямку, оскільки література цієї країни може похвалитися багатьма видатними письменниками. Творчість одного з них, найбільш відомої та плодovитої канадської авторки Маргарет Етвуд, була обрана як матеріал для цієї статті. Чотири романи Етвуд обговорюються задля виділення в них загальних ознак, які є візитною картошкою авторки. Ці романи включають «Леді-оракул», «Розповідь служниці», «Сліпий убивця», «Рік потопу». Підкреслюється, що Етвуд пише про жінок, які є символом змін у канадському суспільстві. Виділяються такі типові риси письма авторки, як використання епіграфів, присутність методу «розповідь у розповіді», жіночі персонажі, які постійно цитують когось зі свого минулого, зображення жінки як інструменту задля зачаття дитини, відсутність взаєморозуміння та теплоти в стосунках між батьками та їх доньками, втрати дорогої людини, огидні описи їжі, квіти як символ надії в романах.

Ключові слова: канадська література, Маргарет Етвуд, стиль письма, загальні риси романів, «Леді-оракул», «Розповідь служниці», «Сліпий убивця», «Рік потопу».

Статья подчеркивает, что канадская литература недостаточно исследована в Украине, однако стоит продолжать двигаться в этом направлении, так как литература этой страны может похвастаться многими выдающимися писателями. Творчество одного из них, наиболее известной и плодovитой канадской писательницы Маргарет Этвуд, было выбрано как материал для данной статьи. Четыре романа Этвуд обсуждаются для выделения в них общих характеристик, которые являются визитной карточкой писательницы. Этот список произведений включает «Леди-оракул», «Рассказ служанки», «Слепой убийца» и «Год потопа». Подчеркивается, что Этвуд пишет о женщинах, и эти женщины являются символом изменений в канадском обществе. Выделяются такие типичные черты письма автора, как использование эпитафий, присутствие метода «рассказ-в-рассказе», женские персонажи, которые постоянно цитируют кого-то из своего прошлого, изображение женщины как инструмента для зачатия ребенка, отсутствие взаимопонимания и теплоты отношений между родителями и их дочерьми, потеря близкого человека, отвратительные описания еды, цветы как символ надежды в романах.

Ключевые слова: канадская литература, Маргарет Этвуд, стиль письма, общие черты романов, «Леди-Оракул», «Рассказ служанки», «Слепой убийца», «Год потопа».

The definition of the problem and its current importance is based on the lack of the research of Canadian Literature in Ukraine even though this country can boast of many talented writers. The period of the oeuvre and inspiration of one of them, the Canadian authoress, poet, literary critic, public figure and feminist Atwood, has lasted for more than 35 years. The writer who created her own and incomparable style, who makes up incredibly evocative plots and perfectly well renders all vivid and potent a person's emotions and worries, holds the leading place on the world literature stage. The authoress initiated a new epoch on this stage, "the epoch of Margaret Atwood".

The researchers that analyzed the material: S. Bielov, M. Vorontsova in her PhD thesis and articles on the originality of the works by Margaret Atwood, O. Zlobina, V. Ivasheva, Ye. Kalmanovskiy, N. Ovcharenko in her numerous researches on Canadian literature and Atwood's oeuvre in particular, L. Romanchuk in the articles on specific features of novels by Atwood.

Margaret Atwood (born in 1939) was born in Ottawa, the daughter of an entomologist therefore ecological catastrophes are acutely highlighted in many of her novels while the writer herself has been an environmental activist for a long time. A long

ago Atwood alongside Alice Munro became a symbol of Canadian literature, her works are published and translated in other languages straightaway after being written. The authoress is extremely prolific, writes fiction and poetry. Atwood's principal work of literary criticism "Survival: a Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature" (1972) is still considered to be an introduction to contemporary literature of her country internationally. In this piece of work Atwood states that Canadian literature should and can find its own way not to be a colonial addition to America or Britain. Atwood has won more than 55 awards. Her novels include "The Edible Woman" (1970), "Lady Oracle" (1976), "Life Before Man" (1980), "The Handmaid's Tale" (1985), "The Robber Bride" (1993), "Alias Grace" (1996), "The Blind Assassin" (2000), "Oryx and Crake" (2003), "The Year of the Flood" (2009), "MaddAddam" (2013), "Hag-Seed" (2016). Fans of Atwood's oeuvre can visit her official site margaretatwood.ca. Atwood often portrays female characters dominated by patriarchy and social oppression. There are numerous critical pieces on her novels and it can take much time to discuss her style but one should just once read Atwood and feel those mysteries, puzzles and riddles where nothing is accidental both in her plot and language. Complex intellectual metaphors nothing but imply opposite meaning. **The part of the problem not solved before that** novels by Margaret Atwood have not been analyzed on the ground of their common features.

Atwood underlines such issues that are becoming more and more currently important nowadays: low and degraded moral values and ideals, something chasing from the past, misunderstanding that ruins people's life, forever lost opportunities, self-analysis, destroying power of scientific and technical progress, ecological catastrophes. Accomplished characters of Atwood often have controversial traits. **The goal of the article** is to show the audience the literary world of Canadian literature using Atwood's style as a bright example of its uniqueness and **the task of our work** is to analyze the most famous novels by this Canadian authoress.

The main body of the article. As any fully-fledged and mature style the writing manner of Margaret Atwood is easily recognized due to characteristic common features of her works that can be called her trademark and these common characteristics present the subject of this research. For the analysis of this signature line of Atwood Lady Oracle (1976), The Handmaid's Tale (1985), The Blind Assassin (2000) and The Year of the Flood (2009) have been chosen.

One can hardly overlook that almost each of the above-mentioned stories begins with an epigraph

and sometimes with several of them. Usually epigraphs are used so that an author can use someone's thought in a different context or sense. So on the very first page of her novels Atwood tries to give a kind of prompt to her readers what a story is going to be about and to convey her own attitude to the work. The Handmaid's Tale begins with the extract from the Book of Genesis, in such a way a parallel is drawn between the biblical character and the main heroine of the novel Offred who lives in the Republic of Gilead, a new-future totalitarian state. Almost fascist regime and everlasting nuclear war are elements of the atrocious plot setting. Women are used only for conceiving a baby, thus they are thoroughly checked and healthy ones are sent to the highly ranked commanders as servants, others – to the concentration camps. Just one of women can get pregnant with a child but what's more no one is sure that this child is born healthy. In this gruesome society Atwood uses biblical Rachel to show what people used to have and what is going on now, what the finish of their life is. In The Blind Assassin the authoress also uses a couple of epigraphs. The authorship of the first one belongs to the Polish writer and journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski. More relevant epigraph can hardly be ever found, both it and the novel tell a reader about children being blinded, in the epigraph by a merciless ruler and in the story by weaving carpets.

The Year of the Flood also starts with an epigraph, but now it belongs to Atwood herself as she presents one of her own short poems. An ecological collapse depicted in the novel takes an important part in the writer's life and oeuvre since Atwood is an entomologist's daughter, with her father she travelled much to the Canadian north and later it influenced her mesmerizing plots. An irresponsible attitude to the nature infuriates the writer and The Year of the Flood is her personal disaster signal. Atwood like no one else tries to look into mysterious tomorrow thus the imaginary worlds of The Handmaid's Tale and The Year of the Flood depict a new universe with extremely vivid details. These novels open in front of us the world where genetic engineering reigns and where nothing is natural and real any more. According to Margaret herself the God's Gardeners are not copied from any existing religion but still this sect uses some already known beliefs.

It is absolutely impossible not to see that three of four Atwood's novels have a story within a story. In Lady Oracle this is the life story told by the main character herself and what's more a love story that is being written by this lady so that she can earn something for her living. In The Blind Assassin the very first plot line is a story from the perspective of Iris, elder Chase sister, and a fantastic story about

the imaginary world of Sakiel Norn which is told by an unknown lover at secret dates. In *The Year of the Flood* the perspective also belongs to two girls, Toby and Ren, each of whom tells the story about *The Waterless Flood*, human species-ending disaster, in their own way and according to personal memories. Atwood is never satisfied with too simple plots and devices, even though such a “story-within-a-story” method often really confuses the audience it is still worth of being read and followed in order to feel an unforgettable tension and goose-bumps worries throughout a novel.

In Atwood's oeuvre a woman is a symbol of all changes in the Canadian society. Atwood's female characters' life is full of hardships, misunderstanding, pain, tears and farewell. The writer uses an interesting way to emphasize her characters' loneliness – her women always quote or remember someone, from their mother or friend to the head of a religious group, that is to say someone who was in their life but disappeared later. In *Lady Oracle* the protagonist endlessly remembers her aunt because she was the only one who sincerely cared about Joan therefore her aunt's death is one of the most lamentable events for Joan Foster. Offred from *The Handmaid's Tale* quotes someone from her past as well but it is difficult to realize whether this figure was positive or not. The protagonist spent some curtain time at *The Red School* where instructors imposed on all girls the thought that they are only a tool for conceiving a baby, “the walking womb”, and where they were trained to serve as handmaids at Commanders'. At this school female trainers were called Aunts and in such a way Margaret Atwood shows the contrast between warm relations of Joan Foster and her aunt and Offred's silent obedience to Aunt Lydia who is a controversial character in *The Handmaid's Tale* but still she leaves some potent trail in Offred's life because when the latter lost all her family Aunt Lydia remained the only one who could be talked to during the new complicated life period.

The theme of the usage of women as an instrument for childbirth is found in *The Year of the Flood* where Toby having lost her parents tries to earn money selling her gametes. It is strongly felt that Atwood doesn't support such a humiliating treatment of women in the society of both today and tomorrow where a girl can do for her living only if she is willing to sell either her body or parts of it. It is worth of mentioning that Toby stops selling her gametes since she has got infected. Medicine as a threat to a woman's life is present in *Lady Oracle* where Joan is wounded with an arrow and gets infected not being provided with the first aid in a proper way.

In *The Blind Assassin* Iris remembers Reenie all the time, the woman who worked as their cook and replaced the girls' mother. In almost all Atwood's characters' life there was someone they really need and miss now, someone they lost under the conditions not subject to any changes. Loneliness, losses and desperation wind like a red thread throughout all the novels by Atwood.

One should attract a reader's attention to the relationship between main characters and their parents. It is rather typical of the authoress' writing style to depict parents absolutely busy and almost indifferent to their daughters' life. Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle* constantly argues with her mother because of her own extra weight. There was no place for tenderness and pet names at their house and when Joan's mother tries to attack her with a knife the main character leaves. The same coldness characterizes Joan's relations with her father who never took part in her upbringing. After his wife's death sadly enough he is no able to become closer to his daughter. Joan's mother continues to chase them even being already dead. *The Blind Assassin* is based on the similar element of misunderstanding and aloofness between the dearest people. Iris and Laura could never boast of warm feelings towards them from their mother and when she died it didn't save the relationship with their father who they were frightened of. Norval Chase came back from the war being maimed and wasn't capable of controlling his fits of fury, and little did he know how to behave with his daughters.

Men seldom support female protagonists in the stories by Atwood and some love story with a happy end is never characteristic of Margaret's oeuvre. In *Lady Oracle* Joan's husband is not willing to be glad for her when finally she published her own title; in *The Handmaid's Tale* Offred loses all her family when a new political regime comes, moreover she doesn't know whether Nick, her new lover, managed to get rescued having helped her to escape from the Commander. In *The Blind Assassin* Iris gets married to Richard, the man she never loved, to save her father's business from going broke.

Atwood bravely ruins a widely-spread stereotype that a woman must spend much time cooking in the kitchen. Her characters are fairly creative and don't want to be involved in the household. Joan in *Lady Oracle* can't cook and doesn't want to know how to do it. In *The Blind Assassin* food and meals evoke nothing but negative emotions, nothing is depicted tasty or at least edible, cream is compared to shaving cream and cakes – to polystyrene.

Despite gloomy descriptions almost all Atwood's novels have one vivid element – flowers, a cry for beauty in the atrocious reality. The first thing Offred

notices when she arrives at the Commander's is his wife's garden and it makes her sadly remember those days when she used to have a garden of her own. A lot of bright flowers are present in the wistful memories of Iris in *The Blind Assassin* and in the world of genetic engineering in *The Year of the Flood* as a symbol of hope for better life and happiness.

Conclusion. There is too much pain in Margaret Atwood's novels, after all the complicated history of her native land couldn't help affecting her writing style. Short sentences, perfectly appropriate stylistic devices, mesmerizing plots that are close to everyone help the writer develop and show the most difficult and controversial aspects of the Canadian society. There are numerous critical pieces on her novels and

it can take much time to discuss her style but one should just once read Atwood and feel those mysteries, puzzles and riddles where nothing is accidental both in her plot and language.

The prospect of the further research. As Canadian literature still presents many unanalyzed gaps to Ukrainian readers and researchers it is worth of continuing to move in the same direction and explore works by Canadian writers, since one can always find in it something absolutely new but potent for the comparison with literature traditions of other countries. Margaret Atwood is extremely prolific and since she publishes a new novel quite often a literature researcher can be the very first one in Ukraine to analyze her works.

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