

## Character System Transformation in British Historiographic Metafiction

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**Abstract.** The article explores transformation of character system in the textual space of British historiographic metafiction at the turn of the millennium. These changes were influenced by postmodern ideas in historic writing. Protagonists are representatives of silenced groups of society. Functions and portraying of real characters are aimed at destroying the traditional knowledge and canonic stereotypes in history. In the depiction of royal characters the accents are moved from “state” body to private and individual.

**Keywords:** *character, protagonist, historic novel, historiographic metafiction.*

The system of characters in historiographic metafiction has been studied by the following scientists as L. Hutcheon, S. Onega, D. Shiller, S. Menton and others. The aim of the article is to define the general changes in portraying and functioning of characters that are deployed by the writers who work in the genre of pseudohistoric novel. The subject incorporates historiographic novels of British authors at the end of XX – beginning of XXI century, mainly presented by P. Ackroyd, A. S. Byatt, J. Winterson, R. Tremain and J. Barnes.

Important part of ideological space in postmodern historic texts is their polemic dialogue with canonic metanarratives of the past. It is obvious that such discussion is easily interwoven into any fictional world directly through the characters – their life and professional interests. Topographical and psychological centers of the narration are around them. But even for the usual “unqualified” reader it is easy to notice those changes in the system of characters in postmodern historic novels. The subject of the article does not include the wide range of mass literature about alternative history, when a contemporary hero armed with modern knowledge and skills appears in past and changes the history flow. There are many real historic characters in such books and their function is direct and clear – to emphasize the possibility of the unreal situation. This article analyzes the novels created in another genre – historiographic metafiction or postmodern historic novels (L. Hutcheon separates them as different types but, nevertheless, on the character system level they are quite close). Books of this type turn to history but at the same time are deeply self-reflexive both in literature and history, intertextual, and deconstructive for any truth and knowledge. For modern readers these novels are the transformed variant of classic historic novels but they mark a new feature – the characters are completely unusual and far from standard.

The choice of characters and historic time for a novel is important for any writer but in postmodern literature it seems to have a slight nuance connected with oddness, challenge, show and, perhaps, even scandal. In European historic novel writing there has always been a certain set of real personages who were known from popular encyclopedias and have formed a certain canon for this genre. They are royal families’ representatives and nobles, famous military people, religious figures, scientists and cultural creators (painters, poets, writers, musicians etc). Novelists have a serious documentary foundation to lean on while writing about these characters.

Real characters of the past that are present in novels form the bridge between reality and fictionality, they are

necessary for writers to convince readers in the reality of the narration. G. Lucacs thinks that a classical historical novel reflected the historical process, presenting the microcosm with mainly an extradiegetic narrator... History was a line of crises where the greatness of a person caused by historical necessity was emphasized [7, p. 47, 53, 58]. So the novel was a kind of a method to introduce the readers to their past. Except for the informative goals, such text served as romantic framing and decorations for entertaining adventures and love.

The transformation of a protagonist and the character system from the canonic into postmodern has been partially influenced by the changes in historical science in the XX century. They call it “the game of scales”. The passive historian of usual historic modus used to describe the important political issues and the struggles between empires. As contradictory to it, the doctrine of “macro-history” appeared, with its universal, all-embracing historic writing. Another scientific school of “microhistory” suggested building history writing from “below”, from the local historical figures to global events. Active position of a historian is defined by the mobility of historic vision – while choosing the scale, history can function as a microscope or as a telescope. Then a historian can see the things differently, not bigger or smaller, but quite different things, people and events. As a result of this “scale game”, the very method of historic writing has transformed. It used to have the form of a report about events, but postmodern texts invite readers to construct the object of the research. The dialogue between authors and readers appears in the process of writing. Such change in the history vision and writing moves new historic actors at the foreground what reflected in historic novels of the late XX century.

The author’s text or the document from the past is the open space for cultural information connected to a certain time discourse. Such document is the part of the following line “author’s intention – process of writing – author’s text – reader’s interpretation”. While reading, readers create their own text and reality, based on their knowledge. Therefore many historians regard the records as unreliable. Marc Bloch acknowledges that “...the first filter between us and past are the records. That’s true but very often these records filter out those things which we need” [1, p. 82].

Russian scholar Yuri Lotman is convinced that “... historian’s destiny is to work with texts. A text has always existed between an event “as it happened” and a historian. This text has been created by someone and the events are presented in a ciphered variant. First historian’s role is the role of a decoder” [2, p. 301-302]. Any fact needs

deciphering, reconstruction and interpretation. A writer starts at the point where a historian finishes, a historian moves towards the facts, but a writer moves onwards the facts. Novelists in romantic historic writing kept accents on strong characters, big contradictions and serious feelings. As W. Scott said in his "Introduction" to "Ivanhoe": "The period of the narrative adopted was the reign of Richard I, not only as abounding with characters whose very names were sure to attract general attention, but as affording the striking contrast betwixt the Saxons... and the Normans..." [10]. Postmodern writers avoid such tendency. R. Tremain in her novel "Music and Silence" describes a year in the life of the Danish king Christian IV. But she does not tell readers about his military campaigns or political matters. The narration is concentrated on the difficult year which was forecasted by the royal astrologer.

Russian scientist B. Reyizov regards a real historic person as an obstacle: "Chained to his real documents, such character is not flexible enough for a novel... As a rule, the leading role in development of a plot is given to political events. The private life of a fictional character is happening in the shade of grandiose social catastrophes..." [3, p. 19, 21]. When postmodernist writers depict their characters they move accents from public to private. Ontologic status of a character in historiographic metafiction proved the expansion of the canon in a traditional historic novel in which real historic characters interact with fictional ones. But in postmodern variant intertextual characters appear: in Winterson's novel "Sexing the cherry" Jordan is fictional, kings and gardeners are real and Dog-woman is intertextual (if to make parallel to Rabelais's giants).

Next factor to influence the changes in the system of characters is connected with ideological basis of the novels. Whose history is chosen by authors? The philosopher of history W. Benjamin answers without hesitation – the winner's history [4, p. 256]. "What is official history the history of? Of the winners, says Stanley Elkin; of the male sex, says Grass" [8, p. 90]. Winners like to create and write the history which is convenient for them. That explains why certain groups of society were excluded from official history. Theorist of postmodernism M. Roemer considers the phenomenon of leadership or victory: "We will not follow someone – be he a general or a teacher – who fails to empower us... The successful leader is often a happy warrior, who allays our fears... and inspires us with the confidence..." [9, p. 166].

As a rule, a protagonist in historiographic metafiction can be any type of society but not the typical representative: eccentric, peripheral historic figure, marginal. We read about a vulgar veterinarian in "Restoration", a filthy Dog-woman in "Sexing the Cherry", a monster in "Grendel", a woodworm in "A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters" or a loser in private and military sense in "The Crossing of Herald Montjoy". Even real historic characters get a different depiction: kings are doing exercises during the audience in Tremain's "Restoration" and "The Crossing of Herald Montjoy", Noah is not the perfect hero in Barnes's "A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters", Ackroyd's Queen Elizabeth I has got a spider on her head instead the crown, Carl Marx appears as not a founder of a revisionist project but a suspicious

and poor foreigner in "Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem". As B. McHale puts it, "...highly "charged" figures are often preferred, figures rich in associations for most readers, able to excite strong reactions, whether of attraction or repulsion..." [8, p. 85]. G. Lucacs thinks the-re is admiration with great people of past as moving forces of historic process in Scott's novels [7, p. 47] but modern scholars deny this feature in historiographic metafiction.

B. McHale develops a theory of "realemes" in historic novels. They constitute a set of real objects, persons and their characteristics pertaining to a certain historical era. They can appear in the text unless they contradict the official version. The "dark areas" constraint helps to fill in the free spaces. In traditional historic novels "dark areas" are normally the times and the places where the real-world and the fictional characters interact or when the writer can introspect the inner world of any character. Today authors move marginalized characters to "dark areas", so these areas are developed to bigger sizes – earlier they occupied several pages in a novel, postmodernism gave them full text length [8, p. 86-87].

The change in canonic system of characters in many cases begins with the title. The utmost leader in British historiographic metafiction is Peter Ackroyd. Most novels of this prolific writer carry the name of a real person on the title. "Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem" is ambiguous from the very cover, where the name of the best comic in late Victorian music-halls is placed together with a magic creature. We expect Dan Leno to be a protagonist but our expectations are deceived. He has got an important role in the narration and life of a protagonist, Elizabeth Cree, he helps to solve the detective puzzle, but he does not get the leading role in the plot. Ackroyd's another novel, "The house of Doctor Dee" tells us about the life of an Elizabethan alchemist and astrologer. This real person has become quite popular in recent years in British culture: he appears in several books and films. In this novel he is one of two narrators, the one who tells the story of the past. Both Dan Leno and Doctor Dee were figures who represented "dark area" people; their stories have never been of much value for historians and writers. But at the same time they were the people who ruined the usual perception of their professions – Dan Leno had the honour to present his show to the King and Doctor Dee was a royal prophet.

For more than twenty years Ackroyd has been suggesting readers new interesting visions of history, literature and cultural geography. In his books London, Venice or the Thames become the main characters. In much of his fictional writing he speculates upon and plays with facts from literature history. Oscar Wilde writes a diary ("The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde"), Milton travels to America ("Milton in America"), Chatterton is supposed to fake his death ("Chatterton"). The author chooses the figures whose names carry certain cultural and historical importance. Having seen such names on a title, readers undoubtedly build them into their own system of stereotypes and knowledge: Oscar Wilde, the gorgeous star of London literature world, every school pupil has read or heard about his Dorian Grey, as well as about Milton's Paradise poem, and many English people know the sad story of the seventeen-year old poet who died mysteriously. So the intrigue starts from the title. The

same scheme works for “The Case of Victor Frankenstein” – the legendary literature character from fictional realm moves into intertextual one.

The “Fall of Troy” and “Clerkenwell Tales” are typical novels when the geographic names provoke strong associations with history or literature and so put the readers into special frames of their expectations. The characters of the novel about Troy – Obermann and his wife, Sophia – are fictional, but their depiction immediately bring to life the real story of Heinrich Schliemann. “Clerkenwell tales” is the novel deeply allusionistic. Ackroyd mingles in it Chaucer’s masterpiece with his “The House of Doctor Dee”, where Clerkenwell is main geographic space. The system of characters in this novel is very intricate, the personages, created by Chaucer and developed by Ackroyd, interact with the real historical people.

A. Byatt fills the fictional world of her Booker-winning “Possession” with the real emes of Victorian epoch, references to real records, names of historical figures. The poem of fictional Cristabel LaMotte was highly praised by real critic and poet Swinburne. A private letter gains the status of a document that gives the beginning to all events in the novel. Referring in it to Crabb Robinson, the author gives her novel a real touch: “I ...was the more fortunate that dear Crabb managed to entice you to his breakfast table. How much I owe to his continuing good health, that he should feel able and eager, at eighty-two years, to entertain poets and undergraduates and mathematical professors and political thinkers” [5, p. 5]. Nevertheless, the real persons in the novel are minor, peripheral and never get the status of a character. As the base of her another retro-Victorian novella, “The Conjugal Angel”, A. Byatt chose a real story. But the reader, who got lost in the net of a séance, has no clue about the real facts until the heroine’s maiden name is mentioned – Emily Tennyson, the sister of the famous Victorian poet. Three séances incorporate the sad narration of her love to Arthur Hallam, his early death, her nine-year solitude and then marriage to a marine captain, what was strongly blamed by society and her brother. These biographical facts, as well as many real characters, lose their reality in the text because many real figures are portrayed in a fantastic way and Victorian poems took over the status of documents.

In Winterson’s novel “Sexing the Cherry” there are several real characters. The most famous of them are kings Charles I and Charles II. Although a lot of real facts in the text are connected with them, the author speculates on a story, forgotten three centuries ago, but still important. It is the story of gardening and the Tradescant family. They both, the father and the son were travelers, explorers and royal gardeners. The botanists left the wide collections of rarities and made a lot of experiments in gardening. The key role in the narration is given to an ekphrasis of a painting: “Painting 3: ‘Mr. Rose, the Royal Gardener, presents the pineapple to Charles the Second. The artist is unknown, probably Dutch. Mr. Rose in the wig is down on one knee and the king in his wig is accepting the pineapple. Colours of fruit and flowers make up the painting” [11, p. 113]. This ekphrasis is given almost at the end of the book but now the reader as a result of mental operation can connect all the parts

scattered in the book. The text of the ekphrasis – four short and simple lines. Obviously J. Winterson did not use it in its direct function – as a pause in the narration. She wanted to draw reader’s attention to the events which preceded the painting. That is because Mr. Rose was not the person who brought this pineapple to England. There was a person behind the painting. It is Jordan, the protagonist of the novel, a fictional figure and Tradescant’s apprentice.

Winterson’s “Passion” is a mixture of historiographic metafiction and fantasy writing. Neither its form nor its characters conform to conventional notions of historical texts. Real character is Napoleon, whose story is traditionally depicted as the story of success, with respect, even in moments of disaster. Winterson suggests a different version. The story of the emperor is told by two representatives of traditionally inarticulate classes and equally silenced groups – a cook (the male and historical part) and a bisexual whore (the female and fantastic part). “Winterson chooses Henri, the male hero, to undermine patriarchy and its claims to universal history. He... is capable of showing in practice that history is but a narrative of past events that is subject to political and ideological manipulation” [6, p. 9]. He follows his emperor from the battles of glory, when Napoleon was his idol, to failures in Russia, where he realizes he is a maniac. And the last feeling is disillusionment and emotional exhaustion.

Historiographic metanovels of J. Barnes do not begin with the first lines of the text, but with the title. “Flaubert’s Parrot” puzzles readers immediately – the name of the famous writer and an exotic bird together on the cover. Did Flaubert really have a parrot? The text is saturated with biographical facts from the life of the novelist, concerning even the domestic everyday details, he himself does not appear as a character. The protagonist, Braithwaite, in a long quest finds not a writer, but a person. It seems sometimes while reading that the life of the real person is prepared as a scientist or a doctor prepares a frog for experimental purposes. And this feeling grows when we find out about the profession of the narrator – he is a general practitioner. And he tells a story of his marriage: Ellen, his wife had several affairs when they were together. Braithwaite comes to resemble Charles Bovary – he becomes not a fictional, but an intertextual character.

In his recent novel “Arthur and George” the same features in system of characters appear: names in the title, very English and very popular. We follow the story of two boys in late Victorian decorations and gradually realize that Arthur is not a fictional protagonist. He is a creator of Sherlock Holmes and his famous deductive method. Barnes tells us the story of Arthur’s puzzle – he tries to solve the detective mystery connected with George Edalji. The story is real and fairy well known. But Conan Doyle’s confusion is moral – being married to sick Touie, he has been in love with another woman. When his wife died, he is free to marry that lady but feels depressed and unable to sort out this matter. So in Barnes’s novels a real character is not a figure from records and memoirs, it is a person with a private life, feelings and disasters.

This idea brings us to the analysis of royal images in historiographic metafiction. The argument is that the

traditional way of portraying them has been changed. In history and literature royal body has long been “state” body, which did not belong to the person him/herself. In postmodern novels official cultural and literary complex has been ruined, royal characters are deployed in non-standard situations and main accents were moved from the “state” body to the private one. R. Tremain in her novels about Merivel, a veterinarian and a courtier of Charles II, could not avoid king’s presence. The young and jolly court of the Restoration was a projection of the king on his lords and ladies. That is why Charles II is portrayed mainly not during audiences or against political events. Merivel narrates about the king who plays tennis or makes love – “state” royal body gains the features of private and individual.

If to draw parallels with W. Scott’s novel “Peveril of the Peak”, which concentrates on the same historical period, the difference in depicting the king is quite visible. The father of the historical novel shows Charles II as he chases the main heroine for clear sexual purpose, but the author keeps the masterful body as decorative, static and official. It is still the “state” body. R. Tremain depicts more human corporality – the king does exercises and can perspire or plunge passionately in a love affair.

In Ackroyd’s novel “The House of Doctor Dee” Queen Elizabeth appears in a single chapter and it is far from real

situation. In the culture of English Renaissance queen’s image took important position, a kind of reginocentric religion has been formed. Elizabeth’s poor health, absence of a child, a thin body put her in the row with medieval lonely nuns. Their body did not belong to them, they were given to the God. Elizabeth’s body in culture was a “state” body. In the novel the Queen is portrayed in gorgeous attire with many jewels but with a spider on the head instead of the crown. In this fantastic dream she cuts Doctor Dee’s body – “state” corporeality gains fantastic features and accentuates royal power.

This article is aimed at proving that the system of characters in historiographic metafiction has undergone certain changes. When authors choose characters, they choose the marginalized and silenced groups for the fictional ones. If the characters have real prototypes, their names are far from politics or military sphere, but they are well-known and able to heat the intrigue. The names of real figures are in the title and they are used to ruin readers’ expectations which arouse when they find a familiar name on the book cover. In many novels fictional and real characters interact with intertextual. In portraying the royal figures main accent is done on moving from the “state” to the private body. Main reason for choosing the real figures for protagonists is to rewrite history and ruin the stereotyped knowledge.

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#### Трансформация системы персонажей в британской историографической метапрозе

**Н. А. Сизоненко**

**Аннотация.** В статье исследуются изменения, которые произошли в системе персонажей в британской историографической метапрозе по сравнению с классическим историческим романом. Трансформации обусловлены постмодернистскими веяниями в исторической науке. На роль протагониста зачастую выбираются представители маргинализованных слоев общества. Функционирование реальных персонажей направленно на разрушение традиционного знания. В изображении королевских особ наблюдается сдвиг от «государственного» тела к частному и индивидуальному.

**Ключевые слова:** персонаж, историографическая метапроза, интертекстуальный, постмодернистский исторический роман.