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Oldie's "Sherlock Holmes vs. The Martians": Influence of Western Literature and Cinema

"Sherlock Holmes vs. Los Marcianos" de Oldie: influencia de la literatura occidental y el cine

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary literature is heavily influenced by postmodern consciousness, a variety of art forms, including cinematography, the internet and treating literature as a source of income. For this reason, new genres combining all previously mentioned elements are emerging. The most prominent examples are *mashup* and *crossover*. A striking example of the combination of *mashup* and *crossover* fiction is a novel by russian-speaking Ukrainian writers Henry Lion Oldie "Sherlock Holmes vs. the Martians" (2014). The title of the novel itself suggests that the main characters come from books by Arthur Conan Doyle and Herbert Wells.

Keywords: Cinema, contemporary literature, Henry Lion Oldie, postmodernism.

RESUMEN

La literatura contemporánea está fuertemente influenciada por la conciencia posmoderna, una variedad de formas de arte, incluida la cinematografía, internet y el tratamiento de la literatura como una fuente de ingresos. Por esta razón, están surgiendo nuevos géneros que combinan todos los elementos mencionados anteriormente. Los ejemplos más destacados son *mashup* y *crossover*. Un ejemplo sorprendente de la combinación de *mashup* y *crossover* es una novela de los escritores ucranianos de habla rusa Henry Lion Oldie "Sherlock Holmes Vs. los marcianos" (2014). El título de la novela en sí sugiere que los personajes principales provienen de libros de Arthur Conan Doyle y Herbert Wells.

Palabras clave: Cine, Henry Lion Oldie, literatura contemporánea, posmodernismo.

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INTRODUCTION

"H. L. Oldie" is a penname of Russian-speaking Ukrainian writers Dmitry Gromov and Oleg Ladyzhensky, who create both fantasy and science fiction novels. From the pen, or rather keyboard, of Oldie came *Order of St. Bestseller* (2002), *Messiah Clears the Disk* (1996) and other novels as well as short story cycles *A Hero of Your Time* (1991), *The Pentacle* (2004-2010), etc. Since 1990s the co-authors have published more than 100 books including reprinted editions. H. L. Oldie obtained numerous literary awards along with a title of The Best European Science Fiction and Fantasy Writer. Their outstanding creative work occupied the top positions in sales of not only fantasy and science fiction, but also fiction in general and the authors themselves were named in the top ten most famous and popular science-fiction writers of Russia and Ukraine (Galimullin et al.: 2016, pp.238-246; Vafina et al.: 2017).

H. L. Oldie define their own style as "philosophical action", which, in their opinion, is the embodiment of "combination of incompatible" (Doyle:2013; Safaryan: 2018). Researchers, in their turn, describe their writing as "postmodern mythological realism" (Lodge: 2015; Andreyeva: 2018), or «connecting elements of both mass and elite literature» (Krishnaswamy:1995; Chait:2000, pp.17-28; Lipovetsky:2011, pp.175-193; Cherny: 2017; Suslov&Bodin: 2019). It seems to be justified by the richness of Oldie's universe, which includes a plenty of literary and cultural references. This is manifested in such works as *Odysseus Son of Laertes* (2000), *A Hero Must Be Alone* (2005), a peculiar interpretation of *The Twelve Labours of Heracles*, *The Grandson of Perseus* (2011). Here allusions to ancient Greek, biblical and Hindu myths as well as to Homer's famous stories allow us to speak about intertextuality of Oldie's works.

METHODOLOGY

Their novel *Sherlock Holmes vs. the Martians* was published in 2014. Today we can see frequent influence of one author to another and this situation can change our reception of the text (Khaybullina et al.: 2016, pp.3100-3106; Afanasev et al.: 2017; Vafina: 2017, pp.423-425). However, these novels' settings often remain within the framework of Oldie's imaginary world, while *Sherlock Holmes vs the Martians* is absolutely unique and different in style and plot. The novel's action takes place in the near future, when a special hyperactive reading service appears. The virtual helmet called "Verbalife" allows the reader to submerge in the book without actually reading it. The only fault of this service is that the programme sometimes starts to write itself based on the existing stories and images using associative links (Smith: 1997).

Thus, Nyura, who without any suspicion started to read *The War of the Worlds*, appears to be reading a different story. We argue that this episode stretches the boundaries of a traditional mash-up novel, where inclusion of alien elements in the plot is not usually justified in any way. For example, the appearance of zombies in the 19th century England in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is an initially predetermined situation and is not and does not require any additional comments.

The novel's composition is a "story within a story", where the frame plot, called "intermedia", represents a certain imitation of metafiction: Verbalife employees Antonina Glebovna Nedereza and Vladimir Chizhik come to Nyura's home in order to fix the fault in the service, i.e. either to get the plot back on track or to finish the new version of the story. The final result eventually serves as the main narrative line of the book.

RESULTS

The main component of the novel is the writers' play. They play not only with texts but with the readers too, inviting them to join the guessing game. This convention clearly illustrates the novel's adherence to postmodernism.

It might be concluded that the whole novel is built on this kind of a dialectic game between the authors and the readers. Firstly, the main storyline is a synthesis of the well-known *The War of the Worlds* by H. Wells and characters of the Sherlock Holmes canon embedded in the narrative. These two works are connected through the image of a nameless young man from H. Wells's novel, who «looked down from the church spire and saw the houses of the village rising like ghosts out of its inky nothingness.» (Wells: 1898). If Wells considered him a minor character, Oldie gave him the name: Thomas Radcliffe. He is the person witnessing the Martians, this is his horror that was described by the authors: «In a daze, Tom looked down from the church spire and saw the hellish flames destroying Moldon and approaching his shack. It is impossible to say that Radcliffe was known as a zealous parishioner, but now he was praying with all the sincerity he was capable of: "Lord, save and keep me! Do not let these monsters destroy the Moldon! Stop and punish them! Don't let them burn my house!" To Tom's credit, it should be noted that he asked the Lord to save his house as a last resort, much more he was concerned about his hometown. Tom did not remember about himself at all.» (Oldie: 2016). Henceforth, Tom becomes one of the primary characters and acts as an assistant to Dr. Watson and Sherlock Holmes.

The style and form of the story also suggest the connection with Conan Doyle's stories, since most of the parts are written in the form of Dr. Watson's notes; the proper style, attention to the details, the desire for accuracy and objectivity are preserved. The image of Dr. Watson has undergone certain changes: he has become more rational and quick-witted, even ironic. For example, he uses Holmes's catchphrase against him: «Elementary, my dear Holmes! I'm not only a doctor, but also your biographer!» (Oldie: 2016).

It should be noted as well that the setting of the novel is transferred to another place: the main events unfold in the small town of Moldon, Essex, which was only once mentioned by Wells: «Along the blue coast across the Blackwater my brother could make out dimly a dense swarm of boats chaffering with the people on the beach, a swarm which also extended up the Blackwater almost to Maldon.» (Wells: 1898).

Overall the appearance of the Oldie's Martians is also almost identical to the original one, they are huge, with long tentacles. The main weapon of the aliens in both writers' is the "Heat-Ray", but in contrast to Wells, Oldie does not focus on the fact that the Martians are terrible and evil creatures. Oldie's aliens are represented in the novel more humane to a certain extent, even equipped with social skills. So the Martians do not shoot at people who control the "tripod", because they consider them insiders: «I was sure that the Martian could destroy us by shredding the battle-house – or all three legs at once. Why didn't he do it?! There was no time to reflect on the strangeness of the enemies. We were threatened with falling from the height of a hundred feet - or the heat ray: having lost manoeuvrability, we became an easy target.» (Oldie: 2016). Based on these quotations, it seems that aliens are not foreign to the feelings of friendship.

Secondly, they return to Moldon, at the risk of being annihilated, in order to retaliate for their departed victims. And in contrast to Wells, who depicted the Martians so cruel and egoistic, that they destroyed their own planet, Oldie's "monsters" seem rather paltry and clumsy creatures, who hardly know, what they want to achieve with their attacks.

Interestingly, except for this, there are allusions to fairly well-known works of popular culture: Godric's-Hollow (or Godric's hollow-location) from J. K. Rowling's books about Harry Potter, the character's phrase: «Let me introduce myself: Holmes, Sherlock Holmes» (referring to the phrase from the famous James Bond films—«Bond, James Bond») (Oldie: 2016), Adele Pfeiffer (Adele Blanc-Sec from Jacques Tardi's comic series), Antonina's surname Nedereza (referring to the famous Russian fairy tale about Nibbly-Quibbly the Goat), Jennie's uncle and aunt were called Balthasar and Melchiora, that is a reference to the biblical story, etc.

However, some allusions tend to have dubious nature. So, in the chapter "Bouquet of wilted flowers" we read about Dr. Watson's presence at the meeting with the Inventor from *The Time Machine*. Interesting facts arise comparing this episode in both works of literature. Thus, at Oldie it is depicted as: «Bronze, Holmes. Black-wood, professor. Ivory, gentlemen. And Tom, that is not all. Also quartz, or other crystals unknown to me, similar to quartz. The machine had time to be in the hardships: its parts were disfigured, covered with

disgusting spots. The bands of metal curved, as if from a powerful pressure, shreds of grass and moss were hanging on them.» (Oldie: 2016). And Wells does it as follows: «There in the flickering light of the lamp was the machine sure enough, squat, ugly, and askew; a thing of brass, ebony, ivory, and translucent glimmering quartz.» (Wells: 2005).

Thus, when a “mysterious unit” unexpectedly appears in the chapter “Pliers and a Screwdriver”, the reader expects to see exactly the time machine, however, when Amelia Fitzgibbon and Edward Turnbull jump out of the device, the reader who is fond of science fiction immediately recognises the reference to a completely different novel *The Space Machine* by the British science fiction writer Christopher Priest. This example leads us to the next level of cultural codes referred to as fantastic. This includes the name of the interactive reading apparatus (“Verbalife” - from Ant Skalandis’s novel *Ask the Ashwood*), the introduction of Abraham Van Helsing, the character from the famous Bram Stoker’s novel *Dracula*.

DISCUSSION

The authors also allude to their own writing. For example, Vladimir Chizhik’s favourite word game - distorting words (Nonsense-Shnonsense, Volume-Shmolume, Knights-Shknights) refers us to the name of the disease featured in the title of Oldie’s book “Shmagic” explained as “false mana syndrome”. The later detail can also be projected on the malfunction of “Verbalife” device.

The following, more complex code level is playing with a more erudite and knowledgeable reader who is aware of less common information. For example, the tripod of the Martians, captured by Holmes and his friends, is named “Warrior” in honour of the British military machine, which was used in the wars in the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan and Iraq and still remains the only infantry fighting vehicle of the British army. Moreover, the picture that Mr. Pfeiffer looks for is definitely *The Picture of Dorian Gray* from the novel by Oscar Wilde («Picture. Medium-sized picture of Basil Hallward’s brush» (Oldie: 2016).

One of the novel’s characters - Captain Welles is a reference to the image of the famous British navigator Samuel Wallace. Moreover, due to the inclusion of cinematic discourse, plot elements are interlaced. For example, the allusions to Joanne Rowling’s novels about Harry Potter is explained as follows: «The interior of the house 221-b in Baker Street in Guy Ritchie’s film “*Sherlock Holmes*” is borrowed from the film “*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*”. The furnishings of the apartment are assembled from the prop, which was used to decorate the home of Sirius Black. The ladder, where Holmes descends at the beginning of the film, is taken from the film “*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*”.» (Oldie: 2016).

Besides, Count Orlok comes from the cinema too - the character from the film by German director Friedrich Murnau “*Nosferatu. A symphony of horror*” (1921). The fact is that the director could not obtain the permission to film Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, so he made his own, slightly reinterpreting the story and changing the names of the characters.

Interestingly, the salvation from Count Orlok happens through the inclusion of musical level codes: «The music swayed with a boat on a gentle swell. She was rolling in with the waves of the surf, with the confident gait of approaching steps. Over all of this, prayer reigned, hope for the highest mercy. There was something wrong with the count: wishing to get close to Mr. Holmes, he seemed to be knee-deep in water against the hurricane wind. The blue face twisted a grimace at the sight of which Tom wanted to cross. Someone was going to meet the count, making it difficult for the madman to budge; someone prayed the heavens for something, deeply contrary to the graph. “I cry to You,” Tom Radcliffe shouted dumbly, staring in horror at the battle of the violin and the madman, “Lord Jesus Christ! Please, hear my prayers, grant me Thy grace, do not let me lose heart ...» (Oldie: 2016). This is actually a choral prelude in F minor “*Ichrufzudir Herr Jesu Christ*” by J. S. Bach. Thus, the associative line built by “Verbalife” spans cinematic and musical discourse. It is natural, as “21st centuries became the time of creation and development of new synthetic art forms” (Kuryaev&Osmukhina: 2018, pp.276-383; Zinnatullina et al.: 2019, pp.357-369).

The authors also use the method of metalepsis, which means the transition from one narrative level to another. Therefore, in particular, Mr. Wells becomes the object of Dr. Watson's memoirs: «A man knowledgeable in many sciences, but extremely extravagant, Sir William told me when young Wells and me were shaking hands(Oldie: 2016). In addition, during the hypnosis, Jennie writes: "© A. Nedereza. 2010» (Oldie: 2016), thus, incorporating one of the authors into the text itself. It is worth mentioning that the reverse process takes place: the printer used by Tyunya and Vladimir periodically issues illustrations to the text or the material on which the association is built. For example, H. A. Corr ea's illustrations to *The War of the Worlds* (Correa. *Martians vs. Thunder Child*. 1906) or an illustration to the stories about Sherlock Holmes by Sidney Paget, thanks to whom Sherlock Holmes wears the headgear "deerstalker hat", etc.

CONCLUSION

To summarise, we consider Oldie's novel *Sherlock Holmes vs. The Martians* a postmodernist work. Cultural codes manifested in the novel were divided into several groups: references to the works of popular culture, science fiction literature, music, cinema and painting. Another distinctive feature of the novel lies in its effect of multi-level organisation, achieved by allusions accessible to the sophisticated reader. Not only do H.L. Oldie use pre-existing images and plots, but also create their own original work on their basis. Proceeding from the above said, *Sherlock Holmes vs. the Martians* is a striking example of postmodern text.

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