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FROM VENICE TO CYPRUS: BIFOCAL STRUCTURE OF «OTHELLO»

The essay deals with the specificity of dramatic conflict in Shakespeare's tragedy «*Othello*». The racial conflict, which determines the events of the first act, must be taken into consideration. This collision does not coincide with the pivotal conflict of the whole play. The relationships between these two conflicts and the role of some characters in the creating the artistic unity are analysed here.

Key words: Shakespeare, Othello, tragedy, conflict, collision, structure, unity, bifurcation, intrigue, system of characters.

Comparing *Othello* with other Shakespeare's great tragedies, a number of scholars underlined – in different terms – its unique structure. A.C. Bradley distinguished «*Othello*» from other great tragedies as «the least symbolic» and «the most masterly in construction» [1, p. 185]. One of the leading figures in British «new criticism» F.R. Leavis in his essay «*Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero*» called this play «the simplest one» of all Shakespeare's great tragedies [2, p. 136–159]. J.C. Maxwell considered «*Othello*» to be a «well-made play» [3, p. 202]. Leonid Pinsky wrote about «*Othello*'s» «exclusiveness» [4, p. 158]; Alexander Anikst considered this play to be «the most perfect of all Shakespeare's tragedies in construction» [5, p. 448], and so on.

That uniqueness can be noted even in the spatial and temporal construction of the Venetian tragedy. Its chronotope¹ is marked by the least conventionality and the greatest historic and geographic concreteness in comparison with other tragedies. Calling «*Othello*» «a drama of modern life» [1, p. 180] A.C. Bradley went too far, of course, but the tragedy's closeness to the reality of the time, when it was created, is beyond no doubts.

Quite exact is Naum Berkovsky's opinion that this tragedy is free from the «narrow historicism» [6, p. 106], what is apparent, for instance, in contamination of the plot motifs originated from Gerald Cinthio on the one hand and from the later concrete historic associations on the other hand. Nevertheless, the most historic and geographic concreteness of the play in comparison with «*Hamlet*» or «*King Lear*» is obvious. It was the single tragedy founded on the contemporary story, written by Shakespeare's contemporary [7, p. 114].

The unity of the tragedy's inner world seems to be broken by quite sharp and irrevocable changing place of action from the first act to the following four ones.

The exploration of the tragedy's spatial and temporal construction convinces of the certain contentional and formal autonomy of the first act. That Venetian act can be examined as a little independent drama with all the main elements of dramatic structure. Speaking in the normative theory's terms, we can find here an exposition (the dialogue between Iago and Roderigo),

¹ Mikhail Bakhtin's term (See: Бахтин М.М. Вопросы литературы и эстетики / М.М. Бахтин. – М.: Художественная литература, 1975. – С. 234–407 / Bakhtin, M. Questions of the literature and aesthetics, Moscow, Hudozhestvennaja literatura Publ., 1975, pp. 234–407).

a beginning (Brabantio's anger), a climax (the speeches in the Senate) and even a dénouement (Duke's and Senate's decision).

Meanwhile the drama limited by the frame of the first act is a tragedy neither in content nor in form. The first act is to great extent an epical one, but the tragedy itself begins later in the Cyprus scenes. It is not accidentally, that the second act opens with the storm, which is, though, rather kind to the characters of the play. G. Wilson Knight, who had investigated the symbology of this scene, showed that it foreshadows – in analogy and in contrast – human storms with tragic ends and at the same time plays the structural part of the *beginning* [8, p. 109–111]. Definition of this scene as a *beginning* already emphasizes the presence of some border between the first act and four others.

The comparative independence of the first act is caused not so much by the place of action, as by its own collision, which does not coincide with the main conflict of the whole tragedy. Development of «the tragedy of subjective passion» (Hegel's expression [9, p. 197]) in the first act is not even declared, though it determines all the action in the following acts. A.C. Bradley had some reason to state that **«the conflict begins late» [1, p. 177] speaking of the tram-line conflict**, but he ignored the special conflict of the first act completely. Meanwhile this conflict determines the dynamics of action in the first act and it is quite apparent in the opposition of Othello to Venetian Republic. As N. Berkovsky observes, this collision is «he starting point of the tragedy» [6, p. 71].

Undoubtedly, the opposition **«Othello – Venice» could not exist before the romance of Othello and Desdemona**. Iago's remarks, as well as the scene in the Senate, prove that Othello's position and behaviour break **«the hierarchic conception of society» [10, p. 73–84] which was established in Venice**. Having become widely known, the romance of Othello and Desdemona uncovers and at the same time catalyses this inevitable clash.

The conflict «Othello – Venice» is not solved in the first act: Duke's and Senate's decision is dictated by the political and military situation, and Othello receives an order to leave for Cyprus, which **«the Turk with a most mighty preparation makes for»**. The famous Russian theatrical director Konstantin Stanislavsky caught this nuance precisely, emphasizing in his prompt-book that there are no solution of conflict but only the compromise at the end of the first act [11, p. 117]. The unsolved collision was also noticed by Grigorij Kosintsev [12, p. 166–168].

The solution of the conflict **«Othello – Venice» is as though delayed and therefore this contradiction**, which is moved aside to the margin of the audience's interest, exists in the tragedy implicitly, becoming apparent closer to the end of the tragedy.

The further development of this conflict is prophesied, to say exacter – forecasted by Iago in the first act. His forecasts are made even before Brabantio's appeal to the Senate. The first one sounds in the first scene:

...for I do know the state, –
However this may gall him with some check, –
Cannot with safety cast him; for he's embark'd
With such loud reason to the Cyprus wars, –
Which even now stand in act, – that for their souls,
Another of his fathom they have none
To lead their business... (Act I, Scene 1) [13].

This statement of Iago contains not the slightest doubt. The conjuncture solution (in fact, *mis-solution*) of the problem is foretold quite exactly. But in the second scene of the same act Iago offers another prognostication and although not all his words sound sincerely (he addresses Othello!), the second forecast is even better grounded. This time the victory is predicted for Venetian nobility, since the Senate will be more attentive to Brabantio's appeal:

...be assured of this,
That the magnifico is much beloved;
And hath in his effect, a voice potential
As double as the duke's: he will divorce you... (Act I, Scene 2) [13].

Unsolved and moved aside conflict reminds of itself in the fourth act by arrival of Lodovico and by his mission in Cyprus. When Lodovico informs Othello that he is discharged, it is not the act of punishment for the Moor's killing Desdemona but the decision which the Venetian powers had come to before Lodovico's departure from Venice:

Your power and your command is taken of,
And Cassio rules in Cyprus... (Act V, Scene 2) [13].

Certainly, Venice, which is opposed to the protagonist, is not represented only by Brabantio, but also by Iago, Roderigo, Gratiano, Lodovico and so on. It is difficult to agree with Yuri Shvedov, who exaggerated the scale of Emilia's «**rebellion**» in the last act [14, p. 231–232]. It is evident that Emilia's resistance is motivated only psychologically but not ideologically or socially. The Venetian society is represented in the tragedy not so differentially. Except only Desdemona, who once performed a real action, moving through the border of semantic field (in terms of Yuri Lotman [15, p. 282]), all the society of Venice in «Othello» is homogeneous and sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly is opposed to the protagonist.

The conflict «Othello – Venice» is unsolved not only in the limits of the first act; it can not be considered the solved one even in the limits of the whole tragedy. «The tragic nature of political power»² is completely realised neither in the first act nor in the other ones. The playwright does not idealize the Venetian state in the beginning of the play, and Lodovico's mission adds more scepticism concerning the Duke's and Senate's role in Othello's life. But this role is being opened quite slightly and just when the conflict «Othello – Venice» is moved aside and the development of action is exclusively dictated by «**the tragedy of subjective passion**». The conflict, which is expressed in the opposition «Othello – Iago» as well as in the struggle of different, sometimes contrary trends in the conscience of Othello himself, appears to be the main tragical conflict of the play, that is completely developed and solved in the plot of the work.

However, the collision of the first act is not being dissolved in the main conflict of the tragedy; these are two correlated, but different conflicts. Considering one of them and fully ignoring another one, we can considerably water down the dramatic work's sense.

When Georg Brandes stated that «Othello» was a tragedy of family life [16, p. 106]³, he narrowed the semantic range of the work; nowadays this point of view seems to be out-of-date. As the modern critics showed quite distinctly, the noble Moor's drama is rather tightly connected with the fates of Venetian republic.

Nonetheless, the modern scholars write that «Othello» is more chamber play than any other of the great tragedies. That is the opinion of the prominent Russian Shakespeare scholar of the 1950–80s: «...**The personal motif prevails in "Othello". The fates of Venice and Cyprus do not depend on the noble Moor's family drama.** In other tragedies it is always underlined that the characters' fates are linked with the state's fate...» [17, p. 514]. The similar judgements are met in the works of British critics. For instance, L.C. Knights writes that «"Othello", although a poetic drama,.. comes closer than any of other tragedies to what is commonly understood by "revelation of character" and its focus is on individual and, we must say, the domestic qualities...» [3, p. 233] But having noticed this «focusing on individual» in the Venetian tragedy, many Shakespeare scholars of the second half of the XX century emphasized the importance of social and political context determining in many respects the development of personal motifs. So H.B. Charlton calls Othello a tragic figure in the tragic world [7, p. 123]. Deepened into the characterological analysis of Shakespearean hero's life, M. Prior admits though that **Othello degrades under the influence of «events and circumstances» [18, p. 233] and those circumstances are found by the scholar outside the sphere of private relations of the characters**⁴. So the importance of the first act's collision is indirectly admitted by various authors.

² George Steiner's expression (See: Steiner G. The Death of Tragedy. – London: Faber and Faber, 1974. – 354 p. – P. 55).

³ The similar treatment of the tragedy not only by critics but also by theatrical companies may be met even nowadays. So Russell Jackson, reviewing Royal Shakespeare Company's new performance, observes, «This year's "Othello" was a domestic drama with a military background...» (See: Russell Jackson. Shakespeare at Stratford-upon-Avon: Summer and Winter, 1999–2000 // Shakespeare Quarterly. – 2000. – Vol. 51. – No. 2. – Pp. 217–229. – P. 220).

⁴ The similar judgements can be even met in the works, which are rather distant from literary criticism. For instance, the well-known German psycho-neurologist Karl Leonhard, treating Shakespearean hero as an example of masterful describing of paranoia, remarks, «**Besides, we must say that the situational preconditions, i.e. external circumstances, determined the development of paranoia, of course...**» (See: Leonhard Karl. Akzentuierte Persönlichkeiten. 2 Aufl. – Stuttgart: Urban & Fischer, Mchn., 1976. – 328 p. – P. 296).

It is quite possible to suppose that the determination of the action by two conflicts can lead to some severance in the tragedy, to violation of its unity. The wish to avoid this severance and save the work's artistic unity often makes literary critics and theatrical directors to concentrate on the only one of these two conflicts. As a rule, the conflict «Othello – Venice» is reduced.

Konstantin Stanislavsky keenly felt inadmissibility of ignoring that conflict, and it was registered in his prompt-book of the tragedy's first act. «...Stanislavsky saw the conflict of "Othello" in the clash of two romantics – Othello and Desdemona – with the world of Venice with its cold calculation, aristocratic arrogance, predatory individualism and "private interest"» [19, p. 369]. It is noteworthy that the Russian director was even inclined to some overstatement of this opposition's role, that was apparent in his wish to represent Venetian Senate stratified, where Brabantio could be an emblem of the reactionary forces and his relations with more liberal Duke were rather complicated. But this conflict is developed by Stanislavsky only for the first act. The «dotted» appearance of this conflict in the fourth and fifth acts is not noticed by the director. In the 2d–5th acts «the tragedy of the betrayed trust» was the most important and interesting for him.

Co-existence of those two very different conflicts in the limits of one play creates some «bifurcation», which is being overcome later, during the development of the tragedy's action. Such the overcoming is possible due to the participation of the same characters (mainly the protagonist and antagonist) in the both conflicts.

Undoubtedly, Othello is the main participant of the both collisions. Just in his opposition to Venetian powers in the first act Othello convincingly reveals as the *noble Moor*, demonstrating the best qualities of his outstanding personality. As far as «the tragedy of subjective passion» is concerned, here the strong and rich nature is becoming destroyed up to the sorrowful finale, when the hero reaches «the greatness of soul» for the last time. If there is no that disclosure of the great nature in the first act, the further development of tragic theme were meaningless.

In the process of overcoming that «bifurcation», of immense importance is a figure of Iago, «the greatest intriguer in the world of Shakespeare's tragedies» [4, p. 160]. That is Iago who was an initiator of the both intrigues and their interlacing. He is a skilful *director* of Othello's clash with Venetian nobility as well as of Othello's private tragedy. The second plan is already born in Iago's head in the first act, right after the temporally unsuccessful result of the first attempt. This circumstance makes perfidious Iago, equally with Brabantio, Duke and senators, a representative of that Venetian republic, which delays in giving its sentence to the noble but stranger Othello only for some time. An artful ensign keeps the threads of the both intrigues in his hands and this circumstance especially assists in overcoming the seeming severance of this bifocal play.

Several other characters of the Venetian Tragedy bear a relation to the both conflicts, of course. However, except Desdemona and Lodovico, all they (Cassio, Roderigo, Emilia and others) are included into those spheres mediately – through their links with either the protagonist or the antagonist.

Thus the inner connection of various and strictly differentiated conflict situations is realised through the system of characters. This connection helps to the first act's conflict to be revealed in the chain of the following acts' events, and makes the central conflict more socially determined.

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В статье рассматривается специфика драматического конфликта в трагедии Шекспира «Отелло». Специальное внимание уделено коллизии, заданной в первом акте и не совпадающей со стержневым конфликтом всего произведения. Анализируются связи между двумя этими конфликтами, а также роль системы персонажей в развитии каждого из них и в реализации связей между ними.

Ключевые слова: Шекспир, Отелло, трагедия, структура, конфликт, интрига, бифуркация, коллизия, событие, система персонажей.

У статті розглядається специфіка драматичного конфлікту трагедії Шекспіра «Отелло». Спеціальна увага приділена колізії, що домінує у першому акті і яка не збігається зі стержневим конфліктом усього твору. Аналізуються зв'язки між цими двома конфліктами, а також роль системи персонажів у розвитку кожного з них та у реалізації зв'язків між ними.

Ключові слова: Шекспір, Отелло, трагедія, конфлікт, структура, інтрига, бифуркація, колізія, подія, система персонажів.

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