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HAMLET IN A “NUTSHELL” – POSTMODERN INTERPRETATION OF THE FAMOUS TRAGEDY OF ALL TIME

As Karl Marx once said, history repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce. This time Hamlet is back in a “Nutshell”, the place he once wished to be in Shakespeare’s tragedy. The article compares I. McEwan’s latest novel in a “Nutshell” (2016) with that of “The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark” and analyses the postmodern traits of the former. Although four centuries divide the two works, both revolve around the ancient archetype of revenge and question its legitimacy in their own way.

Key words: intertextuality, postmodern interpretation, unreliable narrator, author’s death.

“O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams” [2, p. 104].

In 2016 while the world was commemorating the 400th anniversary of the death of William Shakespeare [1564–1616] we heard Hamlet’s voice coming from Ian McEwan’s brand new book “Nutshell”. This time Hamlet (his name is not mentioned throughout the novel) is where Claudius wanted to send him, namely in today’s England, however still in his mother’s womb waiting to be born in two weeks’ time: “So here I am, upside down in a woman. Arms patiently crossed, waiting and wondering who I’m in and what I’m in for” [1, p. 1]. The novel starts with these questions [ontological, whose? and epistemological, why?] of the foetus and till the end of the story we learn about the events from this unreliable narrator; we listen to what he hears and see what he supposes he sees.

Baby Hamlet has got curious and analytical mind which makes him kick his beloved mother from inside to wake her up in order to listen to the radio in the late hours: “Cruel sport, I know, but we are both better informed by the morning” [1, p. 4] Although he is confined to a “meagre living room”, he counts himself “an innocent”, “unburdened by allegiances and obligations”, “a free spirit” and strives to perceive the conscious life bestowed upon him by “Being”: “... my idea was To be. ... The beginning of conscious life was the end of illusion, the illusion of non-being, and the eruption of the real” [1, p. 2–3].

Even if the baby counts himself an innocent, in the first chapter he learns that he is a party to a plot devised by his mother and her lover, who he later realizes is his uncle, to kill his father. So the baby decides to take his father’s side as he believes he was wronged (besides, he hates his uncle who embodies cowardice, greed, and stupidity) and believes it is his mission to ruin their plans and/or take revenge.

Let’s have a look at some other parallels between the two works. In “Nutshell” the kingdom/Elsinore is replaced with a huge Georgian house whose value is estimated at 8 million pounds and the baby’s uncle has his eye on this house that was inherited by his brother. The baby’s mother is called Trudy (from Gertrude) and his uncle Claude (from Claudius). The novel employs intertextuality with “Hamlet” and shares similar motifs like, *to be or not to be*, infidelity, revenge, romantic love, a son’s love, etc. However, as “Nutshell” is a revised version of “Hamlet”, the history could not but repeat itself as farce. Baby Hamlet in “Nutshell” is very mundane to be

considered as a noble hero who stood up against injustice and betrayal in general. Therefore, in McEwan's postmodern novel some important matters are upside-down, like our protagonist in his mother's womb:

– The protagonist of "Nutshell" experiences the dilemma of "To be or not to be" literally. On the one hand the baby is happy to be born in modern Europe "the privileged corner of the planet" and not in the ancient Europe "tormented with ghosts", but on the other hand seeing how the life gets more complicated delves into the suicidal thoughts like his antecedent Hamlet.

– The baby's father is alive and only dies in the middle of the novel by being poisoned, whereas "Hamlet" has not been born yet.

– Trudy's infidelity starts before her husband John is dead and she makes the final decision about his murder.

– Events take place in a smaller space and on a smaller scale, in a squalid house that "is getting rotten" because of neglect (allusion to "something is rotten in the state of Denmark" [2, p. 78]); the characters are from the middle class and not the upper.

– Although there is no fake play in the novel, the characters play one with their forced behaviour and false words while being interrogated by the police and thus betray themselves.

– To the extent that "Hamlet" is an existential tragedy marked with moments of comedy, "Nutshell" is a philosophical comedy marked by moments of tragedy [3]. As the baby philosopher does not have much space to "move", say what he thinks or take action, he is more of an observer and commentator; he follows the events, makes fun of ("homo ludens"), makes judgements and foremost, contemplates about his own salvation. Only after his father's death his "playful" mood diminishes and he resorts to it in the moment of "revenge". Likewise Shakespeare's Hamlet accepts Laertes's challenge after pretending to be mad and using the opportunity avenges his father's murder.

– Even though McEwan's foetus is an unborn baby, it seems impossible to see it as a "child" – "the baby" listens to the conversations, BBC radio programmes, audio books (he enjoys Joyce's "Ulysses" most of all) and documentaries and therefore, is well-informed about how the world works and what problems it faces. His philosophical speculations are not naïve at all; on the contrary, he creates the image of reincarnated Hamlet who has lost his memory.

– Whereas Shakespeare wrote his work half in verse and half in prose, "Nutshell" is a monologue written totally in prose. Here the father – John Cairncross is a selfless person with temperate nature, a poet, publisher and teacher. In real life J. Cairncross was W. Shakespeare's lesser-known contemporary who wrote essays like that of Montaigne's. In the novel the baby has a dream where he identifies himself with the young handsome author from Elizabethan Age who asks for the baby's opinion about the ending of the story he is writing. After the dream the baby is relieved from the remorse he experienced for his father's murder which could only happen provided he realized the events were governed by the power outside him where he served as means and after awakening realizing he was that creative power. If we consider John's/author's death in this light, then we can argue that it was the author's death.

– While there was a ghost in "Hamlet" which revealed the truth and urged for revenge, there is conscience and genuine action in McEwan. The foetus does not want to be a party to the crime, denounces it and loves everything that is hated and deemed useless by his mother and uncle, especially, his father and poetry.

– After committing the crime Trudy realizes what a horrendous thing they did and suffers from a strong sense of guilt. In this part of the novel McEwan creates parodic intertextuality resonating with "Macbeth", i.e. the scene where Macbeth argues with his wife. Claude misquotes Lady Macbeth saying, "So we'll stick our courage to the screwing whatever" [1, p. 125]; while the original quote says, "But screw your courage to the sticking-place, And we'll not fail" [4, p. 55].

– While Hamlet calls Denmark "a prison", in "Nutshell" criminals are imprisoned at the end which can be interpreted as there is no escape from law, where the law is the king of the kings. The next morning of the crime when Trudy and her lover are about to flee the country the foetus decides to get born and by coming to the world "the upside-down" state of the things draw to their close and justice is restored – the criminals are caught.

Let's have a closer look at some of the postmodern characteristics of the novel. When Shakespeare's Hamlet finds out about his father's murder he perceives it not only as a personal

tragedy, but also as a human tragedy and sees it as a challenge posed by the destiny: "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, That ever I was born to set it right" [2, p. 87]. Unlike Hamlet the foetus perceives the happenings as personal tragedy and wishes not to be born at all: "My father's rejection of me, his possible fate, my responsibility for it, then my own fate, my inability to warn or act. ... To start a life in a cell, bliss unknown, boredom a fought-for privilege. ... I see no scheme, no plausible route to any conceivable happiness. I wish never to be born... [1, p. 75] Notwithstanding these pessimistic thoughts the foetus is full of love of life and these are what binds him to life "wine by the glass rather than the placenta, books direct by lamplight, music by Bach, walk along the shore, kissing by moonlight [1, p. 161]". It is this love of life that prevents him from committing suicide (by binding his umbilical cord around his head three times). The foetus is concerned neither with the meaning of life as Hamlet did ("... What is a man, If his chief good market of his time Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more" [2, p. 172]) or with the fatality of human beings ("We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots" [2, p. 168]). Yet the foetus suffers from the archetypic feeling of revenge: "So what's the use of a headache, a heartache? What am I being warned against, or told to do? Don't let your incestuous uncle and mother poison your father. Don't waste your precious days idle and inverted. Get born and act!" [1, p. 45]. We witness here how the foetus delays taking action. Like Hamlet the intellectual he also wants to know who and what it is he is fighting against and to decide how rational the means for the fighting is. The foetus then tries to analyse how humane and civil the revenge is and comes to the conclusion that although revenge impulse is instinctive, powerful and forgivable and can only be considered normal in thoughts, the actual enactment of which is the second crime and a reversion to constant, visceral fear and unstitches the civilisation. As Confucius said, before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves. Being different from Hamlet who sought to revenge his father's murder in the name of honour, dignity and faithfulness and who thought of the vanity of life, the foetus looks upon law enforcement agencies to restore the justice.

The novel also conveys the message that no matter how close we get to the people we cannot "enter" inside even though we were "inside" them. Although the foetus is in his beautiful mother Trudy's womb and witnesses her feelings better than anybody else, he is totally unaware of her thoughts and intentions. Like Hamlet no matter how hard he tries he fails to understand why his mother has chosen to be with Claude who is hopelessly boring, shallow-minded, knows nothing except about the "cars and clothes", makes poor sentences and speaks only with clichés. That same Claude who came between the his hopes and his family as "a maggot". Hamlet thinks of his uncle the same way and blames his mother for marrying "a villain and a slave that is not twentieth part the tithes" of his father.

Leaving realism behind McEwan has created a complex psychological thriller/detective with postmodern and existential highlights which talks about how the inborn are made parties to the plots, what dangers await them, how people lose their identities and values are degraded and that modern people have to live in the age of global warming, immigration, terrorism, and the fear of nuclear war.

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Как отмечал Карл Маркс, история повторяется дважды: первый раз как трагедия, а второй – как фарс. В этот раз мы встречаем Гамлета в «Скорлупе», там, где он хотел оказаться в трагедии Шекспира. В статье дается сравнение последнего романа Й. Макьюэна «Скорлупа» (2016) с «Трагической историей о Гамлете, принце датском» и анализируются постмодернистские черты предыдущего. Несмотря на то, что эти два произведения разделяют четыре века, они оба посвящены древнему архетипу мести и по-своему ставят ее легитимность под сомнение.

Ключевые слова: интертекстуальность, постмодернистская интерпретация, ненадежный рассказчик, смерть автора.

Як зауважував Карл Маркс, історія повторюється двічі: перший раз як трагедія, другий – як фарс. Цього разу ми зустрічаємо Гамлета у «Скорлупі», там, де він хотів опинитися у трагедії Шекспіра. У статті аналізуються постмодерні риси роману Й. Мак'юена «Скорлупа» (2016) та наводиться порівняння з «Трагічною історією про Гамлета, принца датського». Незважаючи на те, що ці два твори розділяють чотири століття, обидва вони присвячені давньому архетипу помсти та по-своєму піддають сумніву її легітимність.

Ключові слова: інтертекстуальність, постмодерністська інтерпретація, ненадійний оповідач, смерть автора.

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