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Main Characters in D. Tartt's Prose: Exploring the Hero

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Abstract. Examines various types and specifics of the protagonists' presentation in the novels *The Secret History*, *The Little Friend*, *The Goldfinch* by the contemporary Donna Tartt American writer. The purpose of the study is to analyze the way the process of growing up is shown in the author's works. The hero's formation impacts the leading motifs, the choice of a protagonist type (a child or a teenager) and a narrative mode (a first-person or third-person narrative mode with social and philosophical digressions), and ultimately gives the reader a possibility to make conclusions about the protagonist. Emphasizes a connection between Tartt's coming-of-age novels and the Young Adult fiction genre as well as points to symbolic connotations in the narrative that help the author create the protagonist's indirect characteristics. The contextual analysis of the three novels explains the specifics of the characters' inner world and their worldviews. Tartt and her characters are passionate about literature and art, thus the narration is firmly based on the principle of intertextuality. The study contributes to the development of literature theory in the field of poetics. The practical significance of the research results is determined by the possibility to use them in teaching American contemporary literature and stylistics.

Keywords: Donna Tartt, the protagonist, Young Adult fiction, intertextuality, coming-of-age novels

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Система персонажей прозы Д. Тартт: в поисках героя

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Аннотация. Изучаются различные способы репрезентации системы персонажей в романах «Тайная история», «Маленький друг» и «Шегол» современной американской писательницы Д. Тартт. Цель исследования – анализ проблемы взросления в произведениях автора. Доминанта внутреннего становления влияет на центральные мотивы, тип героя (ребенок или подросток), повествовательную технику (от первого или от третьего лица с психологическими и философскими отступлениями), что в конечном итоге дает читателю возможность увидеть внутренний мир центральных персонажей. Подчеркивается связь прозы Д. Тартт с жанром литературы для молодого читателя, выявляются коннотации и символика, с помощью которых создаются косвенные характеристики действующих лиц. Контекстуальный анализ трех романов позволяет выявить специфику внутреннего мира героев и особенности их мировоззрения. Прозаические образы Д. Тартт вписаны в мир литературы и искусства, поэтому особенностью нарратива является интертекстуальность. Настоящая статья вносит вклад в развитие теории литературы и поэтики. Практическая значимость результатов исследования определяется возможностью их использования в преподавании современной американской литературы и стилистики.

Ключевые слова: Д. Тартт, главный герой, литература для молодого читателя, интертекстуальность, произведения о взрослении

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Introduction

Poetics, or the theory of literary techniques involved in composing prose and poetry, is one of the most important research topics within literary studies. Fictional discourse fascinates researchers with its distinctive style features,

symbolism, and imagination. It provides literary communication in which feelings, thoughts, ideas, descriptions of places or events are expressed. Analysis of main characters in fiction works allows both the researcher and the reader to understand stylistic idiosyncrasies and genre characteristics of contemporary literature.

Traditional coming-of-age stories (Boes, 2006, p. 245) are a staple of the American literature. Growing-up themes can be traced in the works of such distinguished authors as L.M. Olcott, M. Twain, J. London, T. Dreiser, F.S. Fitzgerald, H. Lee, T. Capote, J.D. Salinger, and R. Bradbury. Donna Tartt continues the national literary tradition that promotes the search for philosophical and existential meanings. This search is embodied in the characters growing up within the development of the plot (Cart, 2016, p. 16).

A key characteristic of the American literature is the themes of multiculturalism, memory, and history, as well as self-knowledge and personal autonomy. The protagonists in Tartt's novels are ethnically and socially diverse: Boris (*The Goldfinch*) has Ukrainian roots, Ida (*The Little Friend*) is African American, Henry (*The Secret History*) represents the aristocratic class, the Ratliffs (*The Little Friend*) have a criminal background. The events take place in a wide range of geographical locations, which are loosely defined by scholars as northern (*The Secret History*, *The Goldfinch*) or southern (*The Little Friend*) (Bone, 2005, p. 25).

The facts of the author's biography can be related to her creative activities. The narrative flows from descriptive passages to the characters' memories and interactions, which often veer into their philosophical and psychological portraits. The study considers Tartt's novels as coming-of-age stories and is aimed at analyzing their protagonists. We also analyzed the stylistic features of the novels, the interplay of voices belonging to the narrator and other characters, the specificity of the genre and its poetic qualities. The protagonists (their age, social status, worldviews, and lifestyles), the system of minor characters, narration types and the chronotope were examined, with comparative analysis and narrative analysis used as the main research methods.

Currently, there is no single, fundamental theory that would allow to generalize and organize all the available information on the main heroes in connection with poetic and genre characteristics of Donna Tartt's prose. An increased interest in teenagers as protagonists in modern literary studies can be explained by their significance in contemporary fiction and impact on the reader. According to some scholars (Byrnes, 2005), the child is an archetypal symbol in literature and this image is the foundation of Young Adult (YA) literature genre. For a long time, researchers have been pursuing attempts to define its specific features. Millard emphasizes that genre forms are mobile and can easily transform depending on the changes in the external sociocultural context (Millard, 2007, p. 14). A very interesting interpretation of the YA genre offered in literary theory links it to the Bildungsroman (Boes, 2006) with its specific poetic and linguistic characteristics: the type of the character, events,

types of narration and chronotope, intertextuality (Heineman, 2015) or phototextuality (Welch, 2019).

Byrnes (Byrnes, 2005) and Cart (Cart, 2016) describe the YA narration as the one that allows the writer to focus not only on protagonists' inner lives but also expand on the historical and cultural aspects of their surroundings. The main semantic dominant of the genre is the theme of growing up (Stratman, 2018). Maturity is achieved through overcoming trials: loneliness, loss of beloved ones, and struggles with evil. Experts in the field of YA fiction indicate that Tartt's aim is not only to depict the main characters but also show, from their point of view, the most significant elements of the environment – cultural and historical references, psychological and social meanings (Heineman, 2015; Millard, 2007; Pereira, 2018; Welch, 2019).

Millard and Cart describe plot-constructing elements of formation novels (Cart, 2016; Millard, 2007). Coming-of-age stories are likely to have a conventional system of characters (Boes, 2006), where all the minor characters to a certain degree become 'teachers' to the main one, which helps reveal the protagonists' inner world in a more comprehensive way (Heineman, 2015).

In one of her interviews Donna Tartt noted that her prose is highly autoreferential, and the coded language of her novels is aimed at sophisticated, erudite, and mature readers with expert knowledge in the sphere of philology (Neary, 2002). The motive of racial inequality in Tartt's prose is presented in the context of the 'southern' tradition (Bone, 2005) and the genre canon of Young Adult literature (Tarr, & White, 2018): historical and cultural contexts are inextricably intertwined (Boes, 2006) with the theme of growing-up in the atmosphere of social injustice, loss, loneliness, and depression (Pereira, 2018).

The use of these techniques creates a unique atmosphere in Tartt's novels, but also complicates their genre specifics. *The Little Friend* is written in third person and the narrative is linear. This choice of the narrative mode and structure makes the novel drastically different to retrospective and confessional narratives of *The Secret History* and *The Goldfinch*. The third person perspective allows the writer to show the protagonists' inner lives as well as to draw detailed psychological portraits of the minor characters and their families. The main semantic dominant in YA literature is the theme of growing up by overcoming trials inherited from the American literary tradition, and the same theme is of crucial importance for Tartt as a writer and a person. Thus, the three novels under study can be inscribed into the tradition of Young Adult literature (Afanasjeva et al., 2020; Stratman, 2018).

To achieve the goal of identifying specifics of the main characters created by Donna Tartt, we used comparative analysis, narrative analysis, and intertextual analysis as the main research methods. Various approaches to determining poetic characteristics of Young Adult fiction (namely, psychological and philosophical aspects of the characters' formation) have been the object of study for a number of literary theory schools (Boes, 2006; Bone, 2005; Byrnes, 2005; Cart, 2016; Millard, 2007; Stratman, 2018; Welch, 2019).

Tartt's novels *The Secret History*, *The Little Friend* and *Goldfinch* were chosen as the material for the study as they illustrate main tendencies in contemporary American literature.

The theoretical significance of the obtained results can be seen in identifying the specifics of protagonists in Tartt's prose, which contributes to the development of narrative studies and the theory of genres, highlighting existential experience, states and stages of adolescence by exploring teenage characters. The work also emphasizes the importance of Young Adult fiction in connection with the main trends in contemporary literature. The practical vector of the study allows one to use its results in teaching American literature and the theory of literature.

Results and Discussion

The title of the novel *The Secret History* is rather suggestive, symbolic and highly relevant to the story's plot. It refers to the work of Procopius of Caesarea, a Byzantine historian. Working as a military chronicler, he created eight-volume *History of the Wars*, which was translated into English from Greek as *The Secret History*. Written in first person, *The Secret History* presents an alternative, personal and accurate account of what is happening as the plot progresses. The novel was originally titled *The God of Illusions* – in many ways a metaphor for the entire book as the characters overcome illusory ideas about the state of the world. The prologue of the inverted detective story contains information about the plot-forming event which is Edmund "Bunny" Corcoran's murder: "The snow in the mountains was melting and Bunny had been dead for several weeks" (Tartt, 2017, p. 6). Bunny is the main character's friend. They are both classics students at an elite private college.

The novel is constructed as a retrospective narrative from the 28 year old man named Richard Papen. The main intrigue and the mystery of the novel are given to the reader on the first pages – Bunny is dead. The detective story is reminiscent of a typical Greek tragedy in its narrative techniques and sharp plot twists. The protagonist's exposition is done skillfully. Describing himself, Richard gives his name, age, place of birth and emphasizes the fact that he "grew up in Piano, a small silicon village in the north. No sisters, no brothers" (Tartt, 2017, p. 7). Thus, Richard has been alone all the time, and he feels like an orphan.

The narrative techniques are close to those of the ancient tragedy. Being the narrator, Richard takes up an 'estranged' position, typical for the chorus in Greek tragedies. His narration is objective, omniscient and dispassionate. The novel is characterized by the analytical composition (as in the Greek tragedy *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles) where appeals to the past are both a compositional and a cultural device. Confession is another important feature of the diegetic narrative. As Richard's personality is slowly shifting throughout the first-person narrative, the readers begin identifying themselves and sympathizing with him. By the finale, the protagonist comes to understand the true significance of humanity and life.

The story is set in a small liberal arts college in Vermont. At the age of nineteen the protagonist comes there to study classic Greek. The place has iconic significance for Tartt – it mirrors her own *alma mater* (Bennington college, Vermont) in many details and the descriptions of the university world are largely autobiographical. The main character is plunged into an elite circle of intellectuals who are united by the love for ancient literature, culture, and the Greek language. Richard succeeds in becoming a part of this closed and exclusive society after resolving a dispute devoted to the translation of a fragment from Homer, thus the Ancient Greek language and literature become the plot-forming motifs of the novel.

The action takes place on the campus, in a separate building called the Lyceum where the characters live. The six students seem to exist in a separate world perceiving everyday life as secondary and insignificant; they all have been handpicked to attend classes of the Classics professor Julian Morrow. Before the class Julian often says: “I hope we’re all ready to leave the phenomenal world, and enter into the sublime?” (Tartt, 2017, p. 38). This image of the professor falls into the traditional archetypal ‘teacher-student’ paradigm but seems more complicated and ambiguous. Subconsciously, the students consider themselves as a part of the elite clique given a privilege to learn about vital issues. It is Julian who inspires them with the idea of their own exclusiveness. The professor’s students are characterized by the sense of superiority. They highly estimate the fact they have been chosen to be in harmony with the ancient culture and aesthetics. Escapism through immersion into the language (the students spend most of their free time studying Classic Greek) elevates them above the daily routine. The harmony of the Greek philosophy where a person perceives oneself as a part of the society and an element of the universe is opposed to the characters’ self-position of being privileged and unique.

The group consists of Richard and his five friends: Henry, Bunny, Francis, and the twins – Camilla and Charles. The author adds some stylistic coloring and specific details to the portrait of each protagonist. Henry’s image is particularly remarkable. He is shown as a linguistic genius who speaks in multiple tongues, ancient and modern. The young man “had published a translation of Anacreon, with commentary, when he was only eighteen” (Tartt, 2017, p. 27). Another student, Bunny, draws the reader’s attention with his symbolic nickname. Bunny’s real name is Edmund. One of the meanings of the word *bunny* is “rabbit or baby rabbit” which brings an element of symbolism (Chupryna, 2022) into the context as rabbits are the symbol of Easter in the American culture. Thus, the motifs of sacrifice, innocence and purity are added to Bunny’s image, though they are often dissonant with the details of his external portrait and descriptions of his inner world: extravagance, disregard of personal hygiene, etc. Francis is portrayed as the boy who “was the most exotic of the set” (Tartt, 2017, p. 26). The young man was thin, had nervous hands and a shrewd look. His way of dressing compels the narrator to compare him to Alfred Douglas, Oscar Wilde’s friend. This adds some additional touches to his image which are later revealed

as relevant. Finally, Charles and Camilla are introduced as amazingly similar in their looks: “They looked very much alike, with heavy dark-blond hair and epicene faces as clear, as cheerful and grave, as a couple of Flemish angels” (Tartt, 2017, p. 30). In this description, Tartt uses a characterization technique typical for her later works – an allusive reference to fine arts – which will fully manifest itself in the novel *The Goldfinch*.

Intertextuality can be traced in the heroes’ descriptions, which is one of the author’s key poetic techniques. Richard says that his five friends didn’t seem to him as unusual people. However, when he had observed them for some time, he understood they were far from being common. The narrator emphasizes that such individuals are extremely rare in real life. Richard describes his impressions of communicating with the other members of the group as follows: “It was as if the characters in a favorite painting, absorbed in their own concerns, had looked up out of the canvas and spoken to me” (Tartt, 2017, p. 24). The plot-forming element of the novel is the story of formation, coupled with the motifs of *teachers vs. false teachers*, *destructive force of arts vs. creative force of arts*, and combining the genre features of a detective story, a university novel, psychological prose, and Young Adult fiction (Cart, 2016).

Donna Tartt’s novel *The Secret History* is an example of a complexly organized text representing a synthetic genre structure, non-linear narrative, and a diegetic narrative discourse. The multidimensionality of the text poetics is achieved by incorporating elements of the university novel genre, YA literature, inverted detective stories, as well as aesthetics and dramatization tools of Ancient Greek tragedies and ekphrastic digressions. The appeal to antiquity is embodied in the double encoding of the text. The reception of ancient culture is a key theme and a plot-forming device at different levels: surface-level events and deep philosophical contents of the novel.

The title of the novel *The Little Friend* is an apparent reference to Louisa May Olcott’s *The Little Women*. Correlations between the two novels, to a certain extent, also can be spotted on the plot development level. In *The Little Women*, the father of the family leaves home to participate in the American Civil War. In Tartt’s novel, the father abandons the family to work after the tragic death of the eldest child. In Olcott’s novel the protagonists feel lonely, while in Tartt’s work the family members emphatically support each other. The main character of the story is twelve-year-old Harriet Cleve who is investigating her brother Robin’s murder. The title of the novel *The Little Friend* is a reference to his life story. Harriet becomes obsessed with finding the murderer and decides to take revenge on young drug dealer Danny Ratliff, whom she blames for her brother’s death. But in fact, the young man didn’t kill Robin. Moreover, he was his true friend. The remarks made by the father visiting Harriet at hospital after the ordeal make the girl reconsider her own assumptions and Danny’s personality. The plot is complex, dynamic and full of unexpected twists. The author’s key message about the ambivalence of good and evil featured in all her works is vividly seen in this novel too.

The plot unfolds dynamically. Despite the fact that in retrospect the reader gets acquainted with the history of the three generations of the Cleve family, the plot of the novel is built around one summer when Harriet learns from Ida, the family's maid, about Danny Ratliff being somehow involved in her brother's murder and decides to investigate. It was quite natural of Harriet who "was wakeful and alert by nature" (Tartt, 2002, p. 25). The author conveys the character's feelings and emotions and exposes Harriet's social position. Harriet is a polar opposite to her elder sister Allison who is homely and obedient. According to the antithesis principle, Harriet is shown as a wild, unfriendly, and strange being, but she is smart, perceptive and courageous. Harriet was born shortly before Christmas, which might be significant for the author whose birthday is December 23. There's also a deeper metaphorical meaning behind the Christmas chronotope. Though Harriet has both parents, symbolically she is an orphan as her mother and father don't care about her.

The Ratliff family is portrayed as dysfunctional their main occupation is dealing drugs. In their environment, moral dilemmas and the distinction between good and evil become complicated, ambiguous and ambivalent. In addition to the criminal component, the family is characterized by a peculiar 'southern' attitude to religion, typical of the older generation of the American South. Southern mythologems in the narrative serve as references to the national American literature. They can be found in the imagery, the character system and the chronotope.

The action takes place in a provincial town in Mississippi where everyone knows each other, and rumors spread fast. The writer inherits this topos from Harper Lee, as well as the collective image of the townspeople. In Tartt's novels, urban areas aggravate the characters' feeling of isolation: the empty streets of Alexandria and overcrowded New York avenues emphasize not only the characters' loneliness but also their restlessness. Their emotions become the starting point for doubling plot situations. The novel is largely based on the juxtaposition of Harriet's and Danny's personalities and stories, but it soon becomes clear that they both suffer from alienation and misunderstanding. In this regard, the characters are similar to the children in *Nine Stories* by J.D. Salinger, who also fail to find any support in the adult world.

The image of the family home plays a plot-forming role in the poetics of the novel. The atmosphere in Harriet and Danny's homes is shown in detail. Harriet's house is filled with all sorts of useless things and feels sleepy and empty. Eventually it succumbs to stagnation and then destruction after Ida's leaving. Danny lives in a travel trailer; his home is run by Grandma Gum. The place is dirty and uncomfortable. In both homes children seem to have no place, they feel lonely and abandoned. Thus, the novel features elements of a family saga. The plot is revealed by referring to the chronotope of the house in crisis, a frequent archetype in the works by Margaret Mitchell and William Faulkner.

Following the footsteps of Mark Twain, Harper Lee and Harriet Beecher Stowe, Tarrt touches upon one of America's most pressing issues – racial inequality. It is no coincidence that the main character's name is Harriet. Both authors (Tarrt and Beecher Stowe) ruminate on how true love and emotional attachment can collapse under the weight of racial prejudice. (Cf. also the pair Harriet and Ida to Scout and Calpurnia in Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*: in the novels the black maids were like mothers for the girls.) Ida is the provider of folk songs, lullabies, fairy tales that Harriet greatly enjoys. Genuine and profound love for Ida deepens the heroine's psychological portrait. The relationship between Harriet and Ida is one of the key storylines climaxing in a dramatic breakup in the chapter *The Red Gloves*.

In American literature, the topic of racial discrimination is a frequent plot-forming device. In contemporary fiction it is most prominent in stories set in southern states, for example, in the novel *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett. The states in the south of the US, Mississippi and Alabama in particular, belong to the topos of the so-called Deep South. Historically, this has been not only the most conservative part of the USA, but also most racially polarized. Racial segregation continued to exist up until the 1960s, and to the day the southern states are characterized by higher levels of conservatism and orthodoxy.

The plot focuses on the main character's formation. The author provides a convincing account of the protagonist's childhood and adolescence. Harriet "did not care for children's books in which the children grew up" (Tarrt, 2002, p. 162). In the summer camp, where everything goes against Harriet's values and her usual way of carrying herself in the world, the girl realizes she is no longer a child. The heroine is a voracious reader, books become her faithful friends and a form of escape. Her worldview is characterized by a great devotion to literature. She sees her investigation as an exciting adventure inspired by the mysterious atmosphere of books by R. Kipling and R.L. Stevenson. One of Harriet's favorites is *The Jungle Book*. No wonder that the character resorts to literature at most difficult moments of her life. Like Peter Pan, she wants to mentally escape from reality by remembering something glorious.

The intertextual field of the novel is quite remarkable. For instance, the classic film about James Bond *From Russia with Love* gets mentioned twice. Another example of the intertextual technique is the phrase from the book Harriet has been reading – *Captain Scott's Diary*. The girl says she has fully grasped Captain Scott's secret message that implies that the victory is often no different from the defeat. Thus, intertextuality accompanies Harriet's reflections throughout the story. It's literature that somehow helps her understand what growing up means.

Phototextuality is another important poetic feature of the novel, photographs play a characterological role (Welch, 2019, p. 439). Harriet tries to learn more about her family's past and Robin's story by analyzing photographs. In the same way she also tries to understand her brother's personality. The pictures with Robin are especially important and sacred to the girl. Removed from the album

and “kept separately on a shelf in Edie’s closet inside a heart-shaped chocolate box” (Tartt, 2002, p. 77), the photos have become an ideal world for Harriet, a world of cloudless memories where she wants to return again and again. The pictures help the heroine learn the story of her birth. They do not only convey the family warmth and serene happiness but also predict grief. For example, Allison, who buries her photo with a dead cat, metaphorically says goodbye to her own life.

In *The Little Friend* Tartt employs some genre and narrative tools of the ‘southern’ novel. The author relies on the topos of a provincial town (inherited from works by William Faulkner and Harper Lee), rebellion against the system (Harriet’s own investigation), connection with the past (much attention in the novel is paid to the family chronicles, the grandmothers’ life history in particular). The provincial southern town becomes an expressive background for the protagonist’s growing up, while the main topos is Harriet’s house. All these tools become the key features of the novel.

The theme of growing up plays a pivotal role in the poetics of the novel. By the end Harriet’s antagonist Danny, who’s been established as a lonely, misunderstood alien in his own family, reveals himself to be such many-sided a person that he rather becomes her double – a literary coeval of the main character. Simultaneously, the author introduces the theme of racial inequality, but does so in the context of the ‘southern’ tradition and the genre canon of Young Adult literature (Tarr, & White, 2018): historical and cultural contexts and the theme of growing up through experience of loss and loneliness are inextricably linked.

Donna Tartt’s most recent novel *The Goldfinch* can be regarded as the pinnacle of the writer’s creative talent. The book is rich in references to other coming-of-age stories where an orphaned main character is reaching maturity through spiritual development, including the works by Ch. Dickens, J.D. Salinger, J.K. Rowling, F. Dostoevsky (Heineman, 2015, p. 30). The key features of Tartt’s creation are the cinematic technique of depicting the protagonist’s surroundings, the three-part plot structure and the chronotope that indicates liminality (a transition between one stage and the next). In *The Goldfinch* the chronotope of the big city is shown through the protagonist’s wanderings in New York, Las Vegas, and Amsterdam.

The liminal stage (the stage of ambiguity) in the main character’s life is accompanied by indispensable, classic attributes of the initiation novel. As a young boy, the protagonist witnesses the death of his mother and then goes on a journey. The reader can visualize his experiences that can be described by some scholars as extreme states of mind (Pereira, 2018): post-traumatic syndrome and drug-induced delirium. In different periods of his life, the hero suffers through serious hardships, including addiction, which can be illustrated by the following metaphor: “Night seemed to fall in the middle of the afternoon” (Tartt, 2014, p. 232).

The protagonist's name is Theodore (Greek *God's gift*) Decker, in the narrative the name is shortened to Theo. The surname Decker has an additional connotation associated with a card deck as Theo perceives life as a game. The hero's life is about to change dramatically when his mother takes him to the exhibition of Dutch masterpieces in the Metropolitan Museum of Art to see their favorite painting – *The Goldfinch* by Carel Fabritius. The painting is one of the few survived works by the famous artist who was Rembrandt's pupil. Almost all his paintings were destroyed in the Delft explosion in 1654, when the artist himself was killed. In the novel, an explosion takes place at the museum and Theo's mother dies. The boy survives, and while staggering through the destroyed halls, he feels compelled to take the painting with him. The masterpiece becomes truly sacred for the main character. The small Dutch Golden Age painting has both aesthetic and social functions. After his mother's death, Theodore roams around, changing foster homes across the US.

The novel opens in wintery Amsterdam where everybody is getting ready for Christmas, the festive atmosphere emphasizes the protagonist's loneliness and isolation. Theo's growing-up process is described with such words as *to wander*, *fog*, *dream*, alluding to the feeling of detachment and showing his homeless wanderings in a cold city. Tartt adopts Dickens' way of describing the character becoming mature through his perception of the big city (Heineman, 2015, p. 24). Soon after his mother's death, Theo stays with the Barbours, the rich family of his school friend Andy, on Park Avenue in New York. When he begins to emerge from his grief and gets back to life, his father shows up unexpectedly and takes him to Las Vegas where Theo enrolls to a local school and meets Boris Pavlikovsky, whom he describes as “one of the great friends of my life” (Tartt, 2014, p. 263). The boys become inseparable, spending a lot of time together, stealing food and experimenting with drugs and alcohol. This is an important stage of Theo's growing-up, a significant step in the ‘ritual’ of his initiation. When Theo's father gets killed in a car accident, Theo packs his things and leaves Vegas for New York, where his adult life begins.

During his journey Theodore changes names. One of the early nicknames he uses is *Potter*, which is an obvious reference to the *Harry Potter* novels by J.K. Rowling: “It was not the first time, in Vegas, I'd heard the Harry Potter comment. My New York clothes <...> made me look like a freak” (Tartt, 2014, p. 263). Harry Potter's *The Boy Who Lived* title is suitable for both characters as they escaped a certain death. Like Harry, Theo gets a magic object (the painting), which is typical of fairy tale characters.

An important element of the novel poetics is vivid memories of the protagonist's past personal experiences. Memories and recollections can serve as an extremely useful composition tool (Tivyeva, 2020) to emphasize crucial moments in the narrative: “When I was little, four or five, my greatest fear was that someday my mother might not come home from work” (Tartt, 2014, p. 61).

The main character's dreams are another way to explain him to the reader. These unconscious reflections are the key to understanding the boy's fears, his repentance and mental anguish. The novel is characterized by a confessional tone, which is achieved largely due to continuous dialogue between the narrator and the reader. This communication is critical for understanding the protagonist's internal identity. At the same time, Tartt interrupts the narration with flashbacks. This structure serves to depict Theo's internal evolution: the main character functions as the narrator commenting on his own thoughts and intentions while the author works to convey the hero's emotions.

The poetics of *The Goldfinch* is multi-dimensional, enriched by intertextuality and intermediality: the novel is full of references to fine arts, music, cinema, and photography. One can also spot documentary elements in the overall artistic narrative. The narrator uses identical syntactic forms (parallel constructions) to both express his judgments and penetrate the other characters' minds. One point of view smoothly transitions into another. As the narrator is largely unreliable, the writer doesn't provide any objective portrait details of the hero's mother and the reader sees her exclusively through Theo's eyes.

The allusions to Russia are very important in the novel. The reader comes across such Russian words and phrases as *telik, angliyski, ty videsh, Ty menja dostal!* (Tartt, 2014, p. 298). Some characters have Russian names (*Boris, Theodore ≈ Fyodor*). The protagonists read works by Russian writers: "He stayed upstairs and out of the way, frowning over *The Idiot* in Russian" (Tartt, 2014, p. 317), which is not only an allusion but a reflection point. Theo accepts Dostoevsky's idea of the resurrection of a great sinner. It's quite evident why one of the key chapters of the novel is titled *The Idiot*. Relying on the perception of Dostoevsky's works the characters realize the circular plot of accepting life and atonement.

The theme of the protagonist's development and maturation takes a central stage in the novel *The Goldfinch*. The elements of intertextuality and intermediality help build up and add nuance to the main character's image. All in all, the novel follows traditional motifs of Young Adult literature: loss, death, illness, heartache, disappointment, and subsequent gradual self-discovery.

Conclusion

As a result, it was established what exactly goes into the writer's creation of protagonists in the novels, which inevitably involves exploring the hero. Donna Tartt's protagonists are characterized by loneliness which they feel in their own families, rejection by their surroundings (Richard in *The Secret History*, Harriet in *The Little Friend*) or a profound loss (Theo in *The Goldfinch*). Some of the character attempt to analyze and understand the world through art or an initiation process they go through in certain periods in their lives.

Tartt's novels can be regarded within the Young Adult fiction genre due to several reasons. Firstly, the main characters are young, and their coming-of-age is the basis for the plot. Secondly, motifs of loss, death, illness, anguish, disappointment, and gradual self-discovery, thematic complexes (the themes of friendship, love, loneliness), poetic and narrative techniques (autonomy of the first-person narrator or the third-person narration with social and philosophical departures) are typical for both YA literature and Tartt's novels. The age of Tartt's characters is also significant as they are all teenagers: Richard Papen is 17 years old; Harriet Cleve and Theo Decker are 13 at the beginning of their journey. They are ostracized, torn away from home and family or lose them altogether. They face painful trials, experience frantic mental throwing, try on different social roles, and face death. Their struggles give a good insight into the characters' nature. They are real heroes due to their repentance, self-sufficiency, and redemption.

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