UDC 821.111(73)-3.09

I. K. Kudriavtseva, Ph. D. in Philology, Associate Professor
Minsk State Linguistic University, 21 Zakharova Str., 220034 Minsk, the Republic of Belarus,
irina.kudriavtseva@gmail.com

THE SHORT FICTION OF EUDORA WELTY, PETER TAYLOR AND FLANNERY O'CONNOR: FROM ANECDOTE TO EPIPHANY

The article deals with the role of such elements of the short story poetics as the anecdotal situation and the character's epiphanic insight. The short story's movement from entertainment to revealing serious moral, social, philosophical and religious issues is demonstrated on the material of the short fiction of Eudora Welty, Peter Taylor and Flannery O'Connor, representatives of the "southern school" of 20th-century American literature. In the analysis of the functioning of the anecdote and the epiphany in the representative works of these authors, the common, typological features are emphasized as caused by the specificity of the regional context, as well as the individual authors' differences. The introduction of the anecdote and the epiphany into the plots of the short stories becomes for these authors an important tool to reveal the dialectic of the local and the universal that is characteristic of their artistic paradigms.

Key words: short story; anecdote; epiphany; 20th-century literature of the American South; E. Welty; P. Taylor; F. O'Connor.

Ref.: 14 titles.

И. К. Кудрявцева, кандидат филологических наук, доцент
Учреждение образования «Минский государственный лингвистический университет»,
ул. Захарова, 21, 220034 Минск, Республика Беларусь, irina.kudriavtseva@gmail.com

МАЛАЯ ПРОЗА ЮДОРЫ УЭЛТИ, ПИТЕРА ТЕЙЛОРА И ФЛАННЕРИ О'КОННОР: ОТ АНЕКДОТА К ЭПИФАНИИ

В статье раскрывается значимость таких элементов поэтики рассказа, как анекдотическая ситуация и эпифаническое внутреннее «озарение» героя. На материале малой прозы Юдоры Уэлти, Питера Тейлора и Фланнери О'Коннор, представителей «южной школы» в литературе США XX века, демонстрируется движение рассказа от занимательности к раскрытию серьезной нравственной, социальной, философской, религиозной проблематики. При анализе наиболее репрезентативных произведений данных авторов с точки зрения функционирования в них анекдота и эпифании акцентируется как типологическая общность, обусловленная спецификой регионального контекста их творчества, так и индивидуально-авторские различия. Введение авторами в сюжет произведений анекдотических ситуаций и эпифанических моментов рассматривается как способ актуализации диалектики локального и универсального, характерной для их творчества.

Ключевые слова: рассказ; анекдот; эпифания; литература Юга США XX века; Ю. Уэлти; П. Тейлор; Ф. О'Коннор.

Библиогр.: 14 назв.

Introduction. The nature and essential features of the short story genre continue to be an arena of debate in Anglo-American, as well as in Russian and Belarusian literary scholarship. Various theories have been proposed regarding specific thematic and formal properties of short stories, and recently also of the cognitive processes that make the experience of reading short stories unique and demanding in its own way. Nevertheless, there are two features of the short story that have often been seen as its defining characteristics: an anecdotal event, character or situation as the starting point of narration and the transformation of a character through epiphany as its final purpose.

Materials and methods of research. This article examines the narrative movement from anecdote to epiphany in selected short stories of three 20th-century authors from the American South — Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty and Peter Taylor — to suggest that it is precisely this dynamic that makes these stories particularly effective. The following methods of research have been used: cultural-historical, structural, comparative.

Research results and discussion. The definitions of the anecdote vary depending on whether it is understood as a genre of historical biography or folklore. F. Lentricchia, for example, defines the anecdote (from the Greek *anecdotos* 'unpublished material') as "a small gossipy narrative generally of an amusing and biographical incident in the life of an important person" [1, p. 3]. For folklorists the anecdote is "a brief narrative current in oral tradition that tells something unusual about a person, an event, or a thing [and] may involve quotation of a witty remark or description of a remarkable situation" [2, p. 223]. This definition emphasizes the anecdote's ability to captivate and amuse, which is achieved through both its content and narrative techniques such as exaggeration, contrast, paradox, surprise ending.

As narratives of comic incidents or accounts of famous people, anecdotes often become incorporated into various "host" genres such as memoirs, articles, biographies. Moreover, the anecdote is considered to be one of the important sources from which the modern short story emerged as a genre, and its genetic connection to the anecdote and its poetics of the comic and the extraordinary remains dynamic and vital. This is true for the short stories of many 20th-century authors from the American South because of the region's rich oral storytelling tradition. E. Welty, for instance, repeatedly emphasized the Southerner's love of the tale: "It is their source of entertainment besides their source of knowledge. <…> It also encourages our sense of exaggeration and the comic, because tales get taller as they go along" [3, p. 164—165]. In one of his interviews P. Taylor described his artistic method in the following way: "I often begin with a character or a situation I've observed or even with a joke I've heard" [4, p. 143].

If the poetics of the anecdote in the short story marks its origins in folklore, the epiphany marks its "literariness." The origin of the term *epiphany* (from the Greek *epiphaneia* 'manifestation,' 'appearance') is connected with religious experience: it was used to describe "the awe-inspiring moment in which a divinity reveals him- or herself or manifests his or her power to a mortal or group of mortals" [5]. The use of this term in literary studies is associated with J. Joyce who made it a part of his aesthetic system. In *Stephen Hero* Joyce wrote: "By an epiphany he [Stephen] meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself" [6]. Joyce recorded his own epiphanies and in his works, especially in the short stories of the collection *Dubliners* (1914), he guided the narrative towards the character's moment of epiphany — an insight into a truth about himself/herself or about the human condition in general.

Epiphanies are highly suggestive of the writer's larger thematic, ethic and aesthetic concerns. They imply the author's desire to foreground internal, psychological realities and are indicative of the author's system of values and worldview. Needless to say, the epiphany's ability to give meaning and coherence to the whole work and to show the transformation of a character in a single "epiphanic leap" becomes extremely relevant for the short story as an intensively managed fictional form. Some theoreticians even see the movement of the short story towards "a single moment of revelation" when "the fundamental secret of things is made accessible and ordinary circumstances are transfused with significance" as its generic feature [7, p. 193]. Terms such as *an epiphanic story*, *a moment-of-truth story*, *a discovery story* have often been used to denote "the canonic form of the modern short story" [8, p. 182].

It can be suggested that as disparate as the anecdote and the epiphany may seem, one dealing with the external, objective reality, the other dealing with the internal, subjective reality, both are effective strategies of representing the extraordinary and the paradoxical in the short story genre. The epiphany in this sense is the structural and semantic equivalent of the "turning point" of the anecdote and likewise often invites the reader to reinterpret all that has come before it.

The notion of epiphany resonated with the agenda of many 20th-century southern authors to represent a changing consciousness in a world that is divided along the lines of race, class and gender. It became especially important for those writers whose formative years coincided with the development of literary modernism with its emphasis on subjective perception of the world. One of

such authors was E. Welty (1909—2001) whose stories "A Piece of News," "Why I Live at the P. O.," "Petrified Man," "Lily Dow and the Three Ladies" and many others are based on anecdotal situations and grotesque characters. At the same time she had a unique gift of showing human drama, loneliness and pain behind each comic event and exploring its transformative and identity-building potential. This is clearly seen in the short story "Kin" (included in *The Bride of the Innis fallen and Other Stories,* 1955) which begins in the anecdotal vein. The protagonist Dicey Hastings is visiting relatives in her hometown in Mississippi, and the conversation turns to Mingo, the family homestead situated several miles away, and to the two relatives who still live there — Uncle Felix, Dicey's great-uncle, now bedridden and almost demented, and Sister Anne, an old maid who is taking care of him. Guided by her aunt Ethel and her cousin Kate, Dicey recollects family stories and anecdotes about these relatives, for example how Sister Anne fell into a well at Cousin Eva's wedding. When Dicey and Kate decide to visit Uncle Felix and Sister Anne, another comic incident happens — upon their arrival at Mingo the girls see a lot of serious-looking strangers in formal clothes on the porch of the house, and they assume that Uncle Felix has died, but it turns out that Sister Anne has allowed an itinerant photographer to use the parlor of Mingo for making photographs of local country people, and Uncle Felix has been removed to a back room.

Looking around the house Dicey begins to recognize familiar places and objects, and the tone shifts from comic to lyric. One of the objects associated with Dicey's childhood visits to Mingo is Uncle Felix's stereopticon which she notices in the back room. The stereopticon triggers the memories of those cherished moments when Dicey and Uncle Felix would go onto the porch to look at pictures of far-away places, and for a moment for Dicey Mingo ceases to be what it is now — an old ruined mansion where the dying Uncle Felix is bossed around by the grotesque Sister Anne. Dicey remembers "the real Uncle Felix" and "the real house" — "cypressy and sweet, cool, reflecting, dustless" [9, p. 669—670]. Another object that creates a poetic association in Dicey's mind, not with her past, but with her present self, is the portrait of Evelina Jerrold, Dicey's great-grandmother, which she notices behind the photographer's backdrop. The portrait has a history of its own: "And I remembered — rather, more warmly, *knew,* like a secret of the family — that the head of this black-haired, black-eyed lady who always looked the right, mysterious age to be my sister, had been fitted to the ready-made portrait by the painter who had called at the door…" [9, p. 674—675]. The hybridity of the portrait reminds Dicey of her own "in-betweenness": she is engaged, but not married yet. She tries to imagine the real Evelina behind the fake surface of the portrait, and in an epiphanic moment feels a particular spiritual kinship with this distant relative: "And still those eyes, opaque, all pupil, belonged to Evelina — I knew, because they saw out, as mine did, weren't warned, as mine weren't, and never shut before the end, as mine would not" [9, p. 675]. Dicey's epiphany heightens hersense of identity as a woman, a Jerrold-Mackaill, a Southerner.

As seen from this paradigmatic example, epiphanies in Welty's stories are often triggered by the characters' sensory impressions — visual, tactile, olfactory — because for Welty the beginning of human knowledge is through the senses. Also, they are associated with the mysterious, the irrational and the intuitive, that's why Welty generally avoids the typical patterns of epiphanic discourse ("realized", "understood" etc.). In fact, she often leaves her characters teetering on the brink of revelation ("Memory" or "No Place for you, My Love") or experiencing a series of micro epiphanies ("Death of Traveling Salesman").

P. Taylor (1917—1994) is another Southern author who relied on anecdotal situations to form the core of his stories: in "Reservations" the bride accidentally gets locked in the bathroom in her room at the hotel on her wedding night; in "The Old Forest" the protagonist who has an upper-class bride happens to be in a car with a girl of a different sort, and this gets into the newspapers when he has a car accident, etc. But for Taylor, as well as for Welty, the focus is primarily psychological. His characters often come to some moment of recognition or epiphanic insight while trying to determine the significance of an episode from their past or present. For example, in the story "The Elect" (from *The Collected Stories of Peter Taylor,* 1969), Taylor's particular combination of comedy and drama is

seen in the climactic moment when Judge Larwell, the newly elected Governor, expresses his gratitude to his wife Nell, a middle-aged woman who supported him during the election campaign. Being by nature quiet and reserved, she assumed that her life would take its normal course after the election, and she is shocked to hear her husband's words: "My darling Nell, …I owe you a debt that I can never repay, and the bad part is that I have no doubt that you will go on increasing that debt of mine so long as we live" [10, p. 405]. Nell recognizes the true meaning of what has been said, and Taylor shows the depth of her disappointment through an epiphanic insight and a violent physiological reaction: "Now the moment had come. She had known how it would be without knowing she knew. What she had dreaded, what she had known to expect (without knowing she knew), was that his expression of gratitude would be but an expression of his desire, his will, that she not now discontinue her public role. Tears quite literally flooded her eyes and flowed down her cheeks. It was as though, quite literally, some dam within her had burst. She knew that there was no turning back and no answering him" [10, p. 406]. By using the verb 'to know' in various forms and tenses in this passage Taylor suggests the female character's awareness of social expectations and the limitations of her gender role. Taylor also conveys the idea of the layered structure of knowledge which comprises not only cognitive and intellectual processes, but premonitions and half-formulated fears as well that become activated in the moment of epiphany. Physical sensations here function not so much to trigger an epiphany (as in Welty's fiction) but to convey its significance, as Taylor's upper- and middle-class Southerners are rarely given to strong emotions and excesses of feelings.

Ironically, Nell's husband and son-in-law assume her tears to be an expression of happiness, and this makes the ending of the story rather anecdotal. However, it also brings into focus the serious moral and social issues that Taylor explores in the story, in particular, suppression of women's real desires in the patriarchal society, which leads to their feelings of isolation, loneliness and inferiority.

F. O'Connor (1925—1964) was a Southerner and a Catholic, and she relied upon regional material to express such notions as original sin and God's grace. Her characters exhibit vices common to all — pride, hypocrisy, selfishness, but also those that she saw as characteristic of Southerners in particular — racial prejudices, aristocratic pretensions, consumerist attitude towards the region's past. To bring into spotlight the characters' moral shortcomings, O'Connor often resorted to ironic inversion and grotesque exaggeration, acombination of humor and terror. In her stories the situations that appear anecdotal turn out to be transformative or even fatal for those characters who persist in their misconceptions. At the same time O'Connor was convinced that each person should be given a chance not only to see God's power but also to receive God's grace. She wrote that "all good stories are about conversion, about a character's changing" [11, p. 275], and she often represented a character's moral evolution through an epiphanic insight.

For example, in the story "The Artificial Nigger" (1955) Mr. Head takes great pains to assert his authority over his grandson Nelson during the trip they make to Atlanta where the boy was born, but to his embarrassment they soon find themselves lost in the big city, which echoes the classic humorous situation of "country-come-to-town." After much tiresome wondering and bickering, Mr. Head sees an opportunity to teach the boy a lesson: Nelson accidentally bumps into an old woman who threatens to call the police, and Mr. Head deliberately steps aside and denies knowing Nelson. He soon realizes the baseness of this action and tries to make it up with Nelson, but the boy wouldn't relent. Tormented by a guilty conscience, Mr. Head desperately walks on with Nelson behind him, and soon they reach a fashionable suburb of the city where they notice a run-down plaster statue of a Negro near of one of the houses: "He was meant to look happy because his mouth was stretched up at the corners but the chipped eye and the angle he was cocked at gave him a wild look of misery instead" [12, p. 268]. In the eyes of Mr. Head and Nelson the statue becomes an embodiment of human pain and suffering, paradoxically bringing them together. Nelson grudgingly accepts Mr. Head's explanation that because "they ain't got enough" real Negroes here "they got to have an artificial one" [12, p. 269], and when they arrive in their hometown Mr. Head has an epiphanic insight: "Mr. Head stood very still and felt the action of mercy touch him again but this time he knew that

there were no words in the world that could name it. He understood that it grew out of agony, which is not denied to any man and which is given in strange ways to children. He understood it was all a man could carry into death to give his Maker and he suddenly burned with shame that he had so little of it to take with him. He stood appalled, judging himself with the thoroughness of God, while the action of mercy covered his pride like a flame and consumed it" [12, p. 269—270].

As seen from this example, the epiphany in O'Connor's works marks the character's painful recognition of his/her limitations as well as of the mystery of God's love: "O'Connor prepares her characters for elevation to a richer life by bringing them to the bedrock of experience: the awareness of limitation. <…> The poor in spirit can recognize their dependence on God and be amazed by the gracious result of their reliance" [13, p. 247]. Epiphanies in O'Connor's stories are usually fully developed, contain colorful imagery and are infused with religious rhetoric, thus she brings the term *epiphany* back to its religious origin.

Conclusion. For southern authors such as E. Welty, P. Taylor and F. O'Connor the anecdote and the epiphany became important means of emotional, intellectual and aesthetic engagement with both the local and the universal. Starting out with a striking incident or an amusing character firmly rooted in southern sociocultural reality and the oral storytelling tradition, these authors often moved into the realm of the mysterious and intuitive by representing their characters' revelatory experiences and epiphanic insights. Relying upon the anecdote and the epiphany to form the kernel of the plot and to create "a poetics of immediacy" [14] in the short story, they dramatized the comedy and drama of human existence and emphasized man's limitations in the face of higher powers or rigid social constructions as well as man's potential for moral growth and self-definition.

References

1. *Lentricchia, F.* Ariel and the police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens / F. Lentricchia. — Madison : University of Wisconsin Press, 1988. — 259 p.

2. *Taylor, A.* The anecdote: a neglected genre / A. Taylor // Medieval literature and folklore studies: essays in honor of Francis Lee Utley / ed. by J. Mandel, B. A. Rosenberg. — New Brunswick : Rutgers University Press, 1970. — P. 223—228.

3. Conversations with Eudora Welty / ed. by P. W. Prenshaw. — Jackson : University Press of Mississippi, 1984. — 356 p.

4. Conversations with Peter Taylor / ed. by H. H. McAlexander. — Jackson : University Press of Mississippi, 1987. — 178 p.

5. *Cioffi, R. L.* Seeing gods: epiphany and narrative in the Greek novels [Electronic resource] / R. L. Cioffi // Ancient narrative. — Mode of access: https://www.ancientnarrative.com/old/pdf/anvol11_02cioffi.pdf . — Date of access: 15.12.2018.

6. *Joyce, J.* Stephen Hero [Electronic resource] / J. Joyce. — Mode of access: https://archive.org/stream /in.ernet.dli.2015.225804/2015.225804.Stephen-Hero_djvu.txt . — Date of access: 10.10.2018.

7. *Shaw, V.* The short story: a critical introduction / V. Shaw. — London : Longman, 1983. — 306 p.

8. *Pratt, M. L.* The short story: the long and the short of it / M. L. Pratt // The new short story theories / ed. by Ch.E. May. — Athens : Ohio University Press, 1994. — P. 91—113.

9. *Welty, E.* Stories, Essays, & Memoir / E. Welty ; ed. by R. Ford, M. Kreyling. — N. Y. : Library of America, 1998. — 976 p.

10. *Taylor, P.* The collected stories / P. Taylor. — N. Y. : Penguin Books, 1986. — 535 p.

11. *O'Connor, F.* The habit of being: letters of Flannery O'Connor / F. O'Connor ; ed. by Sally Fitzgerald. — N. Y. : Vintage Books, 1980. — 617 p.

12. *O'Connor, F.* The complete stories / F. O'Connor. — N. Y. : Farrar, Straus&Giroux, 1992. — 555 p.

13. *Giannone, R.* Flannery O'Connor and the mystery of love / R. Giannone. — Urbana and Chicago : University of Illinois Press, 1989. — 268 p.

14. *Hardy, S.* A poetics of immediacy: oral narrative and the short story / S. Hardy // Style. — 1993. — Vol. 27, № 3. — P. 352—368.

Received by the editorial staff 14.11.2022.

ПАМЯТКА ДЛЯ АВТОРОВ

Научная концепция журнала предполагает публикацию современных достижений в области педагогических, психологических и филологических наук; представление результатов фундаментальных и прикладных исследований, а также результатов, полученных в производственных условиях областей, включая результаты национальных и международных исследований. Статьи аспирантов, докторантов и соискателей последнего года обучения публикуются вне очереди при условии их полного соответствия требованиям, предъявляемым к научным публикациям.

Публикация статей в журнале бесплатная на основании заключённого договора о передаче исключительных прав на объект авторского права (URL: http://www.barsu.by/publishing/vestnik.php).

Статьи принимаются на русском, белорусском и английском языках.

Подробные правила для авторов представлены на официальном сайте БарГУ (URL: http://www.barsu.by /publishing/vestnik.php).

INSTRUCTIONS FOR AUTHORS

The scientific strategy of the journal suggests publishing modern achievements in the fields of Education, Psychology and Philology; presentation of the results of fundamental and applied research, as well as the results obtained under production conditions, both at the domestic and international level. Articles by postgraduate and doctoral students in their final year of traineeship are published out of turn if they are written in strict conformity with the specified requirements.

Publication of articles is free of charge in accordance with the existing contract on transfer of authority to the subject matter of copyright (URL: http://www.barsu.by/publishing/vestnik.php).

Articles can be written in the Russian, Belarusian or English languages.

More detailed instructions for authors can be found on the official website of BarSU (URL: http://www.barsu.by /publishing/vestnik.php).