ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ НАРОДОВ МИРА/LITERATURE OF THE PEOPLES OF THE WORLD

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THE PROBLEM OF FEMALE SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE NOVEL "MIDDLEMARCH" BY GEORGE ELIOT

Research article

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Abstract

The article examines the specifics of artistic understanding of women's issues in the novel "Middlemarch". George Eliot portrays an extraordinary, talented young woman living a rich inner life. The work promotes the reassessment of values in favour of the private sphere of a woman's life and a change in the role and functions of a woman in society. The author of the article comes to the conclusion that the female theme in Eliot's novel acquires, in comparison with the works of her predecessors, new features. The idea is substantiated that women's issues (social, spiritual) are translated into a moral plan and reduced to the idea of the struggle of egoism and altruism, duty to society, family and personal happiness.

Keywords: Victorian England, English mentality, female characters, female self-consciousness, spiritual world.

ПРОБЛЕМА ЖЕНСКОГО САМОСОЗНАНИЯ В РОМАНЕ ДЖОРДЖ ЭЛИОТ "МИДДЛМАРЧ"

Научная статья

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Аннотация

В статье рассматривается специфика художественного осмысления женской проблематики в романе «Миддлмарч». Джордж Элиот изображает неординарную, талантливую молодую женщину, живущую богатой внутренней жизнью. Произведение способствует переоценке ценностей в пользу частной сферы жизни женщины и изменению роли и функций женщины в социуме. Автор статьи приходит к заключению, что женская тема в романе Элиот обретает, по сравнению с произведениями её предшественниц, новые черты. Обосновывается мысль о том, что женская проблематика (социальная, духовная) переводится в моральный план и сводится к идее борьбы эгоизма и альтруизма, долга перед обществом, семьей и личного счастья.

Ключевые слова: викторианская Англия, английский менталитет, женские образы, женское самосознание, духовный мир.

Introduction

The Victorian world was a complex, multifaceted structure, driven forward by industrial innovations and the scope of reforms. Thus, new novels appeared; their authors tried to reflect the picture of Victorian England, to convey the perception and awareness of this time period, as George Eliot did in her works.

The female theme, female issues, turns out to be dominant in the novel “Middlemarch” (1871–1872), named after the name of the provincial English town in which the action takes place. It is significant that its events date back to 1832, the moment of the Reform Bill release, which gave considerable advantages to middle-class men. Victorian women were deprived of the opportunity to receive education on an equal basis with men. That is why they faced insurmountable obstacles to the realization of their abilities and life aspirations. So, R.D. Altick mentions that women could enter the women’s colleges of Cambridge and Oxford only from 1869 and 1879, respectively, but nevertheless they did not have the right to receive a degree until 1920–1921 [7, P. 55]. Having no education, they were forced to do a certain job, which was hardly their vocation, much less a career. The assessment of this state of affairs by the male part of society was simple: the female mind does not have sufficient breadth necessary for conducting business related to commerce or other serious professions; besides, women by their natural virtue, without having business qualities, will not be able to move in the men’s world. Legislation that provided political and social advantages exclusively to the male part of the society, as well as the lack of education, forced women to marry, which, in fact, was the only alternative, and marriage became a kind of “profession” for most female representatives [3], [9], [10].

The theoretical and methodological basis of the present work were the principles of comparative historical literary studies, which had been substantiated and developed in the works of the largest Russian scholars (M.P. Alekseev, M.M. Bakhtin, V.M. Zhirmunsky, etc.). Works of a general theoretical and private nature in the field of literary criticism, belonging to leading domestic and foreign historians of British literature, primarily engaged in the XIX century literary process (E.Yu. Genieva, V.V. Ivasheva, M.I. Tugusheva, etc.), as well as the works of historians and sociologists directly related to women’s and feminism issues (A.A. Case, C.M. Feinberg, S.M. Gilbert, C. Hall, F. Mort, J. Wood, etc.) had methodological significance for our research.

Main results

The reader's acquaintance with Dorothea Brooke and the mention of the Blessed Virgin already in the second sentence of the first chapter determine one of the main motives of the novel – the motive of St. Teresa: "Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters..." [8, P. 9]. Dorothea's aspirations are in tune with many contemporaries' aspirations, who did not find a worthy use for their abilities and talents. An intelligent and impressionable girl, belonging by her origin to the class of landowners, which at the beginning of the XIX century was the ruling class of the country, feels dissatisfaction with the empty secular life that women of her circle lead. Dorothea strives for something more than her acquaintance's stagnant selfishness, turns to religious puritanism and sublime charity in search of the use of her own unspent spiritual forces [4], [6]. In addition, the most important purely female problems of the Victorian era in this novel are the problems of subordination and resistance to the stronger sex representatives and the problem of the inability to engage in any useful activity (in addition to running the house).

A kind of background for the female theme realization is the image of the English provincial society of Middlemarch, living according to the traditional way of life and fully sharing the moral and social attitudes and stereotypes of Victorianism. At the same time, the author acts as a connoisseur of not only national, but also European culture (quite convincing confirmation of which are, for example, the epigraphs to the chapters telling about Lydgate's studies in Paris and Dorothea's unhappy honeymoon in Rome, taken from the works of Cervantes, Dante, Goethe, etc.). Eliot shades English provincialism with all its sanctimonious attitudes and pedantry with the help of intellectual and educated heroes' images – Lydgate and Ladislaw. Beside the two young people mentioned above, there are others who are not bound by the borders of provincial England and are open to a wide world of progressive ideas.

In addition to the interest in history, medicine, mythology and the teachings of Darwin, in her characters George Eliot notes the incomprehensibility of ancient and Catholic art for the Protestant consciousness. For example, Dorothea is confused and puzzled by the impact of Rome on her, which does not fit into the narrow circle of her own views: "…eager Titanic life gazing and struggling on walls and ceilings"; "forms both pale and glowing took possession of her young sense, and fixed themselves in her memory" [8, P. 188]. It is obvious that the author, in order to create the most adequate image of the main character, makes an attempt to study the impact of foreign cultures on susceptible people, secondly, according to K. Hewitt's not unreasonable opinion, this is a wonderful example of her metaphorical prose [2]. It is the latter image, in our opinion, that testifies to the extremely much seen and meaningful by the heroine. We believe that, among other things, Dorothea is a schematic image of a person with an English mentality who is uncomfortable in an alien foreign environment. As A. Kettle notes, the clash of different cultures – Catholic and Protestant – is described at first completely abstractly, and then little by little is used by the author to illuminate the heroine's state of mind [1, P. 203]. We seem to come into contact with Dorothea's spiritual world quite casually, we find out what she really feels. It is the image of intense, passionate feelings experienced by the heroine that contributes to a full-fledged understanding of her image, and it is the inner life, experiences that become decisive in her behavioral model.

During the XIX century the difference of traits in the nature of one person and between people as a whole became the subject of special study, which acquired a massive character; the versatility of mind and memory were investigated by not only scientists, but also writers. The uniqueness of each individual began to be recognized, and, adhering to this position, the authors of novels were looking for fundamentally new topics and ways to implement them. It is in "Middlemarch" that the author attempts to illustrate her own understanding of Spencer's theory on her characters, especially Dorothea, primarily in order to comprehend the position of an outstanding and sensitive woman with a rich spiritual world in society and in relationships with the opposite sex. In addition, Dorothea Brooke's image is shaded by other female characters, for example, Rosamond: "He [Lydgate] once called her a basil plant; and when she asked for an explanation, said that basil was a plant which had flourished wonderfully on a murdered man's brains" [8, P. 792]. Let us recall that the Victorian novelists rather inconsistently portrayed "an angel in the house". On the one hand, such a woman is depicted as an embodied virtue, on the other hand, in many Victorians' works there are alternative models that undermine the ideal that developed in the XIX century [5]. For example, Rosamond's aspirations are incompatible with the fulfillment of Lydgate's life task, since all her desires are focused on petty-bourgeois acquisitiveness – acquiring furniture, luxury things, achieving wealth and "position in society". Thus, George Eliot simultaneously creates and destroys the ideal woman image – a spouse and hostess of the house.

Conclusion

Summing up the results of our research, we note that G. Eliot decries the limitations of her heroines' lives, but at the same time encourages their martyr morality. In the novel "Middlemarch" she portrays a talented, extraordinary woman living a dynamic and rich inner life, striving and able to achieve a lot. However, the writer does not provide the heroine with the field of activity where she could apply her talents.

For a long time, not only George Eliot's art, but also her personality, attract the close attention of literary critics of feminist orientation. However, this is due not only to the extraordinary personality of the writer, who used both creative and social space for self-affirmation, but primarily to the fact that her novels comprehend and demonstrate the biased attitude that women experienced in the conditions of Victorian England from society.

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Рецензия

Все статьи проходят рецензирование. Но рецензент или автор статьи предпочли не публиковать рецензию к этой статье в открытом доступе. Рецензия может быть предоставлена компетентным органам по запросу.

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Conflict of Interest

None declared.

Review

All articles are peer-reviewed. But the reviewer or the author of the article chose not to publish a review of this article in the public domain. The review can be provided to the competent authorities upon request.

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