

**THE IMAGE OF THOMAS CHATTERTON AS A PROCLAMATION OF THE POSTMODERNISTIC
IDEA OF ART IN THE NOVEL "CHATTERTON" BY PETER ACKROYD**

MARYIA ANISIMAVA, IVAN SAVERCHENKO
Polotsk State University, Belarus

All Chatterton's contemporaries and followers saw him as a tragic figure, pure soul, whose godlike image and stainless reputation were undisputable. Romantics constructed their legend around the late poet, a legend which is itself a subject to a change by a subsequent age. Postmodernist Peter Ackroyd calls into doubt the Romantic image of Wordsworth's "marvelous boy," Coleridge's "spirit blest," Keats's "child of sorrow". At the same time various literary historians and researchers accused Chatterton of imitation and plagiarism. Ackroyd creates his own legend, even several legends mixed together about Thomas Chatterton. He suggests an absolutely different provocative, revolutionary to some extent version of poet's life and death. The first impression of the book is that Ackroyd's Chatterton, who has very little to do with the customary image of the poet, is simply the author's attempt to deconstruct the tradition and thus to question the historical truth about his life. However the author does not merely undermine the reputation of the forger and shows his readers the other side of the coin. In fact Ackroyd managed to look deep into the whole phenomenon of Thomas Chatterton and created a more profound, more-sided image of the poet. He managed to unearth the real sense and significance of his life and creative works. Besides the author not only gives his own definition of the poet but at the same time explores the issues of originality and forgery, historical truth and the power of art.

"Chatterton" by Peter Ackroyd is a complex, postmodern novel, with a fragmented structure and multiple plots that employ different time periods, echo and reflect each other. These various story lines are unified by a strong thematic design that not only circles around Chatterton himself but also issues like historical truth versus literary one, original work and forgery, life and death in art as well as immortality through art. "Chatterton" asks what genuine art actually is and if it is possible to trace its originality; and what forgery is after all: a borrowing, a theft or a mere result of intertextuality and thus just a common property of all art with no less important value.

Throughout the book Ackroyd deviates from the biographical account of the poet's life and provides multiple versions of the same events which mock the authenticity of the historical record. The official version of Chatterton's life is given on the first page of the novel. The biographical truth is that Chatterton was apparently discouraged by the poor reception of his poetry in London and killed himself with arsenic at the age of 17 in August, 1770. Ackroyd, however, offers two alternative versions: the first is that Chatterton, being a real forger, only faked his suicide and live long and glorious life, composing verses of his contemporaries, such as Cowper, Gray, and even Blake. The other is that Chatterton did die at seventeen, but not of suicide. Instead of being desperate he was full of hope and vitality; he did not do badly at all, but was prolific during his London period. Instead of a suicide, his death was a mere accident, just a wrong mixture of arsenic and opium, intended to cure a venereal disease. As a consequence the novel gets a very complex structure, where Chatterton stories not only correlate with each other but involve other storylines into this exciting postmodern play.

We first meet with the image of the poet in contemporary period when Charles Wychwood discovers a strange portrait which changes his life completely. This portrait appears to be of no other than Thomas Chatterton, but what Chatterton do we see? "Suddenly he caught the eyes of a middle-aged man who was watching him. He was wearing a dark blue jacket and an opened-necked weight shirt, a costume which might have seemed too Byronic, too young for a man who had clearly entered the middle-age. His short white hair was parted to display a high forehead; he had a peculiar snub nose and a large mouth" [1, p. 11]. This description gives a very little idea of who the depicted man can be. Even though it is hardly possible to distinguish a youthful Thomas Chatterton in this portrait, Wychwood recognizes the poet and he is not a youth anymore. Ackroyd leaves several hints that reveal his personality. They are the man's eyes "Charles particularly noticed his eyes. They seemed to be of different colors and they gave this unknown man an expression of sardonic and even unsettling power" [1, p. 11]. It was the eyes that make Philip recognize Thomas Chatterton as he already has reproduction of the young poet in his possession (apparently Ackroyd means here the only portrait which is believed to be painted during Chatterton's life). It is a well-known fact that eyes remains unchanged throughout a person's life as they are the mirror of one's soul of one's inner world. So the eyes of this man show what a peculiar and powerful personality he is. The other hint is the Books, the four volumes on the table beside the figure. "They were *Kew Gardens, the Revenge, Aella and Vala*. There remains no doubts: the man on the picture

is Thomas Chatterton "Which would mean ...He faked his own death" [1, p. 32]. The course of even sounds very truthful and the reader already has no doubt the man in the picture is Chatterton. However in this same novel another protagonist, George Meredith, says holding this very portrait of the fifty-year-old poet in his hands: "Is he the original or merely a model? ...I suppose only the painter will know" [1, p. 173]. One of the main ideas of the novel is that truth is very subjective and only the creator himself may know the truth about the authenticity of his creation.

No less problematic questions provokes another portrait of the poet, the one painted by Henry Wallace in 1856, a century after the poet's death with red-haired George Meredith posing as Chatterton and his death bed. But even though we the later generation know the fact very well, we still perceive Chatterton in the way he is depicted by Henry Wallace, i.e. in the body of a different person. But the paradox is that this work of art that looks so realistic, so pure and tragic is a mere forgery then. Why should we trust Wallace and admire his picture as a genuine work of art? He deceives his audience! But we do think of Meredith as Chatterton and it makes no difference to us, we just enjoy the painting with this chaste angel-like face in it, his fiery hair and perfect slim body that is lying so desperately in the bed. It just could not happen in a different way! "When all our little feelings are forgotten it will be there still. Now that is immortality" He (Meredith) pointed at the body on the canvas. 'But is it Chatterton or is it Meredith?' 'There will come a time when even you will not know the difference' [1, p. 179]. The time has come and Meredith has become Chatterton. And while looking at the picture we cannot imagine a different Chatterton, not this angel-like "marvelous boy" but a saucy urchin, most likely could be disposed to all sort of terrestrial lusts and whose loose and indecent behaviour lead him to the death door. This idea of poet is provided by Ackroyd on the last pages of the novel, where we meet Chatterton in London. He is very proud and very self-assured and he believes in his own talent and he is in high spirits because of this. Therefore he is not over-modest while speaking about himself: "In my aerial above, he wrote to his mother, I enjoy high spirits. I am *elevated* beyond expression, and I have *lofty* thoughts of my approaching *eminence*. Soon You will see me in the pinnacles of glory ... Dearest mama, my *rise* through life proceeds apace. I am *exalted in* London and will no doubt soon reach the pitch of *sublimity*" [1, p. 207]. Ackroyd even emphasizes the words that define Chatterton's arrogance his youthful enthusiasm and self-confidence. He is very eloquent, while talking about his own values, and places himself on top of the world. But at the same time he has no repugnance towards some base actions and thoughts. Thus, for example, he is not very sentimental regarding his patron's death: "One patron dead, but more to fill his place" [1, p. 219]. He puts down a very sarcastic account of the profit he can make out of the death of this man:

"Lost by Alderman Lee's death in promised work...1.11.6 pounds

Will gain in elegies for Lee....2.2.0 pounds

Will gain in satires against Lee.....3.3.0 pounds

Thus...5.50 pounds

So I'm glad he is dead by 3.13.6 pounds" [1, p. 219].

This profit and loss account sounds pragmatic enough to ruin the romantic stereotype of Chatterton. Besides we learn that the poet appeared to have a very extravagant and provocative lifestyle in London. He is a regular visitor in pubs and a real ladies' man despite his youthful age. He knows no limits in enjoying the great city of London's life as a result he caught a "clap" and this became the actual cause of his death as Ackroyd sees it. His death becomes not desperate suicide but a mere overdose of a so-called remedy "London kill-or-cure", a mixture of arsenic and laudanum. So the tragic death becomes a mere accident, not the result of despair but loose behaviour of a drunk greenhorn: "He leans against the door, laughing and wiping his mouth on the sleeve of his coat. Ah well. I am safe from the powdered angel...He goes over to the bed and drags from beneath it a wooden chest: he unlocks it and takes out a bottle of Spanish brandy...now I'm truly drunk ...I toast Mrs. Angell for ridding me of shameful virginity" [1, p. 226]. He who has always been regarded as a symbol of purity and virginity turns out to be ashamed of it and seems quite proud to be a mature man with a venereal disease already at the age of seventeen. Besides this Chatterton still occupies a very tough stance towards his native land and his satire is inexorable when he happens to mention Bristol and its citizens: "Soon you will see me in the pinnacles of glory, dear mama, far removed from the prostrate and debased Bristolians of our acquaintance" [1, p. 208], "I take it from your accent sir, that you are not from this place?" 'No, Chatterton says hastily. From Bristol' 'Ah, the fair City'. As fair as the sepulcher'. Cross doesn't know how to decipher this remark..." [1, p. 225]. Along with his eloquence while speaking about his own genius he is quite casual in his everyday speech and such colloquial as "clap", "slut", "shit", "shit-hole", "I piss" and so on are not rarity in his vocabulary. Therefore we may assume that Ackroyd is quite deliberate in his intention to destroy all the stereotypes about Thomas Chatterton's personality.

But what for does he blacken the poet's reputation? Nothing is a fortuity in this book. Ackroyd pursues his own post-modern interest. And therefore as a strong contrast to these unpleasant features of the lad he

introduces some very significant ones, and they are his love for poetry and his gift as a poet. In this part of the novel not a word is said about Rowley and antique manuscripts from St. Mary Redcliff. Chatterton is presented simply as a poet who writes all kinds of verses. And he also does it with great enthusiasm, and we see that his talent is acknowledged: "Despite his youth certain booksellers are already prepared to pay him small sums in advance" [1, p. 207]. He composes elegies and satires easily as there's no obstacle for the great talent, the talent of a poet. Because whatever he writes, whether it is a satirical work or an elegy, he does it with pleasure and inspiration, because nothing but the process of creation matters for him. In his conversation with Wallice Meredith claims: "There is nothing more real than words... They are reality" [1, p. 153]. And Chatterton knows his craft so well that he is able to create anything with words, and that is always genuine and of a high value, and along with Ackroyd he explains this: "I hold that writer to be incompetent who cannot write on both sides of the question, Dan. He is not worthy of his Muse... When I write in praise of the late lamented Lee it is true relation; and when I write damning him to the pit of Hell, it's true also. Do you know why, Dan? Because this is an age of poetry and poetry cannot lie" [1, p. 224]. Then there comes a very significant supporting fact and this is the story of other poets, Tookson, Gray, Cowper, told by Dan. Chatterton was prepared for some elevated exalted narration about these great people. But what he hears: "Tookson, a crabbed old body with a pen of vitriol. He used to frequent the Hercules tavern, he was there so often, that he became known as the pillar of Hercules... Gray used to drink until he fell down helpless upon the ground, and then wake up as cheerful as an infant upon his mother's breast" [1, p. 224]. We see that our perverse Chatterton is not an exception in this unbecoming side of life. But at the same time all this makes no real difference for our perception them as poets, since what they created was brilliant and superb and therefore they will always be remembered and glorified by later generations. Besides, we are not destined to know anything about the inner world of a person. Their souls were lofty and we see it in their creative works. Therefore Dan continues speaking about Gray: "No one laughed at him as there was something about him. He walked among us, but his thoughts were elsewhere. But this is no news to you at all... No one laughs at you even though you are but a boy" [1, p. 224]. And that is why poetry is above everything, all stereotypes, all the dirt and misery of something we call the reality. The comic episode with drunk Chatterton returning home has deep sense in it: "He stumbles into an alley and can smell the excrement around him. My feet are in shit, but my home is elsewhere. He could walk forever" [1, p. 226]. Obviously this sentence acquires a figurative meaning. Only the world of imagination is colorful, bright and infinite. And here it seems very appropriate to recall Harriet Scrope's words turned to Charles: "You told me that reality is the invention of unimaginative people" [1, p. 80]. As long as one has a rich and vivid imagination he can live and create forever. Dan was a mere compiler of miscellanies and "had made nothing" of his life, may be because he did not possess this special gift for creating another world. "Oh, now that you talk of Muses you caught me at disadvantage. I know nothing of them... My own day is done, but you may do great things" [1, p. 223], because he was not a poet and as Meredith put it: "The poet does not merely recreate or describe the world. He actually creates it" [1, p. 153]. So we may say that another important point of this novel is to assert "the supremacy of the verbal imagination over the irretrievable world of facts" [2, p. 45]. Ackroyd iterates this position throughout the novel, sometimes in somewhat improbable contexts. For instance, the church leaflet on Chatterton that Philip picks up concludes uncharacteristically: "Chatterton knew that original genius consists in forming new and happy combinations, rather than in searching after thoughts and ideas which had never occurred before" [1, p. 58].

And that is why Ackroyd defends art and says that any art is true, whether it is poetry or painting, as any art is first of all a product of an artist's imagination. Therefore the portrait by Wallice will always be remembered as a true death of Chatterton, even though it all could have happened in a different, less exalted way. And the author shows us that an arsenic death is not a pleasant scene at all. And that Wallice very much idealized the death of the poet. The difference is striking when we read how Ackroyd describes the painter's imagination: " ", and later we see the realistic scene: "The saliva fills Chatterton's mouth... he vomits over the bed, and at the same spasm the shit runs across his thin buttocks – how hot it is – and trickles down his thighs, the smell of it mixing with the rank odor of the sweat pouring out of his body... a birth pain, my bowels ripped open to find the child. Chatterton is being tossed up and down upon the sodden bed... his face is swelling, his eyelids bursting in the heat" [1, p. 231]. Acroyd chooses most abominable words for describing this true death that arouses most negative and disgusting thoughts in the reader's mind and it is far more agreeable to read about the imaginative death, that was created by Henry Wallice: "He could already see Chatterton as the a final union of light and shadow: the dawn sky at the top of the painting, softening down the light to a half-tint with the leaves of the rose plant upturned to reflect the gray and pink tones; the body of Chatterton, loaded with thicker color to receive the impact of the light... Wallice already knew that he would be using the caput mortuum or mars red for the coat, and that he would need tyrian purple for the strong color of his breeches... the gray blouse,

the pale yellow stockings, the pinkish white of the sky. These cooler colors would then be revived by the warm brown of the floor and the darker brown of the shadows ...So everything moved towards the center, towards Thomas Chatterton" [1, p. 168]. It looks very exciting the way the author forges Wallis's procedure of creating the image. Ackroyd seems to understand the painter's technique, here he embodies into the painter, he thinks and feels like Wallace. He seems to be very knowledgeable in the craft and therefore sounds very convincing. As a result we get the most famous portrait of the young poet, which deserves admiration and which will always be known as a real death of the "marvelous boy". And isn't it better to think that Chatterton ended his terrestrial existence in this very lofty way and did not come through dirt and disgust on his way to the death door? All we as readers need is just to believe this and it will be true then. And as Philip through his experience of Charles's belief in the reality of the Chatterton manuscript, comes to learn that nothing new truly exists, that truth is subjective, and Charles's "belief had been the only important thing" [1, p. 231]. Each individual creates his own version of history and believes his own version to be the truth. As Ackroyd's Meredith puts it: "Chatterton did not create an individual simply (the monk Rowley). He invented an entire period and made its imagination his own: no one had properly understood the medieval world until Chatterton summoned it into existence" [1, p. 153]. After Charles' death his friend Philip assumes that it does not matter whether the story is true is not. What really matters is one's belief in the possibility of a myth becoming true. While thinking what to do with Chatterton diaries, he wonders: "Why should historical research not also remain incomplete, existing as a possibility and not fading into knowledge?" [1, p. 231].

Thus, Ackroyd undermines the Romantic myth in order to show that the importance of the poet was *not* that he died a tragic death, or lived a heroic life; the real importance of Chatterton was in his poetry itself: as early as two hundred years ago, he understood the power history woken up to life, which becomes true one merely through imitation and imagination and by means of a unique conflation of fact and fiction.

REFERENCES

1. Ackroyd, P. Chatterton / P. Ackroyd. – London, 1987. – 263 p.
2. Anderson, A. Disappearing within Constructed Narrative in Peter Ackroyd's "Chatterton"/A. Anderson. – London: Hopkins University Press [Electronic Resource]. – Mode of access : www.partners.nytimes.com/books/00/02/06/specials/ackroyd. – Date of access: 22.01.2014
3. Groom, N. The Forger's Shadow. How Forgery Changed the Course of Literature / N. Groom. – London: Picador, 2002. – 368 p.
4. Postmodern Literature and Its Background. [Electronic resource]. – Mode of access: http://www.pulib.sk/elpub2/FF/Kusnir1/pdf_doc/3.pdf – Date of access: 12.02.2014.

UDC 821.111.004=111

THE PHENOMENON OF DIFFUSIVENESS WITHIN THE SPHERE OF LINGUISTICS

ALESYA LEONTYEVA

Moscow State Regional Institute of Humanities, Russia

The article touches upon the problem of semantic diffusiveness in the context of meaning representation and interpretation. The author considers the phenomenon to be a complex one implying its immanent nature and deep roots within its cognitive ground. A self-reflection and an interactive character of the discourse are regarded to be essential criteria in the analysis of the issue.

Though diffusiveness is a non-linguistic term, it may be applied within the sphere of linguistics while analyzing some aspects of semantics, the study of meaning, and its cognitive ground, representation and interpretation issues. It should be mentioned that the subject under consideration is a multi-sided phenomenon having deep roots and complicated character. The simple outlook on the problem gives a limited understanding and an unfinished definition of the phenomenon revealing such synonymic notions as vagueness, ambiguity, inaccuracy, proximity. The notions being synonymic are by no means equivalent. In some cases it may be referred to semantic generalization which seems to be a hasty and incomplete judgement. A more substantial analysis needs a deeper penetration into the problem eliciting more aspects of the issue.