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**Genre variety of A. Christie`s short stories**

**Жанровая вариативность коротких рассказов А. Кристи**

**Abstract:** The article concentrates on the criteria of popular literary genre differentiation of, the key provisions of the existing classifications are analyzed. Special attention is given to the genre variety of A. Christie`s short stories, the wide range of which is represented by eight popular genres: detective story, mystery, supernatural story, quest, thriller, adventure story, encounter story and (melo)drama.

**Keywords:** high and mass literature,popular literature, genre, narrative, genre analysis, thematic, structure.

**Аннотация:** В статье рассматриваются критерии жанровой дифференциации произведений популярной литературы и анализируются основные положения существующих классификаций. Особое внимание уделяется жанровому разнообразию коротких рассказов А. Кристи, широкий спектр которых позволяет выделить восемь популярных жанров: детектив, таинственную историю, мистическую историю, историю-квест, триллер, приключенческую историю, историю противостояния и (мело)драму.

**Ключевые слова:** высокая и массовая литература, популярная литература, жанр, нарратив, жанровый анализ, тематический, структура.

The literary processes of the modern epoch reflect the obvious tendencies of coexistence and interaction of two cultures: “high” and mass. The long-lasted neglection of the specific features of mass literature (and moreover – mass society and mass conscious) culminated in an unexpectedly diverse controversy that filled the existing literary critical vacuum and made it possible to identify the rational aspects of mass literature as a phenomenon having the right for the existence and actual evaluation. In numerous studies concerning with the research of mass literature (and more broadly – mass culture) one of its characteristic features nominates the whole type of such texts. As a result, *mass* literature (associated with mass society) is named as *popular* (claimed by the broadest audience), or *trivial* (reproducing social and fictional stereotypes), or *low* (being aesthetically low-grade) etc. This tendency is also typical for foreign critical studies (cf. *popular literature, kitsch literature, lowbrow art, pulp fiction, Trivialliteratura, paraliterature*) [6, p. 26].

In modern literary context mass literature is considered as a part of general cultural tradition, on a par with samples of “high”, “elite” literature. Taking this point into account, the term “popular literature”, offered by the German critic Birgitt Menzel, seems to be more correct than definitions like “mass literature” or “trivial literature”, since this term avoids contradictory and sometimes contemptuous shades of this concept, that covers not only “the production, structure, ways of publishing and distributing literary texts, but also their reception” [5, p. 394].

The innovative approach to the research of the aesthetic characteristics of popular literature made it possible to apply for linguistic investigation the latest full range of modern scientific methodologies, including narrative analysis, as well as the categories of modern semiotic and cognitive studies. The research of popular literature in the framework of historical and cultural diachrony provides a number of perspective provisions, since it is that aspect of popular literature which can reveal the reasons and conditions for its promotion from the periphery of the field of cultural manifestations to its center.

The variety of literary and aesthetic properties of popular literature caused the necessity of differentiation and study of its genres, the main components of its genre paradigms, the determination of the features and patterns of the popular genre evolution within general literary trends. In this article, Agatha Christie`s[[1]](#footnote-1) short stories were chosen as the research material, as they, on the whole, reflect the genre specificity of popular literature and provide a spacious field for serious narratological study. The purpose of the article is a genre analysis of the short stories of the writer.

One of the most debatable problems associated with the study of popular literature is the problem of its genre classification. Despite the numerous attempts to develop a unified typology of popular literature, the issue of its genre stratification is still being unresolved. The famous American culturologist John Cawelti (1976), the author of “formula literature” theory, suggested the classification comprising the following literary formulas: adventure, romance, mystery, melodrama, story of alien beings or states [4, p. 35]. A literary formula is conceptualized as “the structure of narrative or dramatic conventions used in a very large number of works” [ibid., p.34]. The emergence of formulas, according to J. Cawelti, is the result of combining specific cultural themes, stereotypes and symbols with more universal narrative archetypes, and the process of transformation and changing the formulas is thought as “a kind of cultural evolution with survival as a result of the selection produced by the audience” [ibid., p.35].

William Brewer and Edward Lichtenstein, substantiating the provisions of their Structural-Affective Theory, appealing to the popular literature, name the following genres: detective story, western, spy story, romance, horror story, Gothic history, adventure story and science fiction [1, p. 9]. And although the focus of the authors` study is not so much in the genre characteristics of the narrative, as in its structural patterns, this classification is quite common among the foreign text researchers.

We can mention two more popular genre classifications. According to George Dove`s (1989) alternative interpretation, four basic structural patterns underlying any text are distinguished: the Encounter Story, the Mystery Story, the Detective Story, the Ghost Story [2, p. 59-61]. Another classification is offered by the well-known writer and journalist Amanda Patterson, who differentiates five main genres of popular literature, each of them can include various subgenres: 1) mystery; 2) romance; 3) thriller; 4) fantasy; 5) science fiction [3].

It should be noted that the problem of popular texts classification is complicated by the fact that there are no any clear boundaries between genres. This fact can be explained by the internal specificity of popular literature: characterized by a high degree of standardization, this literary type, at the same time, leaves space for an aesthetic experiment that allows the author “to give new life to stereotypes” and “to change the plot and the environment of action in a new way, without going beyond the boundaries of the formula” [4, p. 40]. As a result, narratives of popular literature are replenished with hybrid forms possessing the signs of several genres. Their genre affiliation is determined by the dominant signs of some definite formula, the other signs determine its genre variation (for example, an ironic detective story is thought as a detective story with the elements of a melodrama).

Having analyzed the existing classifications, it seems possible to distinguish 12 most typical genres of popular literature: 1) detective story; 2) mystery; 3) supernatural story; 4) western; 5) encounter story (spy story is included); 6) thriller (including horror and Gothic); 7) adventure story; 8) love story; 9) melo(drama); 10) fantasy; 11) quest; and 12) science fiction. Each of these genres is characterized by a certain theme (investigation of a crime, searching for treasures, rescuing a victim, solving the mystery, etc.), which determines the appropriate set of argument slots, as well as its own dynamics of plot development and the possible outcome – negative or positive.

The factual data of our study are represented by 143 short stories written by A. Christie. According to the results of genre analysis, these stories refer to eight popular genres (from twelve mentioned above). They are: *detective story, mystery, supernatural story, quest, thriller, adventure story, encounter story, (melo)drama*. Here the brief specification of each genre is presented.

1. **Detective** **story** – a typical classic detective story, based on the investigation of a crime. The main character is the investigator (questor), whose functions in the narrative can be performed by both a professional detective and one of the characters, who became a questor occasionally. Thus, the central character of the majority A. Christie`s works – Hercule Poirot investigates crimes professionally (the collections *Poirot Investigates*,1924 and *Poirot`s Early Cases*, 1974), while the other well-known heroine – Miss Jane Marple (the collections *Thirteen Problems*, 1933 and *Miss Marple`s Final Cases*, 1979) exposes the criminal and reconstructs the circumstances of the crime only by means of her everyday life experience and knowledge of human psychology. Sometimes the investigator has an assistant who accentuates the genius of the detective (for example, Captain Hastings) and whose role for the author of the text is mostly associated with the role of a “naive reader”. Rarely, the investigation is carried out by two equal partners, for example, Tommy and Tuppence Beresford (the collection *Partners in Crime*, 1929). The detective stories usually end with the identification of the perpetrator and his further arrest, but there exist some exceptions: the criminal can avoid the punishment (*Wireless,* 1933), or the detective can release the criminal *(Double Clue, 1974),* or the criminal is punished by Providence (*Philomel Cottage*, 1934).
2. **Mystery** – a type of story, focused on the description of unusual or strange events, having no logical explanation (e.g. *The Mistery of the Blue Jar*, 1933; *Wireless*, 1993; *The Case of the Missing Lady*, 1929). In the course of the plot development, the circumstances of the events are being clarified and specified, but the full picture is revealed only at the end of the story, where a rational explanation of the events is given. These events can have either criminal and non-criminal background. In the story “The Case of the Missing Lady”, the bridegroom who suddenly arrived from the expedition attended to the detective agency with a request to find the missing bride. In the course of their searching the detectives found the girl in a private clinic. Assuming that she became a victim of kidnapping, the detectives developed the plan for her rescue and implemented it. The denouement turns out to be unexpected: preparing for the wedding, the bride decided to lose her weight in a specialized clinic, keeping it in secret. As we see, in this case the disappearance of the girl isn`t connected with the crime. In another story – “The Disappearance of Mr. Davenheim” (1924) – the mysterious disappearance of the famous banker really had a criminal background. The police tried several versions: a murder, a kidnapping, a suicide. The matter was complicated by the fact that a large sum of money were also disappeared. The detective Hercule Poirot stated that the disappearance of the banker was his own mystification performed in order to steal the stockholders` money.
3. **Supernatural story** is constructed on the same principles as the preceding genre, but instead of rational explanation of the events happened, the reader is given an irrational one, admitting the activity of supernatural forces (e.g. The Fourth Man, 1933; The Gypsy, 1933; The Lamp, 1933; The Call of Wings, 1933).
4. **Quest** concentrates on the logical unraveling of a complex intellectual problem (searching for treasure, deciphering a message, solving a mystery, etc.). We can mention the following short stories: The Case of the Missing Will, 1924; Strange Jest, 1979; Manx Gold, 1997)
5. **Thriller** is a frequently occurred type of story, where the protagonist becomes a victim. The hardships and dangers which the victim faces, make him / her seek for the way out, and the difficulties he / she has to overcome for saving his / her own life or freedom cause the reader to feel the emotional tension associated with the anxious expectation of the outcome.

In A. Christie`s story “Red Signal” (1933) the main character, Dermot West, being at a party in the house of his army friend Jack Trent and his wife Claire, felt a strange anxiety. It was strengthened by the atmosphere at the table: the guests were discussing the quirks of the human psyche and the peculiarities of the behavior of the mentally-ill. Then the well-known medium, invited to the party, foretold an imminent death of one of the participants of a spiritual session. No wonder that incident just intensified the protagonist’s anxiety. After the party, Dermot visited his uncle – a famous psychiatrist, who was also present at Trents`. As it turned out, he wanted to warn his nephew from the private affair with Claire Trent, who Dermot was secretly in love with. The uncle and his nephew quarreled and West left.

At the dance-party Claire unexpectedly confessed that she had some response feelings to Dermot, but they couldn`t be together because of a serious illness. But Dermot promised to take her far away and take care of her. On returning home, Dermot noticed that the sense of danger greatly increased. In thoughtfulness the young man started examining the room, opening the doors of cabinets and drawers. Suddenly, in one of them, he discovered a revolver. At that moment, the police came and informed about Sir Allington`s (his uncle) death. Pretending to be a servant, Dermot left his home. Suspecting that he became a victim of someone`s diabolic plan, West decided to find the criminal himself. Unexpectedly he rushed at Jack Trent, who offered his assistance. Arriving at Trent`s home, the latter made a shocking confession: it was he, Jack Trent, who killed Dermot`s uncle. It turned out, that Jack was mentally ill and the psychiatrist was invited to the party to give a medical expertise about the patient`s mental health. To avoid forced hospitalization, Trent killed the doctor and put the blame on his nephew. The next victims were to be Claire and Dermot. Fortunately, when the criminal raised his revolver, the police burst into the house. Having realized the consequences, Jack Trent shot himself.

1. **Adventure story** describes the fascinating adventures of the protagonist, who overcomes obstacles willingly, without being a victim of circumstances. In this case, the reader`s expectations are positive: the reader is impressed by the purposefulness, decisiveness and quick-wittedness of the hero (e.g. The Case of the City Clark, 1934; The Girl in the Train, 1934; The Golden Ball, 1934).
2. **Encounter story** represents the conflict between two opposing forces – the hero and the anti-hero (sometimes the superhero and the supervillain), and besides the adversary (a person or an organization) is determined in the narrative phase of the complicating action. The encounter story is typical for action stories, westerns, spy stories, special agent stories (such as James Bond), etc (e.g. Blindman`s Buff, 1929; The Adventure of Sinister Stranger, 1929; The Accident, 1934).
3. **(Melo)drama** – a type of story on everyday life topics dealing with personal and / or family-household relationships of main characters. If these relations are dramatic, and the fate of one or more characters depends on the resolution of the conflict, the story can be viewed as a drama. The denouement of the drama can be either happy or tragic (e.g. The Face of Helen, 1930). If the circumstances of the conflict are not so fateful, and the topic focuses on the problems of a personal or social nature, then it can be classified as a melodrama that is always terminated with a happy end (e.g. Next to a Dog, 1991).

In accordance with the results of quantitative analysis, more than a half of A. Christie`s short stories are represented by the detective stories – 72 (50.3%). 25 short stories (17.5%) refer to dramas / melodramas, 9 stories (6.3%) are defined as the supernatural stories, 6 stories (4.2%) are determined as the encounter stories as well as another 6 stories (4.2%) – as the adventure stories. Thrillers (5 – 3.5%) and quests (3 – 2.1%) are not numerous.

Among 143 short stories, representing eight popular literary genres, almost two thirds (99 stories – 68.8%) are associated with criminal topics. In our research such narratives are defined as criminal stories. Criminal story is a type of narrative, which is based on the story of investigation or crime prevention. In the case of the investigation of the crime the reader deals with the thematic macrostructure CRIME and its subordinate slots – CRIMINAL, VICTIM, METHOD, INSTRUMENT, LOCATION / TIME, MOTIVE / CAUSE, etc., in case of crime prevention – with the topic THREAT (= POTENTIAL CRIME) and subordinate slots – SUBJECT, OBJECT, METHOD, INSTRUMENT, LOCATION / TIME, MOTIVE / CAUSE, OUTCOME, etc. Criminal stories, mainly presented by detectives (72 stories out of 99, or 72.7%), also include mysteries (13 – 13.1%), thrillers (5 – 5.1%), melodramas (5 – 5.1%) and encounter stories (4 – 4%).

The genre analysis of the research material is of great importance as it aids to classify the analyzed stories according to the global theme subordinating thematic micro- and macrostructures of the popular texts, and to model the narrative structures of such texts. Different genre attributes predetermine different cognitive patterns of the narrative structure. The modeling of such patterns is supposed to be the topic of our further research.

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1. Agatha Christie (1890-1976), a famous English writer, the author of more than 70 novels, 19 collections of stories and 30 plays. By volume of prints, her works take the third place after the Bible and works by W. Shakespeare. In 1955 she was awarded the “Grand Master” Award by the American Academy of Writers-Detectivists. In 1971 she was awarded the Order of the British Empire for her merits in literature. A. Christie`s works were translated into more than 100 languages. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)