

**The Concept of Childhood in Sue Townsend's *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole* and John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany***

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**Abstract:** *This article studies the concept of childhood as the content side of the word sign and considers the main directions of this research. It is noted that the concept of childhood is close to the concept of child, but they are not identical, because their lexical and semantic features are in different planes. The features of the concept of childhood are analyzed by the example of the novels *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole* by S. Townsend and *A Prayer for Owen Meany* by J. Irving. Based on the analysis carried out, it is asserted that the concept of childhood is only partly universal; for each writer this concept has its own unique characteristics.*

**Keywords:** concept of childhood, nomination, artistic text, English-language literature, concept structure.

### **Introduction**

One of the most relevant problems of modern philology is the identification of the concept as the content side of the word sign that implies notions, which are related to the mental, spiritual and material life, socially and subjectively interpreted, fixed in the collective experience of the people, as well as form historical roots in their life and correlate with other associated or opposing notions. The problem of studying the concept from the point of view of the interaction between the universal, national and individual author's principles is also urgent.

To date, there are three main directions of research of the concept, which are based on a common position: the concept is what defines the content of the notion, a synonym for meaning. Representatives of the first direction, such as N.D. Arutyunova, A.D. Shmelev and T.V. Bulygina, consider the semantics of the linguistic sign as the only means of formation of the content of the concept. Representatives of the second direction, such as E.S. Kubryakova, V.Z. Demyankov<sup>1</sup>, Yu.G. Pankrats and L.G. Luzina, study the concept from the point of collision of the word meaning with the personal and national experience. According to a number of researchers, the concept is a kind of intermediary between the word and the reality<sup>2</sup>. Representatives of the third direction, such as V.N. Teliya and Yu.S. Stepanov, emphasize the culturological aspect of research. In particular, they consider the concept as the main cell of culture in the human mental world and culture as the totality of concepts and relations between them.

It is advisable to consider the concept in the context of understanding that each language, including the language of a particular literary work, is characterized

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<sup>1</sup> V. Demyankov, "The term "concept" as an element of terminological culture," in *Language as a Matter of Meaning*, 2007, p. 605-621.

<sup>2</sup> E. S. Kubryakova, V. Z. Demyankov, Yu. G. Pankrats, L. G. Luzina, *A brief dictionary of cognitive terms*, Moscow, 1997, p.244; Elena V. Lapina, Ljudmila A. Obukhova, Vladimir N. Mezinov, Valentina V. Gladkikh, Olga A. Popova, "Social and Humanistic Values of Teachers in the Supplementary Vocational Training System (on the Example of Voronezh Oblast)," in *Astra Salvensis*, VI (2018), no. 11, p. 577.

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by a certain way of world perception and organization. According to Yu. Apresyan<sup>3</sup>, meanings formulated in the language are united in an integral system of notions, a kind of philosophical position that is partly of a universal and national nature. At the same time, it is necessary to take into account the close interrelation of the language (the language of the work) with national culture, which determines a certain value system, as well as with the moral and spiritual attitudes of society at this stage of development. Very revealing in this respect is the specificity of the concept of childhood in the language of literary works.

The above aspects determine the choice of the topic, since its relevance stems from both the interest of modern philological science to study the concept as a whole, and attention to the implementation of specific concepts in literary works.

This study gives an interpretation of the implementation of one of the main concepts related to human life in literary works. The specificity of this interpretation is dictated by the need to study the "age" concepts, and the ambiguity of their interpretation in linguistics and literary criticism.

### **Methods**

This article uses the following methods: the comparative-historical method, which helps to analyze the works of different national literatures; the hermeneutical method, which consists in interpreting dominant figurative structures; the receptive method, which consists in applying the ideas of the school of receptive aesthetics on the availability of a certain program of text perception in the analyzed works; the complex approach, which is based on the application of methods of other sciences (linguistics, psychology, cultural studies).

### **Results**

Within the framework of this article, the specificity of the concept of childhood was examined by the example of literary works and their translations, in particular, the novels *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole* by the British writer Sue Townsend and *A Prayer for Owen Meany* by the American writer and screenwriter John Irving.

The concept of childhood is the most important in the conceptual sphere of these literary works. However, based on the ideological and creative attitudes of the writers as well as on their individual past, the interpretations of childhood in their works differ. For example, Sue Townsend talks about childhood as a period filled with various (serious and not serious) difficulties: complicated relationships with parents, lack of money, first love and spiritual solitude intersect with worries that you failed to do chin-ups at school, the dog ate your homework, or that you have a large pimple on your chin, etc.

In John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, childhood appears as a kind of spiritual transformation of the protagonist, after he hits a foul ball that kills his best

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<sup>3</sup> Yu. D Apresyan, "Integral description of language and systemic lexicography," in *Languages of Russian Culture*, 1995.

friend's mother. After this incident, the protagonist begins to feel like he is an "instrument of God" and discovers that he has amazing abilities (for example, he can foresee the future).

A comprehensive analysis of the above works allows us to identify the lexical means of representation of the concept of childhood, and to offer a semantic classification of nominations in English and Russian. When depicting systemic relations in the sphere of nomination of this concept, we applied the principles and methods of studying lexical-semantic, lexical-grammatical and thematic groups. The keyword (the name of the concept) is the noun 'childhood', which displays the core features of the considered concept.

In modern English, the lexical unit 'childhood' is used in the following meanings:

1. The state of being a child;
2. The time in which persons are children;
3. The condition or time from infancy to puberty;
4. The state or period of being a child<sup>4</sup>.

Thus, the core of the concept of childhood consists of a number of features, namely "time", "state", "person", and "not an adult". It should be noted that the same "not an adult" is identifying for all the nominations of childhood and differentiating with respect to the nominations of other age-related states and periods. The concept of childhood includes the following thematic series: child, infancy, babyhood, boyhood or girlhood, puberty, minority, adolescence, teens.

Based on the study, we came to the conclusion that the concept of childhood is only partly universal – the existing differences relate mainly to the artistic and value aspects of the concept and its specificity.

## Discussion

The concept of childhood is one of the so-called "age" concepts that includes the concept of a period of time from birth to adulthood. This concept is basically nationwide (universal), because regardless of nationality everybody was a child once. In literature, this period is characterized either as a happy, light, carefree, gay, but rapidly passing stage of human life, or as a heavy, joyless and difficult stage<sup>5</sup>. The most important characteristic of childhood is the place where it takes place. Despite the fact that the interpretations of the concept of childhood, like any other definition, have an ambivalent character, it is often represented by positive connotations.

The concepts of childhood and child are very close in meaning, but they are not identical, because their lexical and semantic features are in different planes. For example, the lexico-semantic field "childhood" is much broader, being in the conceptual space of "time"<sup>6</sup>. Anyway, these concepts are related: they characterize the specificity of the child's thinking and worldview, his spiritual, mental and

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<sup>4</sup> Explanatory Dictionary of English. Retrieved from: <http://translito.com>, accessed 07. 03. 2018.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> V. V. Tsurkan, *Anthology of artistic concepts of Russian literature of the XX century*, Moscow, 2013.

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psycho-emotional state. In particular, the concepts of childhood and child are characterized by the following:

1. Integrity of the child's soul, its naivety and frankness; absence of any split and artificiality in the child; spiritual and mental health.
2. Children's mythology, mythmaking and creative energy.
3. Freedom from stereotypes, norms and conventions; freedom of expression; spiritual freedom.
4. The unusually wide and rich world of children's fantasy, as well as playing as the main form of children's activity<sup>7</sup>.

The structure of the considered concept is based on the juxtaposition of childhood as the initial stage of human life and maturity as the highest stage of physical and intellectual development. However, with respect to the spiritual life, this juxtaposition is conditional, due to the understanding of childhood as a certain state of the soul. For example, in literary works this is implemented at the level of a conditionally metaphorical conception of childishness; therefore, the understanding of the concept of childhood cannot be limited only to physiological connotations.

According to a number of philosophers and psychologists, the most important element of the structure of this concept is the understanding of childhood as a kind of the creative principle. For example, S. Freud compared childhood with the unique world created and perceived by children with a great deal of seriousness and sincerity<sup>8</sup>. For E. Berne childhood was, first of all, a time of creativity, joy, spontaneous promptings and intuition<sup>9</sup>. F. Nietzsche defined childhood as a period when a person can reach the highest level of creative self-improvement<sup>10</sup>. Thus, from the standpoint of philosophy and psychology, the adult's "childishness" can be interpreted as a special way of world perception and world view, which characterizes a creative, extraordinary personality.

From the standpoint of Christianity, childhood is a state of the soul, when man reaches the essential and perfect part of his true self. The religious aspect in the interpretation of childhood consists in the perception of the child as the ideal of man. In other words, the children's spiritual life (spiritual organization as a type) is closer to the ideal than the adult's. At any rate, childhood is a multidimensional psychosocial and cultural phenomenon. From an ontological point of view, it can be viewed as a definite stage of human life, which takes place from the child's birth to adulthood and includes a number of stages.

When considering the block of English-language literary works, we identified a number of nominations for infants and newborns: newborn, baby, infant, babbie, neonate, etc. The large number of nominations for infants and newborns indicates that in the English artistic language infant age is characterized as very important and quite responsible. Early and preschool ages are not so

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> S. Freud, *Artist and fantasy*, Moscow, 1995, p.130-135.

<sup>9</sup> E. Berne, *Games people play: The psychology of human relationships*, St. Petersburg, Lenizdat, 1992, p. 400.

<sup>10</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Thus spoke Zarathustra: A book for everyone and no one*, St. Petersburg, 1990, p.17-25.

thoroughly conceptualized in English. Junior school age is reflected in the following nominations: schoolboy, schoolchild, first-former, schoolkid, pupil, repeater, etc.

In Townsend's *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole*, the concept of childhood is implemented through various figurative-metaphorical means. Since the novel is written in the genre of a diary, the linguistic characteristics of this concept can be obtained only through the prism of the protagonist's subjective view on certain events, incidents, facts of life, which are either ascertained or estimated. The specificity of this genre is that the author entrusts the protagonist with the complete freedom of action; the protagonist "determines" the course of the narrative himself, and the author does not "interfere" in it. All this creates a special emotional atmosphere in which the work is perceived. For example:

*"Saturday January 24<sup>th</sup>*

*Today was the most terrible day of my life. My mother has got a job doing her rotten typing in an insurance office! She starts on Monday! Mr. Lucas works at the same place. He is going to give her a lift every day.*

*And my father is in a bad mood – he thinks his big-end is going.*

*But worst of all, Bert Baxter is not a nice old age pensioner! He drinks and smokes and has an alsatian dog called Sabre. Sabre was locked in the kitchen while I was cutting the massive hedge, but he didn't stop growling once. But even worse than that! Pandora is going out with Nigel!!!!*

*I think I will never get over this shock"<sup>11</sup>.*

*«Суббота, 24 января*

*Сегодня – самый страшный день моей жизни. Маму с ее дурацкой машинописью взяли в страховую компанию, где работает мистер Люкас. Он будет возить ее на службу.*

*Папа сильно не в духе – боится неминуемой катастрофы.*

*Но хуже всего: Берт Бакстер – вовсе не милый пенсионер-старичок! Он курит, пьет и держит огромную овчарку по кличке Сабля. Пока я подрезал разросшийся кустарник, ее заперли в сарай, и она все время выла. А самое ужасное – Пандора ходит с Найджилом!!!*

*Вот уж этого я точно не переживу» (translated by I. Knyazev).*

Adrian is a very kind and intelligent boy. At the age of thirteen, he writes poetry, looks after a pensioner, earns money by delivering newspapers, and often has to fulfill the duties of his parents. Adrian's mother, who thinks only of herself, does not know how to do the housekeeping and does not worry about the comfort in the house. His father, who lost his job and fell into a depression, uncontrollably withdraws money from credit cards. Adrian's parents live their own lives and practically do not pay attention to their son, which is why he had to become an independent person early. The author introduces Adrian into the world of adults who do not know how to cope with their own problems and are completely irresponsible, thereby contrasting the child's reasonable, somewhat naive, world with the serious and, at the same time, senseless existence of adults.

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<sup>11</sup> S. Townsend, *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole*, London, Penguin Books Ltd, 2012, p. 336.

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The concept of childhood in Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany* is revealed in a different manner, as it is closely related to the concept of faith. For the writer childhood does not have clear religious notions in the mental and spiritual world; it is rather an experienced than conceivable phenomenon, an object of the author's bright emotions and sympathies. In his novel, Irving tried to recreate the child's religious consciousness. Various mysterious and inexplicable events take place in the protagonist's life. The protagonist of the novel, an appealing and tragic small boy with a rough voice, turns out to be a person who knows about his mission in advance, and his whole life, in fact, is a preparation for the main thing that awaits him at the end of the journey.

The concept of childhood in *A Prayer for Owen Meany* is based on the assertion that the child is closer to God than the adult. Irving believes that this is the basis of the child's religiousness and engagement with God. The God's living closeness is perceived by Owen as a mystery. His bewilderment is caused by any violation of the natural order as well as any (often quite prosaic) event, understood in the context of religion or belief. For example:

*"When I complained about church, I complained about the usual things a kid complains about: the claustrophobia, the boredom. But Owen complained religiously. A person's faith goes at its own pace, Owen Meany said "The trouble with church is the service. A service is conducted for a mass audience. Just when I start to like the hymn, everyone plops down to pray. Just when I start to hear the prayer, everyone pops up to sing. And what does the stupid sermon have to do with God? Who knows what God thinks of current events? Who cares?"<sup>12</sup>.*

*«Когда я жаловался на церковь, это были обычные детские жалобы – тут страшно и скучно. Но недовольство Оуэна имело религиозную подоплеку. «Каждый человек верит по-своему, – говорил Оуэн Мини. – Что плохо в церкви – так это служба. Служба проводится сразу для целой массы народа. Как только мне начинает нравиться гимн, все тут же хлопается на колени и молятся. Как только я прислушиваюсь к молитве, все вскакивают и начинают петь. А взять хотя бы эту дурацкую проповедь – какое она имеет отношение к Богу? Кому известно, что на самом деле Бог думает о текущих событиях? И кого это волнует?»» (translated by V. Prakht).*

The protagonist's attitude towards reality is mythological in nature. The mythological components of the concept of childhood, considered by Irving, include:

- the desire to create a different, more interesting life;
- the inability of the child's consciousness to distinguish between the notions of game, myth, religion and faith;
- calm acceptance of happiness and grief, joy and sadness, good and bad events.

Owen creates his own world, by modifying everything around him, giving it his own meaning and coming up with his own explanations. He lives with a constant sense of "higher meaning" (not only at the spiritual level, but also at the mundane level) perceiving it intuitively. Lexical, semantic and syntactic language

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<sup>12</sup> J. Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, London, Black Swan, 2010, p. 720.

means in this novel are aimed at giving this description.

### **Conclusions**

The analysis of the two novels allowed us to conclude that the concept of childhood is only partly universal: the existing differences relate mainly to the artistic and value aspects of the concept and its specificity, which in the English-language literature is expressed in the intensity of evaluation attitude and the specificity of associative links<sup>13</sup>. Thus, the value side of the concept of childhood involves the positive evaluation attitude of writers, including S. Townsend and J. Irving, towards childhood as a period of human life from the standpoint of moral values.

In general, in the works of such different authors, similar means of implementing the concept of childhood can be traced, which, undoubtedly, speaks of a unified principle for the implementation of the concept itself in different national literatures. However, there is a difference in this implementation – at the level of images and plots.

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<sup>13</sup> I. A. Kalyuzhnaya, *The concept of childhood in German and Russian linguocultures. The author's abstract of doctoral dissertation*, 2007.

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