



Cruel Infantile Hero in the Plays of J. Penhall

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Abstract: The infantile child characters have been used in plays of postmodernism period. This article analyzes child character features of J. Penhall's plays.

Keywords: infantile, child, cruelty, hero, play, postmodernism.

Introduction. Joe Penhall (Penhall, Joe 1967) - British playwright, author of a dozen plays and screenplays, famous in Russia thanks to post-apocalyptic film "The Road" (The Road, 2009, dir. J. Hillcoat), the scriptwriter of which was, and his only play translated into Russian, "Blue Orange" (Blue / Orange, 2000), dedicated to the problems of British psychiatry.

The range of conflicts and contradictions studied by the playwright is quite wide, and the conflicts of children and parents are also one of the topics that Joe Penhall is actively interested in, "his topical plays concern the failure of the National Health System in the integration of schizophrenic patients into society, personal and family collapse that occur extremely common, the incapacity for compassion in our modern world" [Boles 2011: 3].

Analysis. In the drama *Haunted Child* (2011) by Joe Penhall, the existence of heroes is determined by a premonition of the collapse of peace and impending horror: nine-year-old Thomas, who is experiencing separation from his father, hears frightening creaks and rustles at night, the presence of someone in the house seems to be:

«T h o m a s. The door. The door opened.

J u l i e. It was a wind.

T h o m a s. There's somebody upstairs.

J u l i e. There's nobody upstairs.

<...>

T h o m a s. I think I saw daddy. I think I saw him in the house. I think I heard him. Maybe it's him I heard on the stairs.

J u l i e. It wasn't your father.

T h o m a s. Who was it?

J u l i e. It wasn't anybody» [Penhall 2011: 4-6].

The child shares his fears with his mother, which leads her into a similar situation. From the very first "night" scenes that open play, the reader will recognize the poetics of horror, "the repetition of mastered methods of hypnosis" which "formed the basis of his cultural translation" [Khapaeva 2010: 282], which is rightly noted by D. Khapaeva.

Expectation evil experienced by the heroes, the feeling of a child and a mother hanging over them an inexplicable and mysterious threat, forcing fear and horror through mention of various manifestations of otherworldly forces, a special chronotope (mainly at night, closed space at home,

plunged into darkness, and an abandoned industrial building, where there is a sect of esoterics, almost incessant rain), - parameters characteristic of the thriller genre and horror aesthetics in general, aimed at shaping the heroes of the work and its audience impressions of the fragility of reality and the creation of the effect of fluctuation “between the earthly laws of ordinary reality and the possibility supernatural” [The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction 2002: 2].

And although the atmosphere of mysticism is maintained throughout the entire plot action, plot moves that evoke horror with their illogicality gradually receive rational explanations (according to the “rules of the game” of a fictional horror movie and thriller, designed, first of all, to “tickle the nerves” of the reader / viewer).

The source of the mysterious sounds that frightened Thomas, it turns out that he disappeared without a trace father who suddenly left the family, but secretly from his son and wife returning home at night. Artistic Features construction of the drama, referring to the thriller, according to Yu. V. Lokshina, “help create psychological and philosophical labyrinths, associated with the study of evil lurking in the depths of human personalities” [Lokshina 2015: 21], and are organically combined with naturalistic traditions of the British "theater of cruelty".

The reason for the crisis of the hero's consciousness and the origins of the family drama in the play are voiced by Douglas during a chance meeting with his wife, who gave Julia the impression of an encounter with a ghost. («D o u g l a s. You look as if you've seen a ghost. You're trembling» [Penhall 2011: 12].):

«D o u g l a s. I was having very... self-destructive thoughts. I became obsessed with the futility of things – with my failings, I suppose... at work... at home. (Pause.) After me father died and Thomas was born I found in quite difficult to cope... with just the daily grind... I felt I had nobody to advise me or guide me. I felt very alone really, for a few years» [Penhall 2011: 17].

The usual scenario of the existence of the hero, closed on repetition the same life patterns of the average person, receiving a standard set of benefits of civilization, it turns out unsuitable for Douglas, who suddenly felt, according to the remark

M. Billington, “hunger for faith” [Billington 2011], who realized “the tragedy of his everyday life” [Karabanova 2015: 103], and it turns out ground for “the formation of completely unnatural patterns cultural behavior” [Ibid: 103].

Douglas preferred the trouble of everyday life and the burden of responsibility to his family to stay in a religious community located in a dilapidated office building, whose members deny reality, everyday life and routine, asserting the possibility of overcoming the “era of pessimism and melancholy” [Penhall 2011: 51] with the help of mystical practices, faith in the transmigration of souls, the fusion of esoteric teachings with academic science, thanks to the rejection of worldly goods and social life.

The departure of the hero into a conditionally “wild” space, freed from the shackles of civilization, is a plot element characteristic of the poetics of a thriller: “the plot of a thriller, as a rule, is formed around the downward movement of the hero (deep, into the abyss, into darkness, into the wilderness, etc.) , deliberately emphasizing the need for spiritual and conscious efforts to master the fundamental principles of Being, which turned out to be forced out by modern man into the abyss of philistine oblivion” [Karabanova 2015: 105].

Douglas embodies the type of hero characteristic of the thriller, who is characterized by the unstable identity and internal struggle of a restless spirit, seeking reconciliation of the contradictions that overwhelm him and finding answers to his doubts in following the esoteric teaching and the need to preach "truth" to the uninitiated, i.e. to his family. And Douglas's break with his family becomes a traditional horror conflict, which is based on the struggle of two types of heroes opposed to each other.

At one pole of the conflict is the demonic Douglas, convinced of the need to destroy the philistine life of Julia and Thomas, who are at the other pole and embody the everydayness and pragmatism of reality:

«J u l i e. “Esoteria in the Technology Industry and Other Related Issues”? Sounds like a blast. <...> A “spiritual leader”? Is that what you just said? You don’t have a spiritual bone in your body. Who the hell were these people?» [Penhall 2011: 20].

Scenes representing Douglas' temporary return to the family with the goal of handing over the house to the community and forcing Julia and Thomas to follow him to an esoteric organization, present a picture communicative violence of the hero over his wife and child. The father and spouse, who has come to the family again, takes the position of a “villain” in relation to it: “demonic villains playing gods take on the role of Providence, allowing themselves the courage to cut human destinies at their own will. However, it would be an exaggeration to believe that they have an ethical indulgence for such actions” [Lokshina 2015: 118]. Anxious, ghost-afraid child, the father suggests that he is not a nine-year-old boy, but the ghost himself, the reincarnation of the deceased grandfather, who is destined for a special spiritual path and life in the circle of esotericists, which provokes regular outbreaks of conflicts between the son and mother: *«D o u g l a s. The Spirit is the soul of the universe. It’s what connects all of our souls together. My father’s soul is in me. My soul is in you. <...> You see, I believe you a have inner life, a spiritual life which I, as your father, have a divine responsibility to nurture. <...> Also: I believe that when Grandpa died he was reincarnated and he came back as you. So, really, you’re ma dad» [Penhall 2011: 25].*

Discussion. The hero's belief in the possession of extraordinary, infernal abilities, the regular mention of unreal entities and the characters' premonition of their presence evoke associations with mystical thrillers, which plays an important role in the construction of the textual reality, as T.V. subgenres” (2013), “an otherworldly element that fills the works of the horror genre. <...> Often a hero and/or a villain has some psychic abilities, or at least he claims so” [Dyakova 2013: 34].

At the same time, mystical thrillers took shape from such a genre as “ghost story”, it is no coincidence that in reviews of the productions of “The Possessed Child”, theater critics and the author himself call the play a “ghost story” [Marmion 2011] and “a play with elements of a history with ghosts” [Lawson 2011].

At the same time, the evil that Douglas causes to the family, his demonism and the possession of "sacred knowledge" are rather the "fruits" of communication with members of the sect, the result of his immaturity, infantilism and willingness to obey those who put pressure on him, therefore, a villain who fully fits into the canon of the thriller, it can only be called with reservations: “ordinary people turn out to be carriers of demonic forces and themselves play the role of demons, invading the lives of loved ones, <...> breaking this life and crippling fate.

Overwhelmed by unkind passions, they turn out to be stronger than their victims, although sometimes they themselves are both executioners and victims” [Ivasheva 1983: 218-219]. The hero of Penhall's play is indeed not only destroying the way of life of his family, but he himself has been subjected to destruction. Douglas' stay in the community was accompanied by torture and violence inflicted by members of the sect on each other in order to comprehend the "true path" through pain:

«D o u g l a s. They drilled into my gums... down to the bone. The pain was... indescribable. <...> They said I was imagining it... everybody agreed... This is the problem with pain... you can’t see it... you can’t prove it exists... so you start... imagining thing. You imagine phantom pain. You imagine... all sorts of things. <...> I couldn’t think straight, I couldn’t... after that I couldn’t concentrate on anything much at all, really. I had no energy, couldn’t sleep. If I slept somebody would come in and wake me and tell me that I was grinding my teeth... grinding them down to the stump! Because I was so – I was so tense» [Penhall 2011: 35-36].

Naturalistic descriptions of Douglas' physical torture lie in within the tradition of "theater of cruelty", which, like the thriller, uses shock tactics. Atmosphere of tension, mystery and frightening anticipation of the unpredictable denouement characteristic of the construction thriller, is recreated in

Penhall drama at various levels organization of the dramatic text. The playwright operates with a standard for Neo-Gothic binary system of images, according to which the heroes disintegrate into two struggling groups - infernal characters, dangerous for the circle rational actors.

The intonation system and emotional dominants of the drama play an important role in remarks describing the psychological state of the characters and setting the pace of the development of the action. Among the remarks declaring the behavior of the characters, those that reflect the crisis, shock state of the characters, their fear and numbness predominate, while the rhythm of the development of events deliberately slows down, intense foreboding unpredictable decoupling is maintained by regularly repeated pauses of various durations, remarks "silence" and "calmness".

The instability and instability of the position of the heroes, their uncertainty about the reality of the events happening to them fix them discourses: the speech of the characters is inconsistent, inexpressive, different an abundance of pauses, reticences, omissions, reservations, exchange of remarks heroes among themselves is carried out in the speech correction mode, which expressed graphically through broken syntax, incomplete sentences, an abundance of dots, broken, unfinished or, on the contrary, repeated words and phrases several times in a row.

The culmination of the development of the action is the quarrel between Douglas and Julia about the transfer of the house to the community, after which the hero makes another sudden departure from the family. It is noteworthy that the hero removes himself and turns off from the action whenever the conflict between him and other characters reaches a critical point: the inability to productively clarify the relationship and bear responsibility for one's position is characteristic of the infantile hero. The plot-compositional repetition (the disappearance of the hero) is accompanied by a decline in emotional tension and a "rollback" of events to the plot.

Conclusion. However, on a new round of plot action (Douglas returns home again), there is a deviation from the original scenario (Douglas's appearance, a quarrel with his wife and son, leaving home), which leads to that unexpected denouement, the premonition of which kept both the characters and readers / viewers in voltage. The denouement of the drama (the reconciliation of the hero with his family, the refusal to serve the esotericists) is again built within the framework of the poetics of the thriller on the effect of deceived expectations and destroys the readers' and viewers' premonitions of the catastrophe.

Perception of the play "The Possessed Child" as a drama with elements of horror prepared not only by the structure of the play itself, but also by that cultural, non-textual ground to which Joe Penhall appeals.

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