

AMERICAN STEREOTYPES IN MICHAEL CHABON'S VISION

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Abstract: The article is dedicated to American Jewish writer Michael Chabon and his novels. As a part of the research we analyze how the hybrid identity influenced on his prose. In addition to, Chabon's art is interesting through his genre variation. His novels always consist of several genres, for instance: alternative history, hard-boiled detective, graphic novel and etc. The problem and topics are raised in his books are also very relevant concerning contemporary American and American Jewish Literature studies. His texts are the mixture of reflection of reality and analyses of immortal and complicated topics which were being discussed by many writers during XX and XXI century. That's why this reflection of reality is full of different symbols and stereotypes for common American reader.

Key words: Michael Chabon, postmodernism, American stereotypes, contemporary.

1 Introduction

Michael Chabon (1963) is an American novelist, short story writer, and Pulitzer Prize winner. His novels are popular not only in America but all over the world. He is an American-born Jew, whose ancestors came from Romania. All these factors formed the hybrid identity, and the mixture of cultural and national heritage is reflected in his fiction. Chabon puts his characters, Jewish immigrants or their children and grandchildren, into American reality of the 20th century. Thus, we speak about his novels that exist on the border of Jewish and American mentality and immigrant and domestic consciousness. The hybridism of his fiction is also explained by the fact, that it appears on the border of mass or popular literature and high art showing the characteristic features of Postmodernism as it was announced by L. Fiedler crossing the borders and bridging the gaps.

Playing with stereotypes is typical for all Chabon's novels.

In this article we are going to speculate on several novels: *Wonderboys* (1995); *The amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*(2001) and *Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007).

2 Methods

To analyze the functions and the presentation of national stereotypes in Chabon's novels we, first of all look at the theory of stereotypes taking into consideration the works of several prominent scholars. We speculate about a special approach that Chabon has – his ironical perspective of everything connected with contemporary America.

3 Results

Wonderboys is about Pittsburgh professor and author Grady Tripp working on an unwieldy 2,611 page manuscript that is meant to be the follow-up to his successful, award-winning novel *The Land Downstairs*, which was published seven years earlier. On the eve of a college-sponsored writers and publishers weekend called WordFest, Tripp's wife walks out on him, and he learns that his mistress, the chancellor of the college, Sara Gaskell, is pregnant with his child. To top it all off, Tripp finds himself involved in a bizarre crime committed by one of his students, an alienated young writer named James Leer. During a party, Leer shoots and kills the chancellor's dog and steals her

husband's prized Marilyn Monroe collectible: the jacket worn by the actress on the day of her marriage to Joe DiMaggio.

Marilyn Monroe was an American actress and model and she became one of the most popular sex symbols of America in the 20th century, and a national symbol as well. She embodied American Dream for millions citizens, and her image is hardly mythologized. In one of our articles co-authoring our colleague, Dr. O. Karasik we discussed the mythologizing the historical personality – Anne Frank (Strukova, 2016).

As we regarded Anne Frank the icon of the greatest tragedy, we see Marilyn Monroe as the icon of the greatest success, and it is particularly American success, due to which a living being, a personality is turned into a myth. This myth has a material incarnation in Chabon's novel – the author chooses not only this lady, but also her famous coat, the jacket she was wearing during her wedding. The author puts a historic reference into the narration and mentions that after her death this coat began one more popular thing from the icon collection: « WHEN MARILYN MONROE married Joe DiMaggio, on January 14, 1954—a week after I turned three years old—she was wearing, over a plain brown suit, a short black satin jacket, trimmed with an ermine collar. After her death this jacket became just another item in the riotous inventory of cocktail dresses and fox stoles and pearly black stockings she left behind. It was assigned by the executors to an old friend of Marilyn's, who failed to recognize it from photographs of that happy afternoon in San Francisco years before, and who wore it frequently to the marathon alcoholic luncheons she took every Wednesday at Musso & Frank» (Chabon, 2011, P.36). Even unfamiliar reader could lead association with this icon and America.

This fashion item has not only symbolic but also plot making function in the novel. Due to this stolen coat the reader can see the development of action and follow the author's plan. This item is the artifact which professor and his foil are carrying through the whole novel. For the first glance, it sounds like an ordinary hard-boiled detective story where the plot surrounds steal, policemen and chase but it's not like that. The image of American policemen is also appearing in the Chabon's novel as a symbol of American reality. In *Wonderboys* the scene of meeting the main character with the police authorities is described with irony. He is calling policemen as 'Officer Pucik' during the whole narration: "It was a policeman, bearing an apologetic smile and the morning's rolled-up *Post-Gazette*. He was a young guy, not much older than James Leer. Like James he was tall and pale, with a sharp, mobile Adam's apple. His cheeks were a mass of tiny nicks and missed whiskers, and he was wearing some kind of sugary, varsity-halfback aftershave. His hat was a quarter size too large for his head. He had the young cop's way of standing with his chest poked out, speaking too quickly, as though rattling off, to a mock civilian, sample dialogue memorized from the training manual, at the threshold of a simulated house. His name tag said PUPCIK. I didn't ask him in" (Chabon, 2001; 2008; 2011).

Apart from such big symbol, *Wonderboys* overflows the others which create a characterization of American reality and living. For instance, professor drives the car which is one the most popular American car brands " That 1966 emerald green Ford Galaxie 500" (Chabon, 2011). Chabon doesn't hesitate to repeat the brand every time which it needs. It seems to readers that author uses such method as a product placement which is so popular mentioned in cinematography and etc: "Look at them," said James. "They look like replicants." A handsome young family was crossing the street in front of us, a slender pair of blond parents in khaki and plaid surrounded by an orderly tangle of cute blond replicant children. Two of the children swung sparkling bags of goldfish. The sun lit the flyaway ends of their hair. Everyone was holding hands. They looked like an advertisement for a brand of mild laxative or the Seventh-Day Adventists. The mother carried a golden-haired baby in her arms

and the father was actually smoking a briar pipe. As they passed before the car they all looked at the crater in the hood and then gazed up at James and me in uncomprehending pity" (Chabon, 2011)

4 Discussion

The setting of next novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* is set in America in the middle of the 20th century. A young boy, the Jew from Prague, came to America to his relatives. His parents spend all money and bought a permit to the United States. Whereby, they helped him to rescue from occupied Prague. Josef set a goal to earn money and bring parents to him. He tried to earn living with his cousin. They created the Escapist, – comic book superhero and brainchild of Kavalier and Clay. They achieved success with a short period of time but they had to make a pause because The Second World War had started. The main character found out that his family had died. The plot of the novel is directly connected with the history of comics in America and accumulates different facts concerning the authors of the graphic novels, the story of their appearance and the traces of plot of such famous series as Superman, Batman, Captain America and Maus. The novel follows the lives of two Jewish cousins before, during, and after the Second World War. Josef (Joe) Cavalier, a Czech artist who escapes from Prague during the German occupation, and a Brooklyn-born writer Samuel Klayman (Sam Clay). Together they become major figures in the comics industry bringing it to its «Golden Age». Describing their career as the authors of the most popular comics, Chabon refers to the history of the genre. He includes a kind of essay where he gives a brief history, genesis and the analyses of the genre: "In 1939, the American comic book, like the beavers and cockroaches of prehistory, was larger and, in its cumbersome way, more splendid than its modern descendant. <...> From the beginning, there was a tendency among educators, psychologists, and the general public to view the comic book as merely a debased offspring of the newspaper comic strip, then in the full flower of its since-faded glory, read by presidents and Pullman porters, a proud American cousin, in indigenous vitality and grace, of baseball and jazz" (Chabon, 2001).

American comic books first gained popularity after the 1938 publication of *Action Comics*, which included the debut of the superhero Superman. This was followed by a superhero boom that lasted until the end of World War II. After the war, while superheroes were marginalized, the comic book industry rapidly expanded, and genres such as horror, crime, and romance became popular. In the novel author also uses comics not as entertainment product but as the platform through which main characters can transmit their perception the nightmares of war. Chabon consciously appeals to this genre of art. The comics or graphic novel was a tool of ideology and became a great part of American mass culture.

Chabon's personages invent a new superhero whom they call Escapist. He becomes the symbol of American national ideology, as the authors tell about him "He's a superhuman escape artist. No cuffs can hold him. No lock is secure. Coming to the rescue of those who toil in the chains of tyranny and injustice. Houdini, but mixed with Robin Hood and a little bit of Albert Schweitzer" (Chabon, 2001). Such a mixture presents a portrait of a perfect national hero for America: Harry Houdini was an American illusionist famous for sensational escape tricks, Robin Hood, a legendary figure in English folklore, a heroic outlaw said to rob from the rich and give to the poor for the sake of justice, Albert Schweitzer was a French-German philosopher who received the 1952 Nobel Peace Prize (it happened later than the described events of the novel are presented). The combination of these three heroes seemed ideal for Joe and Sam when they were working on the new image of the national hero. The Escapist is close to Captain America, and the images of its fictional creators, Joe Kavalier, and Sam Clay, are close to real personalities – cartoonists Joe Simon and Jack Kirby. The personal stories of the creators interweave with the story of their

creation - Escapist, so we may speak about the combination of fact and fiction.

The scene of the novel is laid in New York City. Some actions happen at the Empire State Building which usually symbolizes American wealthy reality. Also, in one episode Sam told the story about time capsule which consists of a pair of nylon stockings, the book "Gone with the Wind" and coffee cup with the picture of Mickey Mouse. It's set of clearly American innovations.

The novel *Yiddish Policemen's Union* is set in Sitka, which it depicts as a large, Yiddish-speaking city. It's a detective story appears in an alternative history version of the present day. Here we can see the real hard-boiled detective with all its features. The author uses exaggeration in the description of the Jewish community. The society is showed as mafia syndicate. They sell the weapon and make illegal deals. As usual, Chabon gives before the introduction a historic reference. Even though it is an alternative history. "I know you want me to say a Verbover," Berko says. After Berko passed out of the academy, his first billet was the Fifth Precinct, the Harkavy, where the Verbovers landed, along with most of their fellow black hats, after the 1948 arrival of the ninth Verbover rebbe, father-in-law of the present model, with the pitiful remnant of his court. It was a classic ghetto assignment, trying to help and protect people who disdain and despise you and the authority you represent. It ended when the young half-Indian latke took a bullet in the shoulder, two inches from his heart, in the Shavuot Massacre at Goldblatt's Dairy Restaurant. "I know that's who you want me to say." This is how Berko once explained to Landsman the sacred gang known as the Chasids of Verbov: They started out, back in the Ukraine, black hats like all the other black hats, scorning and keeping their distance from the trash and hoo-hah of the secular world, inside their imaginary ghetto wall of ritual and faith. Then the entire sect was burned in the fires of the Destruction, down to a hard, dense core of something blacker than any hat. What was left of the ninth Verbover rebbe emerged from those fires with eleven disciples and, among his family, only the sixth of his eight daughters. He rose into the air like a charred scrap of paper and blew to this narrow strip between the Baranof Mountains and the end of the world. And here he found a way to remake the old-style black-hat detachment. He carried its logic to its logical end, the way evil geniuses do in cheap novels. He built a criminal empire that profited on the meaningless tohubohu beyond the theoretical walls, on beings so flawed, corrupted, and hopeless of redemption that only cosmic courtesy led the Verbovers even to consider them human at all" (4; P.56-57). This portrayal and mafia description is very common for American literature of the XX century.

All police authority is a big parody in the novel. The main character Detective Landsman has a partner, native born American, and their boss is detective's ex-wife: "Landsman is a tough guy, in his way, given to the taking of wild chances. He has been called hard-boiled and foolhardy, a momzer, a crazy son of a bitch. He has faced down shtarkers and psychopaths, has been shot at, beaten, frozen, burned. He has pursued suspects between the flashing walls of urban firefights and deep into bear country. Heights, crowds, snakes, burning houses, dogs schooled to hate the smell of a policeman, he has shrugged them all off or functioned in spite of them" (Chabon, 2008). The investigation is full of chases, fights, blood scenes and etc.

Besides, the author very peculiarly depicts the mixture of immigrant Jewish society and the ordinary American lifestyle with full of external symbols: fast food restaurants and other goods. The citizens of Sitka are using very interesting language apart from Yiddish. American English is treated as a slang language with swear words. *Yiddish Policemen's Union* is an interesting mixture of American and Jewish stereotypes and realities which exists in one common space.

5 Conclusions

Michael Chabon doesn't use features and signs of high art. We can see that for him attractive to work with the mass perception of America that's why he uses so well-known things which the plain reader can determine as a symbol. His American reality is full of different symbols connect with different every-day life spheres. At the same time, we are able to speak about high art concerning the themes and problems raised by him (Karasik, et al., 2014). Postmodern perspective of the Holocaust in the works of American writers was presented in *Holocaust in works of modern American writers: post-modernist look*. The Holocaust, American identity, national history – they all are quite serious and suitable for serious works of literature. Though, according to the principles of Postmodernism, Chabon is playing with them. Due to such method, he does his art and his novels very comprehensible for amateur and professional reader.

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