

Influence of William Thackeray on the character system of Julian Fellowes' Snobs

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Abstract. This article is devoted to the researching the influence of the English writer W. Thackeray's creation on the modern English Literature. In particular the authors explore the novelistic creation of the famous actor, film director, producer J. Fellowes. In the following article the interplay between *The Book Of Snobs*, *Vanity Fair* by W. Thackeray, as the representatives of the 19th century literature and the novel *Snobs* by our contemporary is on the focus of view. In the issue the impact of the classical pieces of the English literature on the modern novel is revealed in certain levels: imaginative, spatial and authorial.

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Introduction

Julian Fellowes is the famous English film director, screenwriter, writer and actor. He is known to wide public as the director of such films as *Vanity Fair* (2004), *The Young Victoria* (2009) and *Downtown Abbey* (2010-2012). The versatility of J. Fellowes' talent is highlighted by his literary activity. Especially it's actual for his first novel *Snobs* (2004). Modern critics, readers compare this book with the novels by Evelyn Waugh and Jane Austen and consider it as one of the best works about modern English aristocracy. But it's evident that the novel is connected with the work of one of the greatest writers of 19th century William Thackeray. In this case it is supposed that this text is created according to the one of the main rules of postmodernism in which the "modern world of art stories are born of other stories" [1; P.2]. So, in this novel the reader has the chance to watch the modern story of *Vanity Fair*. It seems J. Fellowes, describing the main features of the modern English snob in *Snobs*, continues the tradition of the great English writer. It can be claimed that his mission in the modern literature is to "revive the past" [2, P.10].

As we know in his novels William Thackeray shows the main values of Victorian age. The author's chief strategy is to give the social, moral and literary satire. This satire is constructed not only by the system of heroes or an internal reflection but also by the composition of the work. For this purpose W.Thackeray in his novel constructs the dual structure of the narrative. This structure lets to show the fiction as the play for the spectators. So there is no doubt that the story is an illusion. The author demonstrates the "vulnerability in the moral and epistemological premises not only of this particular novel, but of the Victorian realist narrative as a whole" [3]. The construction of the text correlates with the rules of Bakhtinian carnival world:

"Thackeray's foreword to *Vanity Fair* asks us to understand society in the novel as carnivalesque performance, spectacle, and exhibition" [4, P.568]. This fact allows Ana Moya compare it with the Shakespeare's "All the world is a stage" when she says "Thackeray definitely agrees with him" [5, P.76].

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In J. Fellowes' *Snobs* the aim is the same – to show the moral of the English society. But what is for Thackeray the object for his satire, for the modern author is the essence of life. The writer does not aim to ridicule the vices; he tries to represent an objective picture of modern English society: "This may well have been true but Caroline, snobbish and egocentric as she was, was not essentially bad-hearted. Now that Edith was her sister-in-law she was determined to get on with her and she was equally determined that Charles, of whom she was extremely, if rather parentally, fond, should have a happy stay" [6, P.77]. Fellowes does not question that the term 'snob' is inextricably linked to the UK class system.

This position is common for the British culture in general. The clear division into classes is one of the main features of British society. Despite the fact that in the modern world the boundaries between the classes are gradually disappearing in the UK social class, it still remains one of the most important criteria for evaluating a person, because "belonging is important to the English. Individuality is all very well, in some cases it can be commendable, but, on the whole, being part of a team is their preferred situation and they are never happier than when they are surrounded by a group of people with whom they either have, or affect to have, everything in common" [7]. Therefore, it is natural that nowadays for the middle class the promotion of

the social ladder is a topical issue. In this regard, it can be argued that one of the main problems viewed in *Snobs* by J.Fellowes is the possibility for the modern Englishman to climb up easily to the next step in the social hierarchy as quickly as to slide down.

But the Thackeray's concept of 'snobbism' is distinguished from the Fellowes' one. For W.Thackeray and his Victorian readers "snobbarry was not the arrogance of secure elite, but rather the showy gentility of an insecure bourgeoisie that wanted to get into the aristocracy" [8, P.139]. If S.R. Cole said about *Vanity Fair* that "Thackeray uses the resources of fiction to mediate between these "universalizing and minoritizing" images of the snob" [8, P.158]. As for the Fellowes novel snobbism is the rod of the social structure. That's why there aren't any so called "out of the system" heroes. In *Snobs* all characters can be called as snobs. The following is evident in the situations when the representatives of the upper class are proud with their titles and the ability to enter the circle of "the elected" (Uckfields, Jane), and the representatives of the middle class (Mrs. Livery, Eastons) do every effort to get in touch with these terms.

The most prominent representative of modern British aristocracy in the novel *Snobs* is lady Uckfield. If we use the classification by W.Thackeray, the best designation is "the positive snob" [9, P.21], whose constant features are "a preoccupation and predilection for the careful and considered acquisition and utilisation of objects" [10, P.347]. The author gives her the special features, which makes it possible for the reader to associate her with the following level: she is an Englishwoman, an aristocrat related to the highest circles. One of the brightest examples of this is the dialogue with the representatives of the Royal family: "From the Reigning Family we were to get the Princess Royal and the Kents, all of them, but not the Prince of Wales (a bit of a disappointment for Lady Uckfield, a tragedy for Mrs. Lavery) as he was on a goodwill junket somewhere in the South Seas" [6, P. 64]. In addition, Lady Uckfield possesses all the attributes of the upper class representatives; she leads a secular way of life, is the leader of a large number of charities. This is due to the fact that for the aristocracy for any job except art and politics was established some taboos. At the same time, the author shows her as the woman living quietly in a country house, enjoying a regular rhythm of life and monotonous, from which her less tolerant daughter-in-law goes off.

Above all, Lady Uckfield is a supporter of a clear hierarchy, although it is not openly demonstrated. The narrator notes that "it was

fantastic to her that this girl's friends should not be the children of her friends" [6, P.43]. Such rejection the intermingling representatives of different classes has more historical character because it was against the rules as "In England in the 17th century there already was a clear division into classes" [11, P.207]. Despite this, there is no criticism in a work of this quality, and the narrator and the author accept the following attitude, as the natural one: "I liked her but she was in her way quite as dismissive as her mother only without, perhaps, Lady Uckfield's armour of moral certainty. To Lady Uckfield her social position was an article of faith; to Caroline it was simply a matter of fact" [6, P. 48].

In this case this image in J.Fellowes' novel is accepted as the hero following the credo of publicity. So the author focuses on her uncommon mind. It's demonstrated through her relationship with her mother in law. Perseverance and strength of character helps her to be the winner in the fight with the Old lady. Lady Uckfield's reticence is presented as the part of the style of behavior, because "The motto for English lady in the 19th century was "Know how to be master of yourself" [12, P.62]. The ability to hide one's emotions, the restraint has always been considered as one of the main qualities not only of the aristocracy, but of the whole English nation because "The English, of all classes as it happens" have "blank looks". And as the Fellowes' narrator notes "the dishonesty in all this is of course breathtaking but, as always with these people, the discipline in their unwavering rules commands a certain respect" [6, P.19]. This feature is also inherent in Mrs. Uckfield: she always restrained, no one will ever guess her emotions. Notable in the following regard is the episode when she visits the fashion show and notices Edith, who had gone out of their home. This episode helps the author to demonstrate endurance and resistance of her heroine: "Lady Uckfield, demonstrating the skill that ran the Empire, became aware of her daughter-in-law's presence without so much as a flicker of recognition" [6, P. 196].

Thus, we see that lady Uckfield has all the internal and external qualities of a snob: she is an arrogant, cold, reserved aristocrat, surrounding herself with charitable organizations, representatives of the upper classes. In this case this image is different from the Thackeray's ones. The snobbery in his *Vanity Fair* is only the external quality. It's actual for *The Osborns* and *The Crawleys*. So the author shows that the only try to copy the outer features of gentleman, which "causes to author's rude irony" [13, P.253]. Unlike W.Thackeray, snobbery in the work of J.Fellowes is not a subject of criticism. Only a snob, who has been criticized in the novel, is Eric.

Its snobbery is hyperbolized: he is envious, arrogant, and boastful. Such representation is related to the fact Eric is an American. J.Fellowes shows that in the modern world snobbery is not only the subject to the British, but snobbery is the natural quality of the British, while for other nations without having any traditional soil it is unnatural and repulsive.

The most striking example of similarity of the novels *Vanity Fair* and *Snobs* is J.Fellowes retains the imagery of the *Vanity Fair*. The author follows the main rule in the theory of text when it “may be completed only during the perception process, and only the reader has the leading role in the construction of the author’s world” [14, P. 76]. So it’s evident for the reader that Edith is associated with Rebecca Sharp, Charles – with Rawdon Crawley, Uckfield Lady – Lady Crawley. The similarity of the main characters traced as at the external level, as at the internal one. Both of them, as Rebecca, as Edith, are very attractive, have excellent taste, and are able to behave in society and to conquer men: “It is a technique that such women seem to acquire at birth. She was wearing a neat linen suit of a pale bluish colour, I think the correct term is eau-de-nil, with a little pill-box hat tipped forward over her forehead” [6, P. 21]. At the same time, each of them has an internal force, which moves Rebecca and Edith to the dream (the desire to get into the “other world” is inherent to them from childhood). In this case Edith practically repeats the words of Rebecca Sharp (“If Mr. Joseph Sedley is rich and unmarried, why should I not marry him?” [15, P.23]): “It’s just that I cannot imagine I would be very happy married to a poor one” [6, P. 16]. Although Edith, unlike Rebecca, is not poor (“Edith Lavery was the daughter of a successful chartered accountant” [6, P. 12]), she is also not satisfied with her role of the secretary. But what in W.Thackeray’s novel becomes a subject of criticism, in the novel by J.Fellowes is perceived as an ordinary and natural one; in his descriptions satire in the manner of W.Thackeray is missing: “If asked whether she was materialistic she would have answered she was practical, if snobbish she would have said she was worldly” [6, P. 25]. While Edith, as well as Rebecca, has a sense of reality and a sober look at things, she doesn’t hide her desires: “Edith looked the perfect archetype of the Sloane Ranger girl she was, but I was beginning to understand that she had a disconcerting awareness of the realities of her life and situation when such girls generally make a show of pretended ignorance of these things. It was not that her sentiments marked her apart” [6, P. 19]. Like Becky, Edith manages to conquer hereditary aristocrat Count Charles Broughton. Unlike the heroine of the 19th century’s novel, she is more fortunate: her husband is not affected the livelihoods

and the Broughtons settles in a country house. But the protagonist of the novel *Snobs* fails her main exam – an “aristocratic” life. To live in the village with her husband having rather modest mental abilities is harder than to go against the British class system. Just after feeling the anger and indifference of high society, Edith comes to understand that to belong to “a select group” is not only the open doors of all clubs in London and carefree life, but also it is the daily hard work, it’s the role you should play continuously. Although the novel has the happy end, the writer focuses on the same things as it W.Thackeray did: the pursuit of social position and wealth makes a man callous and selfish; more often it occurred that what he wanted is not quite the same what it is seemed.

As well as the Puppeteer is an omniscient author of the novel by W.Thackeray, in J.Fellowes’ *Snobs* the function of uniting the representatives of different classes is handed to the protagonist and a narrator (at the same time), whose name still remains unknown (though some readers will guess in this image some features of the writer). Like the W.Thackeray’s *Puppeteer*, in the recent work the narrator “supervises” events, although the characters are not his puppets. The author creates him as the engine of the plot: the narrator first introduces us Edith Charles, the event entailing a “cross-class” wedding, and then he enters Simon into the house of the Broughton, relations with whom have become the cause of the collapse of the family, and then takes part in Charles and Edith reunion. And the fact that the narrator belongs to the upper class, but he is an actor by profession, allows him to communicate closely with representatives of different social groups. This gives him the opportunity to distance from everyone. But at the same time, all the characters perceive him as “their”, thus creating the conditions for him to combine different perspectives on the same events. Furthermore, as well as *Puppeteer*, the author in *Snobs* includes into his work some kind of remarks, representing arguments about different special phenomenon in English society. “Much has been written in the tabloid press about their coldness but it is not lack of feeling that marks them apart, rather it is lack of expression of feeling. Naturally they do not see this as a failing in themselves and nor do they admire public emotion in others” [6, P. 36].

The researcher also cannot ignore the fact that the following similarities between the two works are found in the novel space. Despite the fact that the works of modern authors haven’t got any historical component, one can note the presence of “macrocosm”. In the novel, practically all groups of English society existing at the end of the 20th century.

The space of the work, like the space of the *Vanity Fair*, is not confined to Britain, but includes France, Italy and the United States. This allows the writer to focus readers' attention on the fact that, in the modern world snobbery goes beyond just one country and is becoming a global phenomenon.

Conclusion

To draw the conclusion, it is possible to claim that *Snobs* by J.Fellowes has written under the influence of certain works of W.Thackeray. If *The Book of Snobs* became a kind of leadership in creating such modern snobs images as Lady Uckfield, the communication with *Vanity Fair* is manifested in the creating the image of the heroine Edith, who is associated evidently with Rebecca Sharp. The role of puppeteer is handed to the narrator, who can be researched as the engine of the plot and substance uniting the characters from different social levels and groups. Similarity with the novel of the 19th century also lies in the spatial organization of the novel. Expansion of a novel by the author is represented by overcoming geographical limitations. Going beyond the UK emphasizes that snobbery has ceased to be just an English phenomenon, acquiring a world scale.

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While William Makepeace Thackeray may indeed be best known as the author of *Vanity Fair*, to examine all of his novels is to understand why his contribution to the history of the novel is singular. His use of the intrusive narrator, although presaged by Henry Fielding, was developed so carefully that it became a new form of fiction, a "genuine creation of narrative experiment," as critic Alexander Welsh calls it. In *The Newcomes*, Thackeray compares his method of character-building to the work of the paleontologist who discovers a series of bones and who must construct the habits, behavior, and appearance of his subject from a mere skeleton. He thereby suggests that any such "reality" is merely an illusion, for like the paleontologist, the author must work with probabilities.

Influence of William Thackeray on the character system of Julian Fellowers' snobs *Life Science Journal*. 2014 | journal-article. EID: 2-s2.0-84899842876. William Makepeace Thackeray was born in the family of a prominent official in Calcutta. In 1817, the boy was sent to England where he went to school and in 1828 entered the Cambridge University. While at the university, Thackeray displayed a talent for drawing and edited a student paper. The stagnant atmosphere of the place irked Thackeray so that finally he left the University. The book admirably draws a gallery of English 'snobs' from different walks of life. In Thackeray's view, a snob is a person who fawns upon his social superiors and looks down with contempt upon his inferiors. In his book, the author declares war against snobbism, vanity and selfishness. 'The Book of Snobs' may be considered as a kind of prelude to the author's major work 'Vanity Fair'.