

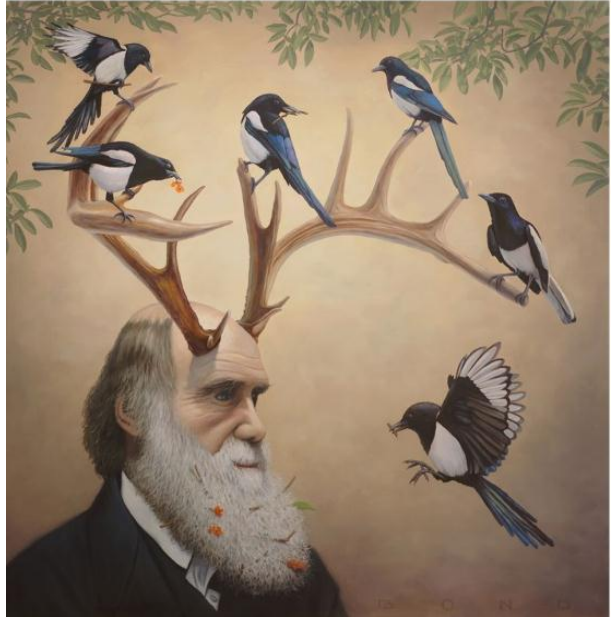
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Percival Everett's creativity in the context of contemporary american literature

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Abstract

The article deals with the literary creativity of Percival Everett who is considered to be one of the most accomplished and prolific American writers nowadays via comparative qualitative research methods. As a result, the main peculiarity of Percival Everett's novels is that the author presents his own vision of American and African American literatures and this way of interpretation is based on postmodernist aesthetics mostly. In conclusion, the creativity of Percival Everett is diverse and it presents itself a combination of new and traditional approaches to the themes of American and African American literatures.

Key words: Percival, Everett, novels, American, literature.

La creatividad de Percival Everett en el contexto de la literatura estadounidense contemporánea

Resumen

El artículo trata de la creatividad literaria de Percival Everett, considerado uno de los escritores estadounidenses más exitosos y prolíficos en la actualidad a través de métodos comparativos de investigación cualitativa. Como resultado, la peculiaridad principal de las novelas de Percival Everett es que el autor presenta su propia visión de la literatura estadounidense y afroamericana y esta forma de interpretación se basa principalmente en la estética posmoderna. En

conclusión, la creatividad de Percival Everett es diversa y presenta una combinación de enfoques nuevos y tradicionales a los temas de la literatura estadounidense y afroamericana.

Palabras clave: Percival, Everett, novelas, estadounidense, literatura.

1. INTRODUCTION

Born in 1956 at Fort Gordon, a small military base in Georgia, Percival Everett grew up in South Carolina, where he worked as a jazz musician and a middle school teacher. In 1982 he received a master's degree in Literature at Brown University, and in 1988 he became an assistant professor of English. Since 1985, he has taught various literary courses at many American universities. The given article is based on a wide review of Percival Everett's creativity since 1983. The writer has a great variety of works of different literary genres and forms. As literature reflects social processes, political and cultural life of the American nation, there is an undeniable dominant that these questions mostly represented in the author's novels. Thus, we analyze the novels only, just mentioning other Everett's literary works.

2. METHODS

This article continues our research on Everett's novels the first results of which were presented in our essay *Not Black Enough: African American Identity in Percival Everett's Novels*. Giving the

outline of Everett's creative work here we give the perspective within the contemporary tendencies and the development of multicultural studies in literature at Kazan University following the methods used by our colleagues and other scholars. We follow the traditional methods of analysis (cultural-historical, comparative bibliographical) that are used in the researches on different segments of contemporary Literary Studies. This allows us to identify the way of development of Everett's novels in his creativity.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Percival Everett began his career in 1983 with the novel *Suder*, which he wrote as a student of Brown University. In this novel, the writer refers to one of the most traditional themes for his generation, the theme of sport. In the American case, it is baseball, as not only the national sport of the United States, but also the traditional national symbol of America. EVERETT (2009) writes about a famous old African American baseball player Craig Suder. Despite the fact that the main character of his novel is a representative of African American culture, the author does not touch upon racial issues in the novel. Everett writes only about American problems in general. After analyzing the subsequent novels of Everett, we classify the writer's works into the following groups. The first group is formed by the works in which Everett deliberately avoids any reference to African American literary traditions. He focuses his attention on national

themes and problems of American society (TLOSTANOVA, 2000; KARASIK & SHCHEPACHEVA, 2015).

Everett's second novel *Walk to the Distance* was later adapted with an altered plot as an ABC-TV movie entitled *Follow Your Heart*. The book tells the story of David Larson, an African American who has returned from Vietnam, and the consequences of the Vietnam War. This subject of the novel is a peculiar theme of the lost generation in American literature of the second half of the 21st century. The next novel was the novel *Cutting Lisa*.

Among the works of the writer, belonging to the first group, there are interpretations of ancient Greek myths. They are the novel to *Her Dark Skin*, a kind of retelling of the play *Medea* by the ancient Greek playwright Euripides and *Frenzy*, an interpretation of the story of Dionysus and his assistant Vlepo. The satirical novel *Zulus*, also echoing the ancient Greek myths, tells the story of the last woman on planet Earth after a nuclear catastrophe. MAJOR (1990) in *Washington Post* compares this novel with O. Huxley's novel *Brave New World* and states that Everett's novel is a curious addition to the literature of antiheroes and futurists. In addition, the critic calls Everett one of America's most promising young novelists (ZUEVA, SHALNEVA & OSOVSKIY, 2017).

Early age ranch experience helped Everett to write a few westerns, as well as create parodies of this genre. In 1994 comes a parody on western *God's Country*. Although the genre of the novel

Watersherd, written in 1996, cannot be defined as western, yet the West is the setting there. The main character is Robert Hawkes, an African American who faces a murder. Everett manifests himself as a children's writer, publishing an illustrated book for young readers of *The One That Got Away*, where cowboys become the main characters, thus returning to the subject of the Wild West. Among the works of the first group, there are several collections of stories *The Weather* and *Women Treat Me Fair*, *Big Picture*, *Damned If I Do*, *Half an Inch of Water*. *Grand Canyon Inc.* was the first short story, which describes Reno Tanner's attempt to commercialize one of the most famous American symbols, the Grand Canyon.

One of the most significant works of this period was the novel *Glyph* published in 1999. This novel reveals Everett's satire on modern researches in semiotics, deconstruction and cognitive psychology, and is deliberately written not for the mass audience. A famous American writer and literary critic MOORE (1999) also speaks about the novel's high intellectuality and inaccessibility to the average reader. Percival Everett is an intellectual writer with the gift of parody and an arsenal of brilliant ideas in his head. *Glyph* is clearly written for a small selected audience < ... >. This audience should find in the novel exquisite entertainment for the mind and new interpretations of the ideas of French poststructuralists.

Glyph is the story within a story. It tells about Ralph, a child who chooses not to speak but has extraordinary muscle-control and an

IQ nearing 500, which he uses to write notes to his mother on a variety of literary topics based on books she supplies. Ralph is kidnapped several times due to his special skills. Among the kidnappers, there is a psychiatrist woman with mental problems; Pentagon Colonel, intending to turn him into a perfect spy machine; Mexican couple dreaming about their own child; and a Catholic priest seeking to drive out demons from him. Thus, an extraordinary boy becomes a means of fulfilling other people's desires.

The novel *American Desert* was written in absurdist tendencies in 2004. In this novel Everett refers to the national identity of Americans, focusing on the American component of the identity of African Americans. Everett makes extensive use of topics specific to the US literature. The main issue of these novels is the current state of the United States of America. The protagonist of the novel Theodore Street decides to commit suicide, but dies in a traffic accident. Three days later, Ted is resurrected, and with the resurrection, his path to self-discovery begins. Various institutions show interest in him. First, a religious sect that declares Theodore to be the Antichrist kidnaps him. Then the main character finds himself in the Pentagon Secret Scientific Center, which is located in the state of New Mexico. In the end, he manages to escape from his pursuers and return to the family. During his adventures, Ted comes to a deeper understanding of religion, revelations, faith, fanaticism, love, family, media sensation, and most importantly, death (BARATOVA, SHAMINA & APENKO, 2017).

In his work, the writer also raises the topic of moral choice. For example, in the novel *Water Cure* Ishmael Kidder, who lost his daughter, is sent to New Mexico. He finds a man in prison who he considers to be the murderer of his daughter. The title of the book is based on one of the methods of torture that Kidder uses on a person, namely drowning. The novel is a confession in which the protagonist tells about the cruel murder. As Everett writes, the events of 9/11 and the experience of trauma led him to write this novel. Everett also published several collections of verses: *Re: f (gesture)*, *Abstraction of Einfühlung* and *Swimming Swimmers Swimming*, *There Are No Names for Red* in collaboration with Chris Abani. Everett himself created illustrations for this edition (MITCHELL, 2013).

Originally published in 2001, Everett's *Erasure* has a reputation among the specialists in literature for its satirical critique of the racist attitude that exists within the publishing industry and literary culture. It is considered to be one of the most significant Percival Everett's novels. In this novel, Everett shows himself as a satirist with a distinct commitment to ethnic problems. His previous works were full of satire however in this novel the African American dominant Tlostanova's (2000) of Everett's work was fully revealed. After publishing the novel in numerous interviews, the writer admits that he does not consider himself an African American writer and refuses to be classified as that. As Everett says, he does not highlight the so-called African Americanos. However, it is obvious that Everett still belongs to African American literature and his own words maybe considered as a

play with interviewers and readers. His works mark the new stage in the development of African American writing showing postmodernist rethinking of traditional motifs (AHRABI-FARD, 2017: CETIN, 2018).

The novel *Erasure* is one of the first novels in the creativity of the writer, in which he fully reveals the African American component, demonstrating his ethnic self-identification and features of his ideological position. According to general estimates, *Erasure* has been the most studied and well-known work of fiction since 1983.

The protagonist Telonius Ellison is an English professor in a creative crisis because publishers refuse to publish his novels. His agent repeatedly explains to him that his novels do not conform to the stereotypes and stamps of African American literature. In response, the main character decides to write a satirical work, a parody of the famous novel by R. Wright *Native Son*. In the novel, the writer criticizes society for racial clichés and prejudices based on skin color, and speaks out with harsh criticism of the publishing market and the media, which oblige authors to create only in accordance with African American literary traditions. Everett shows how the authors of color are often measured not according to their literary ability and talent but according to how well they represent racial (and racist) ideas. Essentially, the novel asks the question(s): What does it mean to be black, and how a black artist must act before he is considered authentic and legitimate, a standard-bearer for racial culture, and thus, a credit to the race?

In 2004 the epistolary novel *A History of the African American People (Proposed)* by Strom Thurmond was written with literary theorist (KINCAID, 2005). This is an epistolary novel that offers a satirical perspective on race relations and the publishing industry in contemporary America. The theme of racial discrimination or discrimination of sexual minorities is one of the main themes of novels written at this time *Wounded*, published in 2005, tells the story of John Hunt, a horse trainer who faces cruel crimes against members of non-traditional sexual minorities and discrimination against Native Americans. Hunt is trying to understand the political basis of these crimes. Nevertheless, when a close friend of Hunt is killed, the main question appears: What responsibility do we bear for those near us?

Another example of such deconstruction of African American literature traditions is the novel *I am Not Sidney Poitier*, which also contains elements of a parody. The novel became the object of serious literary attention. Most critics agree that this novel is one of the main voices of contemporary American literature. Its protagonist has a strange first name Not Sidney with the last name Poitier. He was named after the famous Bahamian American film actor and director Sidney Poitier, who in 1964 became the first black man to win the Oscar. Firstly, such name is a comic device, as Everett describes many humorous situations that happen to the protagonist throughout the novel. Then, the name alludes to the possible show business career that will the protagonist make. Finally, such name is important for the theme of self-identity of a black man.

At the same time, the protagonist is not just Sidney, but Not Sidney, and the negative particle as a part of the name tells the reader not to identify him with the actor, though it is impossible. This author's play makes the novel funny and captivating (NGIRWA & ALLY, 2018). The novel *Assumption* is a few stories, the main character of which is the deputy sheriff of the small town of New Mexico, Ogen Walker. The main character is African American. He is investigating the murder of an old white woman, suspecting that it could be caused by racial issues. Everett creates another parody of the detective genre, in which he mocks at the racial stereotypes and prejudices of the residents of a small town. Nowadays Everett turns to completely new themes and artistic techniques. One of the latest novels of the writer is *So Much Blue*, which was published in 2017. The writer reflects on issues of artistic identity and inspiration, the relationship between the artist and his art.

4. SUMMARY

Everett's literary work is impressive. He manages to publish at least one novel a year: he is the author of 17 novels, 4 collections of poems, 4 collections of short stories and books for children. One could imagine that most writers who were able to write a huge number of works would suffer from a lack of imagination. However, Everett is not among those writers. He never repeats twice. He makes experiments and brings his work to perfection in various literary

genres, as if inviting readers to ride the incredible roller coaster: dizzying and exciting, but ultimately delivering immense satisfaction.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Thus, we conclude that the creativity of Percival Everett is diverse and it presents itself a combination of new and traditional approaches to the themes of American and African American literatures. His desire to be considered an American author made him write novels about political, social, cultural problems of American society, especially at the beginning of his literary career. He did not touch upon racial problems and conflicts. Since Erasure Percival Everett undermines the standardized representations of the so-called African American experience. Everett does not ignore the questions of Africa American identity and identity itself in his novels. He suggests his own way of representing the theme of self-identification, which is far from the traditional form. In some ways, he plays with the reader, denying African American identity. The author's point of view can be defined as a kind of critical cultural reflection and response to society prejudices based on skin color.

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