THE CONCEPT OF SENTIMENTALISM IN THE POETICS OF L. STERNE’S NOVEL
“A SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY THROUGH FRANCE AND ITALY”

Summary. Sentimentalism is a trend in literature and art of the second half of the 18th century. The name comes from the French word “sentiment” – a feeling. It is possible to identify the main feature of this literary direction – emphasis on the feelings of readers, interest in them and the desire to leave no one indifferent. The article analyzes the main features of sentimentalism on the example of Lawrence Sterne’s “A sentimental journey Through France and Italy”. It was up to sentimentalism to describe human feelings. However, the first sentimentalists were Democratic People with natural equality. They brought to literature in the history of enlightening realism by demonstrating that the inner world of heroes from ordinary strata is not poor. In this sense, the Sentimentalists established a tradition of democratization of the author's creativity written in prose, observance of the principles of equality of people in the choice of literary heroes. The article investigated study is to identify the signs of sentimentalism in Sterne’s “A sentimental journey”, characterize the concept of «sentimentalism» and define it as an artistic system; to identify the main features and genres of sentimentalism as a direction in the literature.

Keywords: sentimentalism, feelings, inner world, sensitivity, Yorick.

Introduction. Sentimentalism in Western European literature is a literary trend that emerged in the 18th and early 19th years as a counterbalance to the unilateral domination of so-called pseudo-classical theory. It gave top priority to subjective outpouring and psychological analysis. It aims to awaken in the hearts of some representatives the understanding and love of nature, along with a humane attitude towards all the weak, the suffering and the persecuted people.

“Natural” man becomes the main hero of sentimentalism. Sentimentalist writers believed that man, being a creation of nature, from birth is able to make “natural virtue” and has “sensitivity”; the degree of sensitivity determines the dignity of man and the significance of all his actions.

The appeal to the inner world of man allowed the sentimentalists to show its inexhaustibility and contradiction. They refused to absolute any concrete trait of character and unambiguous moral interpretation of the character, what was characteristic of classicism. A sentimentalist character can do both bad and good deeds, experience both noble and devil feelings. Sometimes his actions and desires are beyond one-dimensional evaluation.

Sentimentalists rejected the principle of “objective” discourse, suggesting the author’s exclusion from the object of the image: the author’s reflection on the subject becomes the most important element of the narrative. The structure of the composition is largely determined by the will of the writer: “he (writer) not so strictly follows the established literary rules, that stifles the imagination, quite arbitrarily builds the composition, is generous on lyrical digressions” [2].

Methods. The work uses descriptive, comparative and analytical research methods. During the research, not only Sterne’s own works were analyzed, but also those of other authors who were considered sentimentalists (e.g. Richardson, Jung, Goldsmith, Goethe, Jean-Jacques Rousseau). The different characteristic features of different writers differed significantly in the sentimentality of heroes.

Analysis of the work “The Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy” revealed psychological aspects, the style of the narrative, as well as the form, techniques and main motives of the narrative.

Results. “The Sentimental Journey” by L. Sterne refers to the psychological novel of sentimentalism. The form he gives to his work is a form of free-flowing literary process, unconnected with the subject matter, the rules of organization of the spatial-temporal structure and other canons, but this form is a fiction form as well. The organization of the narrative structure and composition of Sterne’s work is subordinated to its own strict logic, conditioned by the inner task: to derive the image of a completely subjective narrator.

Destroying the form of travel, memoirs, and the classic novel, Sterne creates a new type of psychological novel which expressed an ironic self-peeking. The depiction of nature, the appeal to the inner world of man, the principle of compassion, empathy, lyrical digressions, and the conclusions that follow prove that the novel is written in the style of sentimentalism. A.G. Yakovleva believes that the novel “Sentimental Journey” destroys the sentimental canon. The novel uniquely combines wit and sensitivity, skepticism and cheerfulness that transcends sentimentalism. “The sentimental journey” partly refers to sentimentalism, this this work is broader than this literary direction.

Thus, “Sterne opened up new perspectives to the narrative art; and many conclusions from the findings of the writer were made not only by his contemporaries, but also much later – also by the romantics and realists of the subsequent time” [3].

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Discussions. Sentimentalism was founded in England and as a strong wave wrapped whole Europe in XVIII century. The name was given by Lawrence Sterne, who called his journey in France “sentimental”, showing the readers a peculiar “journey of the heart”. But Richardson was he, who legitimized the cult of feeling, the affectation of spiritual suffering before him in literature, in art, and then in life.

Sentimentalist writers have made important contributions to literature. Their works differed significantly from that of the classicists, whose pathetic tragedy was mostly celebrated by the hero and heroic event. Outstanding people, outstanding events, outstanding passions – these are the materials from which the tragic story was built. Sentimentalism is a complex and contradictory phenomenon. As an ideological and artistic movement of 18th century social thought, it cannot be equated with the Enlightenment as a whole. In a number of cases, sentimentalism was a crisis of educational thought (in England) and contained damaging motivations alien to the historical optimism of educators. However, in different countries of Europe it could be accepted differently. In England, sentimentalists’ works combined criticism of social injustices with the preaching of non-maliciousness, idealism, mysticism and pessimism (“Vicar of Wakefield” (1766) and “The Deserted Village” (1770) of Oliver Goldsmith, “Night Thoughts” of Jung, etc.).

In France and Germany, sentimentalism has merged with educational literature, and this has significantly changed his appearance compared to sentimentalism in English. Here we can find calls to struggle, to active and volitional actions of personality, here the notes of idealization of feudal olds disappeared, and the materialistic understanding of the world manifested.

However, in both German and French literature of the sentimental trend, there were ideas akin to English sentimentalism. Goethe’s novel “The Sorrows of Young Werther” is imbued with a materialistic world outlook, but is not alien to the well-known idealization of feudal olds disappeared, and the materialistic understanding of the world manifested.

Sentimentalism appeared to the world as a reaction to the bourgeois reorganization of the social system. England in the 18th century was the only country in which this reconstruction took place with intensity, and led to the fantastic destruction of the villages. Sentimentalism, therefore, carried anti-urban tendencies and was full of sadness about the lost idyll of country life and the beauty of nature.

Writers, poets, always ready to respond to the people’s suffering with the word of empathy, could not keep silence, when all scourges of ordinary workers happened before their eyes. Phenomenon of sentimentalism, which imbued all the virtues of their hearts and all the weaknesses of their political and philosophical thinking, became their answer. They began to glorify the old, the charm of the patriarchal village, to paint idyllic pictures of the peaceful nature whose silence was destroying progress.

We will not find in Sterne’s works the excited and pathetic descriptions of nature, as in Rousseau’s, but the admiration for rural life is felt in his book: “Nature pours its wealth into everyone’s hem”, “Music beats the beat of work, and all his children gather grapes, with glee”, “Peace be with you, noble shepherd! Happy is your hut – and happy is the one who shares it with you – and happy are the lambs frolicking around you” [4]. There is not only admiration, but also irony.

For Sterne, sensitivity is above all, he called it “the great Sensorium of the world” and, in fact,
pointed humanity to a country where it can hide from all social troubles that it cannot get rid of in any other way, a country of oblivion, where both the rich and the poor will find peace drinking the divine nectar of feeling. “Sweet sensibility! An inexhaustible source of all precious in our joys and everything sublime in our sorrows! You chain your martyr to a straw bed — and you lift him up to heaven — the eternal spring of our feelings! Now I am following in your footsteps — you are the “deity” that moves in me.” [5].

The novel “A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy” has the form of a self-narrative. The main character of it is the pastor Yorick, on whose behalf the book is written. The narration is conducted in the first person, in memoir form, with a complex relationship between the author’s position and the position of the hero-narrator. A rather large gap between the time of action and the time of description testifies to the memoir, and not the diary form. So, when meeting a monk, Yorick immediately mentions his subsequent death and, further, about his current attitude towards the snuff box received from him: “...I keep this snuff box along with the objects of the cult of my religion, so that it contributes to the exaltation of my thoughts...” [4].

As V. Shklovsky writes: “Stern was the first to unravel the very foundation of the tangle of human relations. He changed the scale of the descriptions, took close-ups of the insignificant. He changed the clock of time in art.” [3].

The change in the passage of time appears in a different perspective in “A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy”. Sterne here does not violate the very order of the flow of time and temporal processes, creating an intricate confusion of time — in “A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy”, leaving the course of time outwardly linear, he violates its scaling, continuity, uniformity. Time in “A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy” moves unevenly, in leaps and bounds, often it does not move at all, which is manifested in the imaginary change of the same chapter titles, as if stuck in one time period. Sterne in his novels started a great fight with time. The result of this fight is an allegory of the name Yorick chosen by him as the main character, and his journey (from death) to nowhere, and the fluidity of his spiritual movements, which he tries to stop, making available for analysis, disassembly, fixing as the sum of unchanged mini-impulses; the fiasco he suffers in this is the semantic core of the novel.

Researchers have repeatedly emphasized the dynamics of mutual transitions of the “high” and “low” consciousness of the hero, his caustic, sober and intent introspection, in places bordering on self-flagellation and painful reflection. So, A. Elistratova notes: “Secrets and riddles” that occupy Sterny the artist are, first of all, the secrets of a person’s mental life, the riddles of contradictory mutual transitions from one mood to another, from intention to an act opposite to him. Sterne’s psychological analysis to some extent anticipates the comprehension of the “dialectics of the soul”. A sentimental attitude to life is brought to the forefront of the narrative. Yorick himself, listing the different types of travelers in the preface, refers to himself as a sentimental traveller. He really values only his feelings, regardless of the reasons caused [1].

The genre of “travel notes” was widely known in English literature of the 18th century. Descriptions of the journey across the continent (the “grand tour”), on which rich young gentlemen accompanied by mentors-companions, were necessarily sent to complete their education, were published quite often.

However, Sterne’s work differed sharply from them both in form and content. Outwardly, it resembles the notes of an inquisitive traveler. Many of his chapters are named after the names of the cities he visited. However, the imaginary reliability of the description is necessary for Sterne only in order for the reader to plunge into the world familiar to him at first glance. And then surprises await him.

The book does not describe the places, nor the exact presentation of the facts, nor the assessment of what the author saw. The chronology is broken in it, there is no harmonious composition. The description of minor episodes grows to enormous proportions, overgrown with seemingly useless details. On the contrary, significant phenomena are mentioned in passing.

One of the predominant properties that characterize the image of Yorick is sensitivity. In “A Sentimental Journey”, the hero’s generosity and goodness often appear in the form of posturing, the pose of a “crafty swindler”, and Yorick himself sometimes pathetically plays the social role of a philanthropist.

It turns out that the author is not at all interested in what the traveler saw. All that matters to him is how he perceives what he sees. Just as in the first novel, Sterne, as it were, stages a psychological experience. His hero, torn from his usual life, must be a cold-blooded observer of everything that comes his way. But emotions, quirks, complexity of character do not allow Yorick to be just an observer. They make him a participant in events, leave an imprint on his soul. It is a journey into the inner world of the hero. It is necessary in order to reveal his spiritual qualities, to show his weaknesses and virtues, the inconsistency of his character and the importance of momentary impressions for his formation.

Sterne builds the character of the protagonist in accordance with the theories of Hume and Smith, in which the main ethical category is sympathy for someone. But in the same theory of Hume, he also finds a rejection of its imperativeness. The philosopher’s skepticism is also perceived by his followers. Sterne doubts the eternal virtue of man and his desire for mercy. He knows only too well how many other feelings lie hidden in human nature. This causes the destruction of the sentimental canon.

Yorick is a typical sentimental hero and at the same time his denial. His feelings are always moderate and colored with a slight irony in relation to reality, to other people, to himself. Yorick’s sensitivity has a subtle tinge of skepticism. He is impulsive and often begins to act on a sudden impulse of the soul. But to each such outburst of feelings he has a certain amount of selfishness mixed in. And he immediately pulls himself up sharply.

Committing a bad deed, he often tries to justify it, resorting to rationalistic arguments. But they quickly collapse under the pressure of feelings. However, his feelings are uncertain. So, Yorick understands intellectually that he should be merciful...
and noble, but sometimes this nobility is purely rational. He begins to act under compulsion, because from the point of view of morality, “it is necessary.” And only when sincerity, a sense of empathy, compassion wins in him, Sterne’s hero is transformed.

The portrait of the hero is ambiguous, but psychologically accurate. Yorick perceives the contradictions of human nature as something inevitable and enduring. Seeing the limitations of human possibilities and even more limited ability of human cognition, he can only laugh bitterly at these contradictions, but does not try to correct anything. He also considers satirical ridicule of reality unnecessary and fruitless. From here arises the equivalent acceptance of good and evil, demonstrative immorality.

The essence of Sterne’s art, in the words of I. Vertsman [6], is that he proclaimed as his motto “wisdom grieving in the shell of buffoonish humor over the tragic course of life”.

“A Sentimental Journey” was the culmination of the development of English sentimentalism, and Yorick may be said to herald a new type of hero to be developed later in the realist prose of the 19th century.

References: