

## **The Role of Historical and Religious Components in John Fowles's Novel *A Maggot***

**Khabibullina, L.\* and Zinnatullina, Z.**

*Institute of Philology and Intercultural Communication, Kazan Federal University*

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article is devoted to the analysis of main components of a national myth in John Fowles' novel *A Maggot*. Religion plays an important role in this regard. The writer creates his own national myth based on a synthesis of images of Celtic mythology and basic Christian tenets. In *A Maggot*, Fowles also presents the "feminist" variation of Christianity through the image of Rebecca. It is she who connects national myth with universal mythology in the novel. In this respect, there is a mythologising of space and history. The space is represented by the road (path) motif and by the opposition capital/provinces. The author focuses on Stonehenge, one of the main objects of cultural and English national mythologisation today. The action of the novel takes place in 18<sup>th</sup> century. This epoch was important in the shaping of the historical development of England. Fowles shows two development paths for the English nation: "official" and "religious". That is why this epoch is very important for the author.

*Keywords:* John Fowles, *A Maggot*, national myth, the Quakers, sanctification

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The strategy of historical narrative is one of the most significant strategies in creating the national myth in English literature. Authors Liliya Khabibullina and Tatyana

Breeva have contemplated this issue in their work *National myth in Russian and English literature* (2009). National myth is a product of national collective imagination (Anderson, 2006), which includes the image of the national "we" showcasing unity and the representation of peoples about themselves alongside with the image of the "other" in comparison, as well as about the nation's development, national mentality and major national images. The work represents the formation of national

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*E-mail addresses:*

fuatovna@list.ru (Khabibullina, L.),

zin-zulya@mail.ru (Zinnatullina, Z.)

\* Corresponding author

myth (the 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries), figuration (the 19<sup>th</sup> - the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century) and development (the 20<sup>th</sup> century). The most important factors in the development of the national myth are demythologisation (destruction of present representations about the nation) and remythologisation (providing new meanings in the present representations about the nation). In this work, the authors introduce new methods of analysis at this point and throw light on some novels such as by Peter. Ackroydohn, John. Fowles and Anthony Burgess among others We study this problem in J. Fowles' *A Maggot*.

In a novel, history exists in both forms: a proper historical novel and a "cryptohistory". Cryptohistory includes some mystery connected with the story which is revealed in the form of a historical or pseudo-historical component of another literary genre.<sup>1</sup> Historical metaplots had already appeared by the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They comprised recreation and mythologising of the national past, for example, the "Arthurian", "Shakespearean" and "Victorian" metaplots, which appeal to a great number of English writers. As an example of the "Shakespearean" metaplot, we might mention novels such as *Falstaff* (1976) by Robert Nye Burgess's *Nothing Like the Sun* (1964); *The Voyage of the Destiny* (1983), *Mrs. Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (1992); *The Late Mr. Shakespeare: A Novel* (1998) etc. The

<sup>1</sup>For example, in Ackroyd's *The house of doctor Dee*, cryptohistory combined with the detective genre.

novels by Fowles such as *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem/The Trial of Elizabeth Cree* (1994) may be considered as examples of the "Victorian" metaplot.

In this respect a special interest is attached to the novels which create a new and unusual dimension in the collective literary remodelling of the national myth. Both researchers and authors of literary writings note that the task of "promoting of new Englishness" is set in the majority of literary works belonging to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> The authors modify this task by themselves in accordance with their own concept of the nation.<sup>3</sup>

## HISTORY AND RELIGION IN FOWLES *A MAGGOT*

Fowles's (1926-2005) novel *A Maggot* (1986) excites a particular interest in this respect. Some researchers, including F.M.

<sup>2</sup>Englishness became a popular topic of the novels of many contemporary writers. Some of these novels include: *European Journal of English Studies*, 8.2 (2004) by Ingelbien, R. ("*Imagined Communities / Imagined Solitudes: Versions of Englishness in Postwar Literature*") and Nunning, V. ("*The Importance of Being English: European Perspectives on Englishness*").

<sup>3</sup>For example, Khabibullina, Liliya and Valentina Vassilieva consider Somerset Mougham's ideas about English and Russian national characters in: Interaction des idées nationales dans les littératures anglaise et française du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle (S. Maugham, R. Gary). (2014). *Journal of Language and Literature*, 5.1, 55-60.

Holmes, appraise *A Maggot* as a stylistic repetition of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. *A Maggot* seems to revert to the narrative method of what is widely regarded as his finest work, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1991). In fact, even though the author addresses different epochs, we can easily trace the intent to reveal the "inner" and deep essence of the epoch and evaluate the national character.

Glorification of the national state was a feature of the Victorian period that was shown in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there was no idea of a common nation. This is much conditioned by the fact that in 1714, the throne of Great Britain and Ireland passed to George I, the representative of the Welfen dynasty prince-electors Georg Ludwig. His personality and interior life became the matter of discussions and antagonism of the British people. At the same time, in the period of revolution in England, there appeared a whole range of occult sects where the national ideas were especially strong. They were somehow connected with the revolutionary movement. The researcher T.A. Pavlova mentions: "Then, in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, contemporaries counted more than 300 national sects and movements, each of which proposed their own religious and social doctrines" (Pavlova, 2005, p. 149). However, the 18<sup>th</sup> century noticed the decrease of its revolutionary character and the Quakers' sect was one of the most influential. It is assumed that the participant of this very sect became the mother of the famous Ann

Lee, the founder of the Shakers' Sect, the activity of which spread on the territory of England and later the USA. Taking advantage of the fact that there was little information about Ann Lee's mother Fowles creates her fictional biography. *A Maggot* in fact tells about how the main character acquires the new interior knowledge of Christianity. The action takes place in England, and it is connected with even more ancient Celtic spiritual tradition. The researchers note: "In fact, even though Rebecca's experience often conflicts with traditional authority as it is written in the Bible and inscribed in patriarchal culture, she stubbornly affirms the truth revealed to her through personal experience" (Arnell, 2007, p. 936). Quakers are chosen by the author to realise the idea of the national as not only the most significant and strong sect, but also as a community formed on the basis of the features of English national character, such as aspiration for justice and Puritanism.

The main character of the novel named Rebecca bears the national features. Creating an image of Rebecca the author associates her with two biblical characters - firstly, with Mary Magdalene, as at the beginning of the novel Rebecca earns her living by prostitution, secondly, with virgin Mary, as she is predestined to give birth to a daughter who will be honoured by the predecessors as high as Jesus Christ. It is characteristic of John Fowles' oeuvre to put emphasis on female characters. Women become the impetus for the main male images transformation, for example, Sarah

and Charles from *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Jane and Daniel from *Daniel Martin* (1977), Lily and Nicholas from *The Magus* (1965). In the novel *A Maggot* Fowles makes a peculiar "reshuffling"; it is not the woman who transforms the man, but vice versa. Mr. Bartholemew becomes a guide for Rebecca. It is typical that the man becomes a leader for a woman in classical literature (for example, in Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor*).

Rebecca's evolution is described by the author through a range of recognised Biblical associations, which makes the image one of the main means of mythologisation of the "historical" content. She was a prostitute in Hannah Claiborne's bordel. Her infertility only contributed to her craft. At this stage, Rebecca's image correlates with the image of Mary Magdalene. During the journey in her soul there awakens a feeling of pity and compassion to Mr. Bartholemew's mute servant Dick: "Q. Yet later you chose to lie with him for pleasure, was it not so? A. I felt pity of him" (Fowles, 1986, p. 309). As it is known, compassion is one of the main Christian virtues. Thus, compassion leads to catharsis: Rebecca does not want to come back to London, she is more and more driven by the thought of going back to her parents:

*"I take heart thee won't look me in my eyes, 'tis sign thee knows I speak truth. It had become strong upon me that I must change my life, now saw I his Lordship was my prison's key. For when he came out with his scheme to*

*take me away to the West where I was born, I felt a great flutter come to flee where I was."* (Fowles, 1986, p. 304).

The final step of Rebecca's transformation from a "harlot" to "Virgin Mary" takes place in a cave which represents the destination point of the main characters' journey and which is traditionally associated with the mother's womb (Flöttmann, 2013). That is the very place where Rebecca, being infertile at some point of her life, could conceive a baby after the episode with Dick.

In this novel, Fowles diverges from the religious canon turning away from the patriarchal world view assigned to Christianity. The transformation of the belief in God is a given via the main heroin. Rebecca thinks up the "Holy Mother Wisdom" cult, which "'tis she the bearing spirit of God's will, and one with Him from the beginning, that takes up all that Christ the Saviour promised" (Fowles, 1986, p. 378). She put these ideas into her daughter's head who later became the leader of the Shakers. Their doctrinal statement was based on the view that a female has to be an inseparable part of the Holy Trinity, the latter couldn't exist without. Ann Lee's birth was treated by the Shakers as the second coming of Christ. They asked everybody to search for God within oneself, but not in the Bible or Church. The Shakers perform rituals using music and dances to reach God, which gives it a common ground with pageantry. Some historians (for example, C. Garrett) consider that the Shakers' religious sect

sprung from the teachings of the "French prophets" who were mostly protestant refugees from South France and the Quakers who joined them later (Garrett, 1987). Fowles's novel *A Maggot* presents to the reader the author's version of how the sect appeared, signifying that his version is a fictional one: "...but I would not have this seen as a historical novel. It is *A Maggot*" (Fowles, 1986, p. 2).

Through the history of the Shakers' sect, Fowles denotes the significance of England as the country where a new religion was born with the culture forming its basis. It all strikes the sacral component into history and makes it a part of a national myth. The basis of the novel's plot is the mystic motivation for the rise of a new religion in England. Mr. Bartholemew and three mystic female characters who might be treated as the personification of mythological Celtic goddesses and who by that give reasons for the "local" belonging to the new religion. They help Rebecca, the former prostitute, create a religious theory which on the one hand is based on her Christian views, and on the other on pageant images and rituals. Making England a special place, the place of the rise of the true religion, the author actualises the idea of the country's special mission, putting it on the same level as Christian Jerusalem and Muslim Mecca.

To "consolidate" the new religion, Fowles combines the Christian component with the local Celtic one. For this purpose, he includes in the novel the image of Stonehenge, attributing it with new features. Stonehenge is one of the most famous

archaeological monuments in the world, and also one of the main objects of cultural and national mythologisation today. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, an English antiquary John Aubrey put forward an assumption that Stonehenge was a sanctuary built by Druids and Celtic tribe priests who had moved to Britain in the last centuries BC (Bonwick, 1894, p. 214). Quite often, mostly in literature, it is included in the "Arthurian" myth as it is considered connected with the name of Merlin of whom the legend tells that he built it on the order of Ambrosius. There is a legend that Stonehenge is a devil's brood.<sup>4</sup>

The novel describes several versions of Stonehenge's origin. First, it is an official version of the building of Stonehenge which was characteristic of that period: in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, an English architect Inigo Jones put forward a version that Stonehenge had been erected by ancient Romans as a burial place. That version was kept as the basic one until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is presented in the novel by Mr. Lacy during his questioning. For him, Stonehenge is just "a chief place of pagan idolatry" (Fowles, 1986, p. 179). When Bartholemew asks him to come to see the place together, Lacy can't but agree but he finds nothing attractive in the trip. Even when the actor stays face to face with Mr. Bartholemew, and a straight talk about church and religion begins, Mr. Lacy acts with discretion and does not express any

<sup>4</sup>For example, D.P. Gregg describes the legend that Merlin engaged the Devil to move the stones for Stonehenge.

radical judgements. Such cold attitudes of the majority of the English population to Stonehenge in the 18<sup>th</sup> century might be conditioned by the “Witchcraft Act”, which cruelly punished people suspected of warlockry or any connections with black magic: “But this is largely because he now associates the witchcraft cases he has heard of, even attended as a younger man, like the occasional uses of the ducking-stool, with defective law and always disputable evidence” (Fowles, 1986, p. 411).

The second “devilish” version of the origin of Stonehenge reveals itself in the scene of questioning of Jones-Farthing who describes it as heard from Rebecca-Loise. This narration is full of gothic elements. Thus, while analysing his story according to the account for the symbols described by Montague Summers in his book “The Gothic quest. A history of the Gothic novel” (2011), we might notice the presence of some cave (Stonehenge itself), a dark night, the groan of the wind, a knight (Bartholemew), a lady, the main character (Rebecca), mysterious rustles, light, a strange creature: “That then there was all of a sudden a great rush or hurtle close in the night above, as of some great falcon that passed. And as a flash of lightning, so be it no thunder-clap warned of its coming; and tho’ but in this great flash, she did see a figure that stood above her on a stone pillar as a statue might, next above where she lay, that seemed of a great and dark-cloaked blackamoor, which did gaze most greedily down upon her, like he was that falcon whose wings she heard, his cloak

still aflutter from his falling, and so he would in an instant spring down further upon her, as a bird upon its prey” (Fowles, 1986, p. 241). It is through the people’s version of the gothic style (considering the origin and vocabulary of the character) that the author introduces the “devil’s” myth of Stonehenge. The images of witches and crows increase the horrible effect in Jones’ story. Thus, in this way, one more variant of the Stonehenge myth is realised, the myth which represents the place as the one connected with evil spirits and the place where the Devil lives.

The third version of the Stonehenge image is given in Rebecca’s story. As opposite to Jones’ story where Stonehenge is depicted in dark colours and surrounded by hair-raising sounds, the main heroine’s story comprises light, fragrance and warmth: “And the younger stood with his finger pointed up, as if towards the light, yet me thought his eyes did rest upon me. But as a gust of warmth, that was sweet scented, as of summer fields, as I say, and more than sweet to the nose, sweet to the spirit” (Fowles, 1986, p. 323). Traditionally in Christianity, these phenomena are the signs of divine presence. Reverent Kirill, a Slavonian teacher, explaining the mystery of the Holy Trinity said: “do you see a shining sphere (the Sun) in the skies which gives light and warmth? God the Father is like the Sun without beginning and end. Eternally He gives birth to the Son of God, like light goes from the Sun; and the Holy Spirit comes from it like warmth comes from the Sun together with rays of light.”



“For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life” (Bible, New Testament. 2 Corinthians).

The author connects the “divine” version of the origin of Stonehenge with the basic Celtic version, which is put forward in the evidence of the main heroine. As K. Brax (2003) writes in *The Poetics of Mystery*: “The Celtic mythological elements are another component of the novel’s fantastic narration. Rebecca’s testimony in particular contains a relatively large amount of Celtic mythic symbolism” (p. 219). During the questioning, Rebecca claims that she has seen two men in Stonehenge: “Then again of a great sudden there was a light upon us from above, a light more large than any human making, as of a sun, I know not, so bright I no sooner looked to it than I must look down bedazzled, why, near blind of it; and there I saw, who stood not fifteen paces from where we knelt, among the stones, a young man and an old, that gazed upon us” (Fowles, 1986, p. 323). In contrast with the heroine who associated these images with the Divine, the contemporary reader will easily trace the links with Celtic mythology. Thus, the elder of the coming people resembles Merlin, a legendary wizard, a builder of Stonehenge: “I saw not, save that he had a white beard” (Fowles, 1986, p. 324). The young man is supposed to have been Ambrosius Aurelius, King Arthur’s uncle. As the legend tells, it was him who ordered Merlin to build Stonehenge.

The “correct” perception of these links is open only to Mr. Bartholemew, the initiator of the journey, the aristocrat who understands the interior meaning of the events. Mr. Bartholemew shows in his speech addressed to Lacy that he knows who and why built this monument: “Then lie said, I will tell you this, Lacy, these ancients knew a secret I should give all I possess to secure. They knew their life’s meridian, and I still search mine” (Fowles, 1986, p. 138). But a reader does not get an answer to this question. In this respect, the mentioning of time of the events described in the novel seems quite important – May 1, 1736. It was a traditional Celtic holiday in England. For the contemporary English people, this holiday is only associated with “Green Jack”. On this day, the Celts celebrated one of the four most important Beltane celebrations. This celebration is remythologised in the novel. Fowles describes it in every detail. If the ancient druids praised the beginning of summer by making huge fires and offering sacrifices, the Christians allotted their own symbols to it. English people replaced the human sacrifices by offering animals, choosing one of the most “non-Christian” and widely spread representatives of fauna: “A very few hours would see a series of terrified living birds tied in place of the stuffed red puppet, and blood on the setts. Eighteenth-century man was truly Christian in his cruelty to animals. Was it not a blasphemous cock that crowed thrice, rejoicing each time the apostle Peter denied? What could be more virtuous than bludgeoning its descendants

to death?” (Fowles, 1986, p. 17). So the author draws the readers’ attention to the fact that the link between Christian and local pagan traditions stays stable and deep, that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century people could not turn back from paganism and pagan rituals. They adapted them to their religion giving them a new meaning.

Apart from bearing the image of Stonehenge, the scene in the cave turns out to be a very important symbol actualising the meaning of Celtic mythology in the novel. This scene sends us back to the Biblical story of Christ’s birth by Virgin Mary. Rebecca also conceived a baby in a miraculous way. Both Christ and Ann Lee whom the Shakers considered a feminine impersonification of Christ, became the leaders of religious movements. The cave in *A Maggot* becomes the place of initiation for the main heroine. Traditionally in such underground caves people held the rituals connected with the transition of a man into a different state. Going off on kind of a journey inside “the maggot” Rebecca is subjected to a trial, which brings about changes in her lifestyle and concepts of life and she becomes a different personality. When Rebecca, Mr. Bartholemew and Dick reach the terminus of their journey – the cave - they are met by a strangely dressed woman at the chops, “lady in silver” (Fowles, 1986, p. 350), and two more ladies join her later: “All three there gazed upon us, with that same kindly look. Then further marvel, ‘twas plain they was mother and daughter, and daughter’s daughter again. Thus it seemed the one woman in her three

ages, so like were their features despite their different years” (Fowles, 1986, p. 363). An educated reader will associate those “mystic” women from the story with the Celtic triune goddess – Morrigan (the goddess of war). She consists of Bodb (“outrageous”), Macha (personification of a battle) and Nemain (“poisonous”). Usually Morrigan is depicted as wearing a suit of armour and carrying a spear in each hand. She often came out to people in the likeness of a crow. These are the birds that Jones sees when he watches the cave: “For not a half-hour after they had gone in there came two great black crows, that they call ravens, with their young, and sat on the pentice slope above the cliff where the cavern lay, and made a great noise, as of joy or mockery, I know not which” (Fowles, 1986, p. 216).

The image of Dick, Mr. Bartholemew’s mute servant, is also connected with Celtic mythology. The main role here is attributed to his death: he was found hung by the road with a bunch of violets in his hand. Ancient Celts believed in Esus the god, one of upper Celtic deities, the patron of forests and trees. He accepted sacrifices on trees, that was the reason why druids quite often offered him hung people. Dick might have become this kind of a sacrificial victim. The flowers in his mouth may also play a big role. The researcher finds some connections of it with the myth of the ancient Greek goddess Cybele and her beloved Attis (Tarbox, 1988). The violets grow in the blood of the badly injured Attis. They bloom in Dick’s mouth in *A Maggot*



several days after his death. In this way Fowles widens the mythological field of the novel by the image of Dick, introducing into it not only Celtic mythology but also a classical one, thus creating a unified mythological space.

As we can make it out, the image of Mr Bartholemew himself is also connected with Celtic world view. It might possibly be associated with the druid – the Celtic priest. According to ancient legends druids were highly educated people: “Finally, druids were educators; many young people studied with them for a time, learning the history of their people, religious concepts, mathematics, astronomy, writing, and other subjects before returning to life in the other classes of society” (Monaghan, 2004, p. 138). Mr. Bartholemew was also an educated person and to some extent, even a man of genius. We get to know this from his professor's letter in Oxford, Mr. Sonderson: “Of his Lordship I may most sincerely state that I have had few pupils to equal him, and none to surpass” (Fowles, 1986, p. 181). But the most important thing is that druids had a particular ritual – after receiving some training a druid had to make a journey to the Well of Wisdom, where he could find answers to all questions and learn the truth. Mr. Bartholemew makes the same kind of journey. Having acquired some knowledge he goes off towards the bearers of the truth he has been searching for.

## CONCLUSION

In the novel *A Maggot*, Fowles creates his own version of the national myth

uniting the universal symbols of Biblical mythology and “local” Celtic one. The version of the appearance of the Shakers' religious sect from Quaker's origin plays a major role in this process. On the one hand, combining both Christian (international) and Pagan (originally national) elements, Fowles alludes to such important places like Stonehenge to expand the sacred significance of this monument. On the other hand, he gives a more national meaning to this belief. Fowles emphasises English origins of the new branch of Christianity, which later was to spread to America. He also shows the special role of the English nationality in the world of spirituality as well.

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