

G. K. CHESTERTON'S BIOGRAPHIES. PECULIARITIES OF THE GENRE FORM

Ekaterina V. Zueva

Kazan Federal University

Maria A. Kozyreva

Kazan Federal University

Abstract. The paper deals with biographies written by G.K.Chesterton. The works are viewed from the perspective of peculiarities of his artistic and critical method as well as through the prism of biographical theory. The authors aim to study the artistic and polemical means used by G.K.Chesterton, and to identify the features of his biographical approach. The history of the writer's biographical writings is traced. It is proved that following the general rules of the biography as a traditional conventional form Chesterton breaks with the conventional approaches and forms his own variant of the genre. Such specific methods as building up the psychological portrait of the subject by analysing his creation, paradoxes, brief overview of the life events, open subjectivity of the author's position and publicistic pathos, essayistic digressions are proved to be the leading technique of Chesterton's biographies. In this paper we tried to figure out some of the most characteristic features of the biographies written by G.K.Chesterton. Taking into account the fact of the importance and diversity of the biographical genre forms in the twentieth and twenty first century it would be interesting to place Chesterton's works into a wider context of the English biographical tradition and to trace his impact on the contemporary development of the genre form

Keywords: G. K. Chesterton, biography, art criticism, literary criticism, hagiography, essay.

1. Introduction

Well known by his detective stories about catholic priest Father Brown Chesterton also wrote novels unusual and innovative by their form. (*The Man Who Was Thursday*). He was not less popular as a journalist, critic and essayist. The diversity of genre forms used by G.K.Chesterton is quite typical for his epoch. Using quite traditional literary forms (novels, short stories, essays, biographies), the writer revealed his own understanding of the genres thus inscribing into the general literary context of his time original aesthetics and philosophy. The biographical writings seem to us one of the most interesting sides of his creativity. He was writing biographies throughout his life (*Robert Browning* – 1903, *George Watts* – 1904, *Charles Dickens* – 1906-1909, *George Bernard Show* – 1909, *William Blake* – 1910, *St. Francis of Assisi* – 1923, *Robert Louis Stevenson* – 1927, *Chaucer* – 1932, *Thomas Aquinate* – 1933). All these works can be divided into two groups : literary and art biographies in which the subjects' individualities are extracted from their writings and paintings ; and the life stories of saints, which can be defined as hagiography, still they bear the main features of a biography.

2. Materials And Methods

Due to the fact that Chesterton made a great contribution to the development of biographical form in Twentieth century English literature it is important to trace how he follows the traditional features of the genre and his innovative approach to it.

The hybrid nature of biography is recognized by most of the contemporary scholars. [Edel, 1978], [Holmes,1995], [Lee, 2005, 2009], [Benton, 2009, 2015], [Novak, 2014]. As H. Lee's states, "whether we think of biography as more like history or more like fiction, what we want from it is a vivid sense of the person"[Lee, 2005, 3]. There exists variety of possible techniques of creating an image of a real person without destroying historical truth not only in biographies but other non-fiction forms. [Karasik, Nesselova, Strukova, 2016, Idoko, C. U., & Onoja, M. O. (2016)].

Most studies of G.K.Chesterton's life and works do not contain detailed analysis of his biographical writings, give only a general survey of their problematic but do not explore genre peculiarities and the specificity of the form. [Pierce...] Some scholars tend to concentrate on the writer's religious views and their reflection in the writings [Ahlquist 2003,2012], [Oddie 2010]. The most interesting attempt to analyze the specifics of three of biographies was undertaken by A.Blackstoc [, Burgos, Alex Veliz, et al. 2018],, but the research is also mainly conducted on the basis of Chesterton's religious preferences. As Chesterton's novels are well studied but the genre features and peculiarities of his biographies somehow escaped the deep analysis, we aim to highlight the individual author's approach to the genre form.

3. Results

It is generally known that a mere chance made Chesterton to start the exploration of the biographical genre. In 1902 he was ordered a book about R. Browning by the publishing house *Macmillian*. Later he described this event as a very flattering invitation. Though it was obviously successful, the biography received mixed criticism. On the one hand Robert Browning appeared to the reader as a real person full of character, "a man alive", on the other, the study of the poet's life and creativity appeared to be rather arbitrary. Chesterton quoted his poems on memory and with many mistakes. The reader cannot be sure about the factual side of the biography. Still the image of the poet-laureate is vivid, generalizations, though sometimes naïve, give us full impression of Browning's writings and possible approaches to his poetry. This first experience formed the basis for Chesterton's future biographical works.

The next biography was a portrait of G.F.Watts. It was also a commissioned work, but Chesterton depicts the painter whom he appreciated from his youth. It is his first experiment in the form of artist's biography, yet an immature work and rather superficial study of Watts' creativity, but here Chesterton tries to apply the same method as in his first literary biography deriving the main features of the portrayed character not from factual information but from his works. However the book may be considered quite successful as a study of the artist's life and oeuvre as Watts liked this essay. Chesterton's art education also helped him greatly in creating the painter's portrait and art criticism.

The year 1908 was marked by the publication of the book which has become one of the best studies of Ch. Dickens' life and creativity ever written. (*Charles Dickens*) Chesterton speaks about one of his favorite writers and that makes the portrait vivid and bright. There was certain similarity in their vision of the world and creative manner what also gives advantages to the work. In the genre, it is already structurally complete and mature work. The same year Chesterton published his phantasmagoric novel *The Man Who Was Thursday* and a book of essays, *Heretics*, where he already revealed himself as a brilliant literary critic. Then *Orthodoxy*, a detailed account of his life philosophy and religious views, came out. His aesthetic and religious position were by this time absolutely formed.

The most polemical among Chesterton's biographical works is *George Bernard Shaw*. (1909) Here the writer met with a real challenge: he had to write about the person who was alive and popular among the contemporaries, his close friend and the hottest opponent at the same time. It is possible to say that this book became the written continuation and generalization of the constant discussions the author was leading with his subject in real life.

In 1910 *William Blake* appears as a companion to Chesterton's earlier study of G.F.Watts in the Popular Library of Art series. The originality of this work consists in the author's attempt to reveal the syncretic nature of Blake's artistic individuality. He investigates the synthesis of different forms of art, painting and poetry and achieves in this brilliant results.

After more than a decade break Chesterton returns to the biography form to face a new challenge of writing about the life of one of the greatest saints of the Catholic Church St. Francis of Assisi. It appears to be not only hagiographical description of the saint's life and miracles but also the study of his poetry and sermons and an attempt to create his live portrait. Trying to comprehend the mystery of the saint Chesterton expresses his own Christian views as well.

Robert Louis Stevenson (1927) carries much more features of a traditional biography but at the same time shows the development of Chesterton's individual biographical approach. He analyses Chaucer's creativity through the prism of his life puritanical education and Scottish cultural tradition.

Chaucer (1932) was the last of Chesterton's literary biographies. He praises the poet and tries to help the modern readership to enjoy his writings. At the same time it is a full study of British medieval culture and Catholicism. "Inevitably, many critics condemned the biography because it failed meet certain scholarly criteria. Chesterton, however, was merely being true to form and following the familiar style that had characterized all his previous biographies." [Pearce P.410]

The last full-length book Chesterton wrote was *Thomas Aquinas* (1933). This new hagiographical work was highly praised both by critics and Vatican. The author himself felt all the responsibility and worked a lot with sources. Chesterton presents the reader comprehensive portrait of the saint and analyses and explains his works. It can be defined as a combination of biography and theological research.

In his biographical books Chesterton does not necessarily describe the lives of the heroes fully, and usually they cannot be called "lives" in a full sense. The dates are imprecise and are mentioned unsystematically. In the later writings (*Chaucer*), and biographies of the saints (*St. Francis of Assisi*, *Thomas Aquinate*) Chesterton is more exact but usually he speaks only about facts which seem to him mostly important. The choice of the key events is absolutely subjective. But practically all of the biographies he pays great attention to the childhood of his characters and the role their families played in the formation of their personalities. A. Blackstock claims that in this case Chesterton brings to the fore the religious component of upbringing which is true only partially. Even when there is not much factual material for the speculations about the early life of the personality the writer still builds up the imaginary atmosphere of his childhood. "...there seems to be no doubt that William Blake was brought up in the ordinary atmosphere of the smaller English bourgeoisie. His manners and morals were trained in the old obvious way; nobody ever thought of training his imagination, which perhaps was all the better for the neglect. There are few tales of his actual infancy. Once he lingered too long in the fields and came back to tell his mother that he had seen the prophet Ezekiel sitting under the tree. His mother smacked him. Thus ended the first adventure of William Blake in the wonderland of which he was a citizen". [Chesterton 1932 pp 3-4]

In this uneven outline the author's judgments about the creativity of the hero play important role as means of characteristic. Brilliant literary and art critic, Chesterton tends to identify features of the creative personality basing on the characteristic of the oeuvre. . But this tendency typical for the form of literary biography reveals absolute subjectivity of the biographer. As a rule he analyses deeply the works which he likes and omits those which do not fit his concept of the author or even risk to destroy it. So in *Charles Dickens* the late novels *The Great Expectations* and *Tale of Two Cities* are just mentioned, but *Mystery of Edwin Droode* is carefully studied. Very often the chapters dedicated to the close analysis of some writings or pictures can be regarded as separate essays.

The integral part of Chesterton's biographies are digressions on different problems: religious, philosophical, sociological – topical for Chesterton and his times. They are full of hot polemical discourse and in some cases

homiletical pathos. In *Charles Dickens* - thoughts about philosophy of childhood and French revolution, in *Robert Browning* Englishness and Victorian epoch, in *Robert Louis Stevenson* – Scottish Puritanism, in *Geoffrey Chaucer* – the Middle ages.

In his biographies Chesterton uses the tool typical for his journalism. He begins his polemics with creating an imagery opponent starting his arguments with common statement “some people think”, “It is argued that”. Usually these imaginary points of view are obviously absurd. So speaking about the reception of Chaucer’s creativity in the modern world he declares: “...there has been perceptible, in greater or less degree, an indescribable disposition to patronize Chaucer. Sometimes he is patted on the head like a child, because all our poets are his children. <...> Sometimes he is treated as entirely dead; a bag of dry bones to be dissected by antiquarians.<...> It is partly the pedantic prejudice that medieval civilization was not civilized. It is partly a sheer incapacity to thank those who have given us everything, because we cannot imagine anything else” [Chesterton, 1932, P 14] Creation of such fake foolish and uneducated opponent flatters the reader and helps him to join the discussion.

It was Chesterton’s paradoxical manner of thinking that allowed him to see some specific features of the studied character which contemporary criticism failed to notice. He considers that the main artistic achievement of Charles Dickens was not his narrative method or specific development of the novel form but creation of vivid characters; he tries to explain Robert Browning’s style through his psycho-physiological type; he interprets Stevenson’s *The Strange case of Dr.Jekil and Mr. Hyde* as an expression of the inner overcoming of Protestant dogmas; yet was the first to study William Blake’s poetry and paintings as a unity.

It is obvious that Chesterton’s aim was to form bright images of his heroes, subjective and as a result to a great extent fictional. It is achieved among other ways by the usage of symbolic and conceptual details which become a kind of leading motives of the biographies. In *Chaucer* it is the image of a daisy widely used by the poet which for Chesterton is the symbol of both simplicity and complexity of the world. In *Thomas Aquinate* he describes one of the portraits of the saint: “having given so much vividness and vigilance to the eyes, may have felt that he stressed too much the merely combative concentration of the saint; but anyhow for some reason he has blazoned upon his breast a rather curious emblem, as if it were some third symbolic and cyclopean eye. At least it is no normal Christian sign; but something more like the disk of the sun such as held the face of a heathen god; but the face itself is dark and occult, and only the rays breaking from it are a ring of fire. I do not know whether any traditional meaning has been attached to this; but its imaginative meaning is strangely apt. That secret sun, dark with excess of light, or not showing its light save in the enlightenment of others, might well be the exact emblem of that inner and ideal life of the saint, which was not only hidden by his external words and actions, but even hidden by his merely outward and automatic silences and fits of reflection.” [Chesterton]

The writer’s style is often paradoxical and metaphorical. “... it is necessary to say something about the great movements that led up the entrance of the founder of the Franciscans. It may seem to mean describing a world, or even a universe to describe a man. It will inevitably mean that the world or the universe will be described with a few desperate generalizations in a few abrupt sentences. But so far from the meaning that we shall see a very small figure under so large a sky, it will mean that we must measure the sky before we can begin to measure the towering stature of the man.” [Chesterton, 2009, P.21]. Or: “Our recent slackness in poetry and in everything else is due to the fact that we are not longer a nation of shopkeepers, but merely a nation of shopowners” [Chesterton. 1910, - 3]

4. Summary

G.K.Chesterton in his biographical works insists the right of the author of creating his own, may be subjective image of the portrayed person. He aims to create vivid picture of the epoch to which his hero belonged and to describe him as a person alive, to explain his life for a common reader who usually has only a vague picture of it. At the same time the reader is given freedom to disagree with the author which is achieved by controversial spirit and dialogical discourse of the biographies, their paradoxical and metaphorical style.

It must be also mentioned that Chesterton was brilliant sketcher and caricaturist, so his ability of giving a quick outline of a biography’s protagonist character correlates with his artistic creativity.

5. Conclusion

In our paper we tried to figure out some of the most characteristic features of the biographies written by G.K.Chesterton. Taking into account the fact of the importance and diversity of the biographical genre forms in the twentieth and twenty first century it would be interesting to place Chesterton’s works into a wider context of the English biographical tradition and to trace his impact on the contemporary development of the genre form.

6. Conflict Of Interests

The authors confirm that the data do not contain any conflict of interests.

7. Acknowledgements

The work is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

References

1. Ahlquist D. G.K. Chesterton: The Apostle of Common Sense. – San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2003.
2. Ahlquist D. The Complete Thinker. The Marvelous Mind of G.K. Chesterton. – San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2012.

3. Benton M. *Literary Biography. An Introduction.* – Chichester: John Wiley&Sons ltd., 2009.
4. Benton M. *The Aesthetics of Biography – And What It Teaches* // *Journal of Aesthetic Education.* – University of Illinois Press, 2015. – Vol. 49, No. 1 (Spring 2015). – pp. 1-19.
5. Burgos, alex veliz, et al. "democracia, gobernanza y conductas éticas: ejes transversales en la formación." *opción* 34.86 (2018): 152-175.
6. Blackstok A. "With Considerable Art". *Chesterton on Blake, Browning, and Shaw.* // *Renascence: Values in Literature.* – 2.1(Fall 2009) - 2009.
7. Chesterton G.K. *Thomas Aquinas.* <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks01/0100331.txt>
8. Chesterton G.K. *Saint Francis of Assisi.* – Brewster, Massachussets: Paracleve Press – 2009.
9. Chesterton G.K. *Chaucer.* - Lnd.: Faber&Faber, 1932.
10. Chesterton G. K. *William Blake.* - Lnd.: Duckworth&Co, N.Y.: E.P.Dutton &Co, 1910.
11. Chesterton G.K. *Autobiography.* – Lnd. : A Hamish Hamilton Paperback, 1986.
12. Edel L. *Biography: A Manifesto* // *Biography.* – Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1987. – Vol. 1, No. 1 (Winter 1978). – pp. 1-3.
13. Holmes R. *Biography. Inventory Truth* // *The Art of Literary Biography.* Ed. by J. Batcheror – Oxford: Clarendon press, 1995. – pp. 15-25.
14. Idoko, C. U., & Onoja, M. O. (2016). *Youth Empowerment A Panacea for Unemployment in Kogi State, Nigeria.* *International Journal of Engineering, Science and Mathematics*, 5(1), 210-218.
15. Ker I. G.K. *Chesterton. A Biography.* – Oxford, Oxford UP, 2011.
16. Karasik O. B., Nesselova O. O., Strukova A. V. *Anne Frank as an Icon: Fictionalization of the Image in the Works of Literature and Visual Arts* // *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies.* – 2016. – Special Issue, July. – pp. 651-657.
17. Lee H. *Body Parts. Essays on Life-Writing.* – Lnd.: Chatto&Windul, 2005.
18. Lee H. *Biography: A Very Short Introduction.* – Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009.
19. Novak J. *Nell Gwyn in Contemporary Romance Novels: Biography and the Dictates of "Genre Literature"* // *Contemporary Women's Writings.* Oxford. – 2014. – 8(3). – pp. 373-390.
20. Oddie W. *Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy. The Making of G.K. Chesterton, 1874 – 1908.* - Oxford, Oxford UP, 2010.
21. Pearce J. *Wisdom and Innocence. A Life of G. K. Chesterton.* – Lnd., Sydney, Auckland: Hodder &Stoughton, 1997.