

METAPHORS AND SIMILES IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN PROSE : D. TARTT'S NOVEL *THE GOLDFINCH*

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Abstract: The article presents a survey of the metaphor- and simile-related researches in modern linguistics and considers stylistic functions of metaphors and similes in contemporary fiction. It is based on the novel *The Goldfinch* (2013) written by the American writer D. Tartt, the winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction (2014). It proves that the tropes in question used in the book are unique and striking. They perform figurative and descriptive functions, contribute to the expressiveness and emotiveness of the text, help to convey the characters' psychological frame of mind and produce a dramatic effect.

Key words: metaphor, simile, trope, stylistic device, stylistic function

1. Introduction

Metaphors and similes are among the most widely used tropes in prose. That is why they are in the focus of attention of many linguists. Among them are N. D. Arutyunova, N. Basylaya, A. Ben, M. Black, M. I. Cheremisina, T. V. Derkatch, S. S. Gusyev, V. L. Halatska, S. Glucksberg, M. Grothe, G. Lakoff, L. Myasnyankina, V. N. Telia, M. Turner, etc. who viewed the stylistic devices in question from different perspectives.

Contrary to the common belief that metaphor is only “a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish”, G. Lakoff considers that it finds reflection not only in language but also in thought and action [7]. N. Arutyunova defines metaphor as a method to perceive the peculiar feature of a concrete object, to convey its uniqueness [1]. A. I. Eger, in the article *Metaphors in Cognitive Linguistics*, dwells upon the development of the theory of metaphor, presents its disputable issues related to the subject of its nature and the way such linguists as

N. Chomsky, J. Derrida, G. Lakoff, E. R. Mac Cormac and others viewed it from different perspectives [3].

According to Dr. Mardy Grothe, metaphor and simile have a long history. The word *metaphor* made its first appearance in English in 1533, and *simile* – still earlier, in 1393 in William Langland's *Piers Plowman*. Comparing the two stylistic devices, the scholar states that they have a similar goal, that of relating one thing to another in a slightly different way. By contrast with simile which is an explicit comparison, metaphor is an implicit comparison [6]. Differentiating between metaphor and simile, M. Cheremisina claims that metaphor is a semantic function of a lexical unit, its transferred usage; the material bearer of metaphor is a word which is materialized in the context, whereas simile should be perceived as a construction because comparison is characteristic of the entire construction, not of a word or word combination [2]. Josie O'Donoghue makes a profound analysis of the differences between metaphor and simile in terms of their effect and suggests an idea that the latter is sometimes more powerful than the former [9]. L. Miasnianskaya suggests that simile is studied in various aspects: 1) grammatical (by finding and classifying its morphological, wordbuilding, syntactical peculiarities); 2) phraseological (by describing it as a set expression); 3) onomasiological (considering relations of its components with extralinguistic objects); 4) semasiological (examining some structure of its components); 5) functional-stylistic (describing its function in various functional styles) [8].

L. L. Zhao considers a metaphor as a three-dimensional complex comprising object, image and sense. It does not directly mention the resemblance between the object and the image, while a simile points out the similarities between the ones straight out [13]. Lynne Tirrell claims that metaphor is an elliptical simile and develops reductive and non-reductive simile theories of metaphor [11]. According to Adam Gargani's assumption, similes are used in poetry "to achieve some effects which could otherwise be achieved by the deployment of metaphors, but often to achieve effects which could *not* be achieved by equivalent metaphors. Metaphors and similes are like apples and oranges" [4]. Sam Glucksberg and Catrinel Haught

assume that metaphors and their corresponding similes may differ in their interpretations and differences between them are rather subtle [5]. In their research S. Zharkov and D. Gentner make an attempt to discuss the traditional idea that expressions in metaphor form feel more profound and express stronger claims than expressions in simile form [14]. Ewa Walaszewska supports already existing idea that “similes would be metaphors were it not for the word *like*”. She analyses the meaning of *like* in similes and ordinary (or literal) comparisons and considers that similes are related to metaphors [12].

2. Analysis and Discussion

The suggested article presents a case study of the use of metaphors and similes in the novel *The Goldfinch* (2013) [10] written by the American writer D. Tartt, the winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction (2014). The novel received a lot of rave reviews from literary critics. Stephen King, commenting on the merit of *The Goldfinch*, in *The New York Times Book Review*, said that it “is a rarity that comes along perhaps half a dozen times per decade, a smartly written literary novel that connects with the heart as well as the mind... Donna Tartt has delivered an extraordinary work of fiction”.

The Goldfinch is a story of an ordinary boy Theodore Decker whose life suddenly came to be related to Carel Fabritius's masterpiece of painting, *The Goldfinch*. After an explosion in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan a thirteen-year-old Theo loses his mother and has to change families and move from New York to Amsterdam. Since his mother's death the boy's life has changed dramatically – “Her death the dividing mark: Before and After” [10]. It has been deprived of stability, which resulted in experiencing a wide range of emotions, from despair to euphoria. Only owing to his favourite painting Theo remains afloat in a cruel and alien world. Throughout the whole novel Donna Tartt displays herself as a keen psychologist and observer of human emotions which she skillfully conveys by means of metaphors and similes.

For the main character of the novel, Theo, his mother was always an ideal woman whom he adored and without whom he could not imagine his life. After the explosion in the museum he realized that something terrible had happened to his mother. The author uses such metaphors to show that Theo is overcome by strong emotions: “<...> my dreams for the most part were muddled with the same indeterminate anxiety that bled through into my walking hours <...>”; “<...> my imagination was flying and darting around in panicked zig-zags”; “<...> and a chill wind of unreason blew over me”; “With a deadly coldness spreading in the centre of my chest, I was walking back into the living room”; “But soon fresh doubts and fears began to crowd around me <...>” [10]. Among the stylistic metaphors which produce a strong dramatic effect, there occur sustained metaphors in which several metaphoric images complement each other for the sake of creating and intensifying one central image: “But sometimes, unexpectedly, grief pounded over me in waves that left me gasping; and when the waves washed back, I found myself looking out over a brackish wreck which was illumined in light so lucid, so heartsick and empty, that I could hardly remember that the world had ever been anything but death”; “The interrogation (as I thought of it) had disturbed me greatly, kicking up a wall of the disjoined sensations that crashed over me at unexpected moments: a choking burn of chemicals and smoke, sparks and wires, the blanched chill of emergency lights overpowering enough to blank me out” [10].

Besides, we can find multiple trite metaphors which have partially lost their expressiveness due to the fact that they have become idioms used in everyday speech. However, they perform a certain stylistic function in the text contributing to familiarity and informality of speech, making it more colloquial, colorful and lively. For example: “Help me *keep an eye on* the time, will you?”; “She had sent me directly into *the heart of the explosion*”; “The match flared up, and he coughed as he exhaled *a cloud of smoke*”; “Margaret was their father’s princess, *apple of his eye*, all that”; “Hey, hey, *hold your horses* <...>”; “*To kill some time* I walked over to Greenwich Street <...>”; “*We took him at his word*” [10], etc.

Because Theo is a sensitive teenager, he is often overcome by a wide range of strong emotions. Therefore, the metaphors that help the author to convey anxiety, fear, perplexity, as well as some positive emotions, frequently contain the lexemes *heart, face, eyes, mind, stomach*:

- “<...> there was a hollowness at the *heart* of it <...>”; “<...> my *heart* scrambled and floundered at even the most innocent noises <...>”; “At the silence, my *heart* went cold”;
- “My panic must have been written plainly on my *face*”; “Her *face* went blank and then she shook her head <...>”;
- “<...> *eyes* gliding across me coolly as if they didn’t quite see me <...>”; “<...> our *eyes* met in the glass for a long still moment <...>”; “<...> china-blue *eyes* with a lot of light in them <...>”; “Though her voice was light I could see the fog in her eyes <...>”;
- “My *mind* was whirring busily on my own troubles <...>”; “My *mind* was churning in circles”;
- “Excitement fizzing bright in my *stomach* <...>”; “Custody? The word made my *stomach* crawl”; “Every time I thought of it my *stomach* squirmed <...>”; “<...> there was something about her too that made my *stomach* go watery” [10].

Metaphors are also used in the descriptions of Theo’s environment (the city, the weather, the museum, etc.), and they are apparently in tune with the characters’ mood. For example: “Along Park Avenue, ranks of red tulips stood at attention as we sped by”; “It was still dark outside; the city was just waking up”; “Horns cried in the crosswalk at rush hour and the light burned gold in the windows across the street, dying down around the same time as the traffic began to thin”; “In the shadowy room, a single blade of sun pierced between the curtains and struck across the room <...>”; “A thin spring rain was hitting at the windowpanes; outside, in the dark courtyard, the foamy white blossoms of a flowering pear were pale against wet brick”; “Faintly, I heard traffic singing on the street” [10].

Another peculiar feature of D. Tartt's style is the use of similes which help to convey various aspects of the main character's life. Theo's mother used to take him to the museum to let him enjoy the paintings exhibited there. The simile "<...> the museum always felt like a holiday <...>" [10] in a concise but eloquent way reflects the boy's attitude to his trips to the museum and shows how much he enjoyed them.

On the tragic day of his mother's death Theo finally came round, however he could hardly understand what had happened. The author uses very neat similes to describe the way the boy felt at that moment: "<...> I ached all over, my ribs were sore and my head felt like someone had hit me with a lead pipe"; "My ears rang, and so did my body, an intensely disturbing sensation: bones, brain, heart all thrumming like a struck bell"; "With a benumbed heaviness like moving through snow, I began to slog and weave through the debris <...>" [10]. The accident in the museum was a turning point in Theo's life. It changed his life dramatically and remained in the boy's mind forever making him feel infinitely lonely. Similes convey this idea in the best possible way: "The splashes and bursts carried a violence, like big blood sneezes, an hysterical sense of movement in the stillness". "Though I felt faint, and wanted to sit down, somehow I kept hobbling along with a hitch in my step like a partially broken toy" [10]. A number of similes are based on zoonyms (rat, fish, dog, animal, etc.) which enable the author to emphasize Theo's despair, loneliness and hopelessness: "Part of me was immobile, stunned with despair, like those *rats* that lose hope in laboratory experiments and lie down in the maze to starve". "I was desperate to vanish into the background – to slip invisibly among the Chinoiserie patterns like a *fish* in coral reef <...>" [10].

D. Tartt introduces in the plot a number of characters who play a significant role in Theo's life. Their relationships are described with a help of similes. One of them, his friend Andy Barbour with whom Theo was staying after becoming an orphan, could not substitute his mother and it was not easy to communicate with him: "His voice – as flat as the robot voice on an answering machine – kept me for a moment from realizing quite what he'd said". "He was a

planet without an atmosphere”. “<...> His conversation sometimes made me feel as though I was talking to one of those computer programs that mimic human response” [10].

In the rubble, Theo meets another character, an old man, Welton Backwell (Welty). That encounter, which has a great influence on the boy’s further life, is presented especially expressively (not without zoonyms): “The old man was watching me with a gaze at once hopeful and hopeless, like a starved *dog* too weak to walk. <...> We looked at each other, for a long strange moment that I’ve never forgotten, actually, like two *animals* meeting at twilight; <...> For an instant we were wired together and humming, like two engines on the same circuit”[10].

Theo falls in love with Pippa, a teenager at a school for disturbed girls, in Switzerland. The author describes the girl and Theo’s feelings for her with a help of similes: “Her face was like someone had turned a light into it. <...> Beautiful skin: milky white, arms like carved marble”; “<...> And all the blood rushed from my head, a long sweep, like I was falling off a cliff. <...> A starry ache that lifted me up above the windswept city like a kite: my head in the rainclouds, my heart in the sky” [10].

Theo’s life was full of various events. He would try to get rid of drug addiction, would suffer from unhappy love and his friend’s betrayal. However, he would be accompanied by the painting “The Goldfinch”, which followed him everywhere, like a faithful companion: “The painting, the magic and aliveness of it, was like that odd airy moment of the snow falling, greenish light and flakes whirling in the cameras, where you no longer cared about the game, who won or lost, but just wanted to drink in that speechless moment” [10].

3. Conclusion

Thus, having considered various linguistic sources we can affirm that metaphor is a trope based on likeness. It is a means of creating imagery and it contributes to figurativeness and expressiveness of the language. As far as simile is concerned, it is widely disputed by linguists who have contradictory views on its

role in fiction text. However, we agree that simile explains the essence of one object by comparing it with another one. Both metaphor and simile are used to represent the author's attitude to the object described.

Analyzing the language of D. Tartt's novel "The Goldfinch" we came to the conclusion that the most frequently used tropes in the novel are metaphors and similes. Among metaphors there occur trite ones which produce a colloquial effect. However most of the metaphors are unique and striking, they help the author to create colorful characters. Another typical feature of D. Tartt's style is the use of similes. They are introduced by the formal elements *as ... as, like, as if, as though*. The metaphors and similes perform figurative and descriptive functions in the novel. They participate in text formation and creation of characters, contribute to the expressiveness and emotiveness of the text, convey the characters' psychological state of mind and produce a dramatic effect.

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Мінцис Е.Є., Чік Є. А. Метафори та порівняння у сучасній американській прозі: роман Д. Тартт *The Goldfinch*

У статті узагальнено результати наукових розвідок пов'язаних з метафорою та порівнянням у сучасному мовознавстві. Матеріалом дослідження слугує роман *The Goldfinch* (2013) американської письменниці Д. Тартт, за який вона була нагороджена Пулітцерівською премією за кращу книгу у 2014 р. У результаті дослідження зроблено висновок, що метафори і порівняння є характерною рисою стилю письменниці. Вони виконують образотворчу, емоційно-експресивну, зображально-оцінну функції, увиразнюють художній текст, сприяють зображенню психологічного стану героїв та створенню драматичного ефекту.

Ключові слова: метафора, порівняння, троп, стилістичний засіб, стилістична функція.