Italian motifs in the works of William Dean Howells

Fesyanova Natalia Leonidovna  
a candidate of philological sciences, an assistant professor  
Naberezhnochnelnsky Institute of Kazan Federal University, Russia  
E-mail: birujza@yandex.ru

Goryacheva Olga Nikolaevna  
a candidate of philological sciences, an assistant professor  
Naberezhnochnelnsky Institute of Kazan Federal University, Russia  
E-mail: olganikgor@mail.ru

Abstract

The key point, revealing the genesis of American author William Dean Howells creativity in the paradigm of the USA culture, is his attitude to Italy. The great works of literature and art of this country have had a tremendous impact on the creative development of the American author. Accompanying him throughout life, they were an aesthetic basis for the wide variety of multifaceted Howells activity. The work relevance is connected with the peculiarities of artistic interpretations of a different cultural environment through the author’s perception of reality. The mental concept of the «different» life, recognition of the specifics of the «foreign country» often take place in the course of reading of literary works of different genres. In this paper William Dean Howells’s works are analyzed for the first time in the Russian literature of the XXI century, the main themes of the narrative are identified, archetypal images, expressed in artistic and literary form, are defined. The practical significance of the study of the cultural phenomenon of the city is concerned with the identification of specific features, forms and techniques of creating his image, enclosed in the space-time continuum of W. D. Howells’s works.

Keywords: travelogues, author's interpretation, American literature, the urban prose, Italian motifs.
Introduction

Analyzing the cultural aspects of the hail formation and the urban environment, expressed in the artistic and literary form, it is possible to detect differences in mentality and communication study of representatives of different ethnic entities. The artistic interpretation of the «different» culture in the works of the American writer of the late XIX century William Dean Howells helps to see the ulterior motives of the narrative, to identify archetypal images through the author's perception of reality.

The research methods

In the works of William Dean Howells the perception of the city is associated with mood, outlook, the author's point of view on the depicted object, so the leading method in the study is biographical. The author's position, expressed in prose form, helps to understand the difference in perception of the same events by representatives of different cultural systems: American and Italian. Additional research methods are comparative-contrasting, typological and cultural. The dialogue of cultures, suggesting the presence of tolerance, understanding of national identity can be traced in W. D. Howells’s travelogues.

Theoretical background for the study

In cultural works aimed at resolving the problems of the urban environment influence on the man in general, and the traveler in particular the need for understanding and acceptance of the citizens’ mentality was emphasized.

In the trilogy «Architecture», «Urban science» and «City Without Borders» (2010 ) written by V. L. Glazychev the integrity of the city and the urban environment which helps to understand the history of human development is proved. R. Y. Porozova’s work «Cultural and educational potential of urban space» is dedicated to the perception of the city as a semiotic system. It reveals the educational potential of the city, which is characterized as a social and cultural phenomenon. The importance of the city study as the text is highlighted in the article «Cultural science, city and cultural tourism: space concretization) by O. Kirillova (Kirillova O.). The conference «City and Urbanism» (Moscow State University, 2010) which was attended by linguists and cultural experts of Russia and the United States became a landmark event in the understanding of the role of the urban landscape. L. N. Nabilkina’s work is devoted to the city as a cultural image in Russian, American and Western European literature. The role of travelogues in the perception of «ours» and «foreign» cities (Nabilkina L. N.) is examined there. Significant contribution to the cities’ study subject was made by foreign researchers: Jean Bodriar, Henry Miller, P. Ackroyd.

The travel notes genre can be found in the ancient literature. Travelogues are artistic-documentary genre, full of philosophical reflections and the image of the traveler. It expresses the personal attitude to what was seen and learnt in another country. The authors of travelogues laid the tradition of relating the world, manners and customs of other nations with their compatriots, «foreign» countries and cities with «theirs», expressed their own attitude to the world.

In William Howells’s works the perception of the city is associated with mood, outlook and the author's point of view on the image object. The biographical context allows us to understand the difference in the perception of the same events. For example, the analysis of the travelogues written by W. Howells shows us the dialogue of cultures, suggesting the presence of tolerance, understanding of the national identity.

Results and conclusions

The identification of the major archetypes and, as a consequence, archetypal images will help to identify cross-cutting model, passing through all works. Using the chronotope method we
can combine events and people in one temporal and spatial point. On analyzing the image of Italy as an artistic phenomenon of culture in the works of W. J. Howells, you can identify the leading motives of writer’s perception of different cultural environment.

William Dean Howells (1837-1920), like many compatriots of his circle and time traveled abroad frequently. Many times he was in Europe, visiting England, Switzerland, Spain, lived in Italy. This allowed the writer to put into his prose the details of life of other countries, to depict a special national flavor. Travel books for Howells were «a kind of workshop where the writer studied to transform a concrete fact to the phenomenon of art» (Stetsenko, 2003). Italy is associated with the road motive in WD Howells travel essays in a very special way - the book «Venetian life» (1867), «Italian Journeys», «Tuscan Cities».

The book «Venetian life» refers to the first Howells travel essays. In his foreword to the book, the author wrote: «Believing that such value as my book may have is in fidelity to what I actually saw and knew of Venice. I fancy that in the traits at which I loved most to look, the life of Venice is not so much changed as her fortunes; but at any rate I am content to remain true to what was fact one year ago» (Howells, 1867). In 1861-1865 WD Howells was an American consul in Venice, so this work tells the story of the years spent in Italy as ambassador. Venice attracted him greatly, aroused astonishment and admiration, and at the same time repelled him. He had the opportunity to compare information gleaned from books about Italy with reality, and Howells came to the conclusion that the most of literary descriptions of Venice are not true: «...the name of Venice will conjure up scenes of brilliant and wanton gayety, and that in the foreground of the brightest picture will be the Carnival of Venice, full of antic delight, romantic adventure, and lawless prank. But the carnival, with all the old merry-making life of the city, is now utterly obsolete, and, in this way, the conventional, masquerading, pleasure-loving Venice is become as gross a fiction as if, like that other conventional Venice of which I have but spoken, it had never existed» (Howells, 1867). However, not depressing Venetian life facts were fundamental for Howells. A distinctive feature of the Howells art world is that even in the dullest things he managed to distinguish something beautiful. This unique city with a magic atmosphere and a rich historical and cultural heritage caused in the American WD Howells mixed feelings and emotions. Priceless beauty he saw in high art and culture, in the only thing left in Venice and what this city is famous for Nowadays. According to the author, the highest cultural values are the primary indicators of the country's civilization and played a dominant role in the life of the society. Venice is represented as an ambivalent image: it is a dead and devastating place, especially in winter, and at the same time is a heavenly sacred space that is resurrected in spring and gives the illusion of detachment from the earthly, real world: «Venice in winter is the dreariest and gloomiest place in the world, so in spring it is the fullest of joy and light» (Howells, 1867). Venice is like a maze, where you can get lost, people are ignorant, culture is in decline, even the city is in a dilapidated state. The Italian city is perceived by the writer as a «vision of the past, like a ghost, visiting this world, serene, indescribably beautiful, unknowable and an inexpressibly sad» (Howells, 1867). In the course of the narrative WD Howells describes Italians with a negative connotation, considering them swindlers and hypocrites, people who turned their sights to the subject of commerce. But gradually, the author’s perception is changing: the city surprises and delights him, the author tries to capture and retain the brightest moments, not allowing any of them to disappear, while he does not appreciate their aesthetic value. Impression data vary as a theatrical scenery, as if Venice is a great theater. From the writer's astute gaze escapes no detail of city life, none of the changes occurring in it.

«Italian Journeys» was written from 1867 to 1895, it tells the story of traveling to various cities where is questioned the accuracy and authenticity of the many legends of many attractions. The book is an extensive travel essays about staying in the particular cities. The author’s travel was as follows: Rome, Padua, Ferrara, Bologna, Genoa, Naples, Pompeii, Herculaneum, the island of
Capri, Pisa, Vicenza, Verona, Parma, Mantua. He compares the Italian cities and their attractions, finding their strengths and weaknesses: «I think there is less of the quaintness of Italian civilization to be seen in its vivacious crowds than anywhere else in Italy. One easily understands how, with its superb length and straightness, and its fine, respectable, commonplace-looking houses, it should be the pride of a people fond of show; but after Venice and Genoa it has no picturesque charm; nay, even busy Milan seems less modern and more picturesque» (Howells, 1867-1895). In the detailed description of the areas, streets, architecture Howells proved himself as a consummate connoisseur of history and art. Delving into the deep antiquity, representing a galaxy of historical names, giving a description of a particular work of art (by what Italy is so rich), describing the Italian people as simple and natural men, writer highlights different facets of Italian life, while what is important for him - it is the process of understanding of the Italian society development and the role of man in this world. But the most important thing for him is that Italy - the realm of miracles, where a mysterious spirit of the time soars, where the majestic and beautiful city form a bizarre and mysterious (enigmatical) world. In this book, in the contrast to the first one ( «Venetian life») WD Howells acts as a connoisseur of the Trecento and Quattrocento beautiful wonders.

In his later book «Tuscan Cities» (1886), Tuscany and its artistic heritage, such creators of the beautiful as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Dante Alighieri enveloped WD Howells by a deep sensitivity and created the refined atmosphere of romance and celebration. Florence, for example, is no longer a dream of the sentimental novelist for him, but «something infinitely better, that is a modern city, which is business and beautiful in its own way, not only owing to its monuments of art, but to everyday life also. I love this city, not for his heroic and bloody history, but for a free and kind present, full of opportunities of prosperity and brotherhood, as Boston and Denver, « (Howells, 1911). In this prose, there is a special character of the path representation and a dashed theme - synthesis of empirical and metaphorical. In the foreground - a real route (Florence, Siena, Pisa, Lucca) where the poet-traveler- tourist is going, staying in the Italian cities and fixing his observations lyrically. In the background, there is a spiritual movement of the author, the «eternal traveler» for whom the cities, and works of art, and the entire collection of «Italian experience» are the essentially significant motive for the realization of the underlying foundations of the inner life, connected with his spiritual path: «Perhaps also one feels a want of unity in the group ; perhaps they are too much like dishes set upon the table : the Duomo a vast and beautiful pudding ; the Baptistry a gigantic charlotte russe ; the Campo Santo an exquisite structure in sugar ; the Leaning Tower, a column of ice-cream which has been weakened at the base by too zealous an application of hot water to the outside of the mould» (Howells, 1911). This approach to the study of the WD Howells Italian experience allows not only to discover the hidden mechanisms of his individual creativity, but also to reveal another literary-historical aspect of highly relevant throughout the XIX century and keeping its value up to the beginning of the XXI century problem of national cultures interaction. Imbued with the classic Italian spirit, WD Howells drew inspiration from the origins of European civilization.

Howells reflected the Italian nation life, its customs, traditions and character peculiarities that evolved under the influence of the environment, culture and political system. Owing to the detailed descriptions, author’s arguments and statements the depicting life is perceived brightly and easily. In Venice Howells for the first time was interested in the works of art, felt the desire to understand the history of the spiritual culture of the country. The writer expresses his views on various issues, tells about meeting with people, expresses his personal feelings and thoughts. His spatial movements recreate a wide panorama of culture and express the writer's attitude to the sphere of reality being in the center of attention. Diving into the Italian past allowed the writer to «reveal» the contradictions in the development of the country and its society and to provide
evidences that a lot of them has already changed, to describe the attractiveness of Tuscan life and to express optimism about the «rebirth» of Europe.

The image of Italy is reflected not only in the travel notes, but also in the works of art, becoming not only the scene in the most of them, but a way of expressing a particular worldview. Italy occupies a special place in the system of spatial images of the world literature of the XIX century. This is the type of real space, which has not only the status of special historical, economic and cultural importance, but is endowed by a spiritual value and becomes «an iconic way of semiosphere - the language in which are expressed a variety of non-spatial values» (Lotman, 2000).

In such novels of WD Howells as the «A Foregone Conclusion» (1875), «The Lady of the Aroostook» (1879), «A Fearful Responsibility» (1881), «Indian Summer» (1886) - the main scene is Venice and Florence.

So, the first novel «A Foregone Conclusion» tells the story of friendship between two people with quite different interests - the American consul Henry Ferris and the Venetian priest Don Ippolito. If the first one fancies himself a great but misunderstood artist, the latter has a passion for mechanics and is constantly busy with a variety of weird and useless devices. Friendship of the abovementioned originals is threatened when two American women - a Mrs. Verveyn and her beautiful daughter Florida arrived in Venice in order to escape from the horrors of the Civil War. Despite the vow of celibacy, Don Ippolito immediately fell in love with Florida, as for Ferris, he finds a girl illiterate and devoid of artistic taste, but in the end, could not resist her charms too. The fight of friends for Florida’s hand goes beyond love competition and leads to profound changes in their ideologies. WD Howells describes the Italian countryside in the smallest details. The motive here is the Italian character in the image of Don Ippolito. This is a typical Italian, passionate and romantic, inclined to internal torments, naive and straightforward. He is a dreamer, daydreaming about idealized New World and inventing a lot of cunning, but useless things: «He tried to get other pupils, but he got none, and he began to dream of going to America. He pinned his faith in all sorts of magnificent possibilities to the names of Franklin, Fulton, and Morse; he knew that English was the language of the North, and he applied himself to the study of it; he might very naturally desire to come to a land where the spirit of invention is recognized and fostered, and where he could hope to find that comfort of incentive and companionship which our artists find in Italy» (Howells, 1875). Being a priest by his uncle's will, Don Ippolito is weary of the sin and is taking heavily the falsity of his position, believing more in science than in God. Don Ippolito lives by the emotions, is capable of impulsive behavior, and is so noble that ready to abandon his beloved when got to know about her feelings to a happy opponent, but he died from his own victim.

In the novel, «The Lady of the Aroostook» (1879), whose protagonist is a young pristine provincial girl Lydia Bloud, who grew up in the north of Boston, sailed on «Aroostook» board to Venice, where she was deeply shocked by Sunday Opera and an ease of Italian mores. Thus the novel motive is the Italian mores which Lydia's aunt explained: «The Italians never go out without a chaperone of some sort, and you must never be seen without me, or your uncle, or Veronica. Now I'll tell you how you must do at parties, and so on. You must be very retiring; you're that, any way; but you must always keep close to me. It doesn't do for young people to talk much together in society; it makes scandal about a girl. If you dance, you must always hurry back to me. It would ruin a girl's reputation; she could hardly walk arm in arm with a young man if she was engaged to him...» (Howells, 1879). Being a Protestant she was surprised by the piety of Catholics and their neglect for the religious norms of behavior - they demanded that ladies should definitely be in the church in a hat, but could attend the opera on Sunday. Women position when they could not go out alone or accompanied by strange men, but could change their lovers freely seems for her strange enough.
The novel «A Fearful Responsibility» (1881) can be attributed to the romance novels type because the focus is the love story of Professor Owen Elmore, who arrived during the Civil War to Venice to write its story. And where, if not in the romantic city Venice, you can meet the love of your life? Life in Venice is impossible, since it involves life and death, happiness and sadness, therefore, responds to any feelings: «He thought he had seen that face and figure before, but this is what often occurs to the connoisseur of modern sculpture. His mind heavily reverted to Lily and her suitors. Take her in one way, especially in her subordination to himself, the girl was as simply a child as any in the world, – good-hearted, tender, and sweet, and, as he could see, without tendency to flirtation. Take her in another way, confront her with a young and marriageable man, and Elmore greatly feared that she unconsciously set all her beauty and grace at work to charm him; another life seemed to inform her, and irradiate from her, apart from which she existed simple and childlike still» (Howells, 1881). Venetian world was precious and attractive for the characters, as the city itself became a form of personal expression of inner world while staying in it.

The last novel «Indian Summer» (1886) tells the story of 40-year-old American journalist Theodore Coalville, who lives in Florence. The romantic atmosphere of Florence captures aged Colville, who came to Italy to write a book about its architecture, he immersed in the past, a historical and his own. Florence is represented as a fairy tale, a miracle, an embodied dream: «...Colville was finding a sort of vindictive satisfaction in the power to ignore the surrounding frippery of landscape and architecture. He isolated himself so perfectly from it, as he brooded upon the river, that, for any sensible difference, he might have been standing on the Main Street Bridge at Des Vaches, Indiana, looking down at the tawny sweep of the Wabash» (Howells, 1886). Here, the city of Dante stands as a motive of the past, the motif of the circle and its subject-shaped variation, a motive of the tower as a symbol of eternity, isolation, perfection.

On analyzing the image of Italy as an artistic phenomenon of culture in the works of W. J. Howells, you can identify the leading motives of writer’s perception of different cultural environment (Table 1).

Table 1. «Classification of artistic motifs in W. D. Howell's works»

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motive</th>
<th>The novel's title</th>
<th>Idea</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>«TRAVEL ESSAYS»</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. The Way, The Road</td>
<td>«Venetian life»; «Italian Journeys»; «Tuscan Cities»</td>
<td>Own life as a way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The wretchedness and the triumph of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The creation</td>
<td>«Venetian life»; «Italian Journeys»; «Tuscan Cities»</td>
<td>The contemplation and worship of beauty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>«ITALIAN NOVELS»</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Meeting motive</td>
<td>«A Foregone Conclusion»; «The Lady of the Aroostook»; «A Fearful Responsibility»; «Indian Summer»</td>
<td>Test heroes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Italian character</td>
<td>«A Foregone Conclusion»; «The Lady of the Aroostook»</td>
<td>The triumph of love, passion, death.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Italy as a «better world»</td>
<td>«The Lady of the Aroostook»; «A Fearful Responsibility»</td>
<td>Italy as a space «where are all the way»</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The loneliness</td>
<td>«A Fearful Responsibility»</td>
<td>The Americans-strangers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the works of the Italian period W. D. Howells tends to follow a contradiction of the Old and New World through the Italian culture admiration.

Contrasting the Americans and Italians, the writer seeks to study his nation, to understand the laws of historical development. The most of novel’s heroes are representatives of art. Howells had the desire to capture a portrait of the artist soul, whose aesthetic ideal is seen as the greatness of simplicity. The author is trying to comprehend Italian nature, the country that keeps the monuments of culture, and people aspire in search of masterpieces, in search of their «Promised Land».

The last aspect is related to the expansion of genre modification, «women’s novels» were born. The author develops a type of an American female character. The main features of national mentality are reflected in their characters precisely. The author puts his characters in the situations, where their personalities are revealed particularly brightly and clearly. He endows them by an optimistic view of the world, naturalness, high morals, spiritual depth, belief in the human honesty and sincerity. The reasons for such close attention of the writer to the female subject can be explained, first, by the sensitive attitude to the socio-historical and cultural environment of the second half of the XIX century in the United States. In the essay «The Writer as a businessman» WD Howells wrote: «The writers need to understand that in the United States, the fate of the book depends on the women. Women have more leisure time and read more. They are usually much better educated than our men, and their taste, if not their minds, is more developed» (Howells, 1990). In his novels WD Howells has shown that there is an «American character» in his «female» version. It won’t be an exaggeration if we express the idea that it is a woman, according to Howells, who brings the best features of the American nation.

Studying W. J. Howells works of the «Italian period» you can discover the hidden mechanisms of individual creativity, classify Italian motifs, reveal the literary and historical aspects of the national cultures interaction.

**Conclusion**

It is safe to say that Europe was the first life experience and the final selection of WD Howells. Italy is treated as a special space, and its history and art can be considered as a canvas on which the story of a man's way is deployed. It can be ended, or being developed, gets a different refraction, or opens a new life. Travel Essays and «Italian romance» by William D. Howells can be considered the key to the work of art and a self-portrait of the writer. W. D. Howells’s prose presents opportunities for cross-cultural communication, helping the dialogue of cultures and building confidence between different ethnic groups.
References


