

*Kalieva K.A.*

**INTERPRETATION OF A POEM «THIS IS JUST TO SAY» BY WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS**

*Калиева К.А.*

**ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИЯ СТИХОТВОРЕНИЯ «ЭТО ПРОСТО СКАЗАТЬ» УИЛЬЯМ КАРЛОС УИЛЬЯМС**

УДК: 808/45.16

*The following analysis is a discussion of a poem “This is Just to Say” by William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) and its interpretation and evaluation using some elements of formalistic, psychological, archetypal and feminist critical approaches.*

*Следующий анализ-обсуждение стихотворение “это просто, чтобы сказать” Уильям Карлос Уильямс (1883-1963) и его интерпретации и оценки, используя некоторые элементы формального, психологические, архетипические и феминистских критических подходов.*

*Макалада Уильям Карлос Уильямсын (1883-1963) “Жөн эле айтып коюш үчүн” аттуу ырына жасалган талдоо жана талкуулоого арналат. Ырды талдоо үчүн интерпретациянын жана ырга баа берүүнүн формалисттик, психологиялык, мифологиялык / архетиптик жана феминисттик багыттарынын кээ бир элементтери колдонулду.*

According to the works of contemporary critics and theoretical ideas we may say that interpretive practices change with time, reflecting changing world-views and uses of literature, and each theoretical perspective tends to find fault with the one before, or they attempt to give their own new ways of interpretation based on the various world views of literary movements. Different ways of interpretation, which tends to show instability of meaning and its polisemic quality, challenge the development of interpretation which demonstrate the impossibility of any certain meaning or any foundational 'truth' or reality. So, this is a new challenge to begin to explore new concepts and ideas expressed in the poetry considering different approaches. I attempted to analyze *This is Just to Say* basing on literary theory and criticism approaches, and taking into consideration Robert Eaglestone's suggestion, which says, “while your initial reading might be shaped by your presuppositions, literary theory offers a huge, possibly infinite, number of ways of approaching literature” (2002:24).

*This Is Just to Say* by William Carlos Williams

I have eaten	saving
the plums	for breakfast
that were in	Forgive me
the icebox	they were delicious
and which	so sweet
you were probably	and so cold

**Formalistic approach** focuses on form. According to the studies on literary theory and criticism (Roman Jakobson (1896-1982), Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-2009), Viktor Shklovsky (1893-1984), Vladimir Propp (1895-1970)) formalistic analysis stresses items like symbols, images, figures of speech, and structure and explains how one part of the work relates to other parts and to the whole. It also interprets writer's use of paradox, irony, symbol, plot, characterization, and style of narration as well as a relationship between the beginning and the end, between tone and mood of the story or poem. According to Bertens Hans, “whereas practical criticism and the New Criticism focused on the individual meaning of individual texts, Formalism wanted to discover general laws – the more general the better” (Hans 2001)

Formalism, in the most general sense, is “the cultivation of artistic technique at the expense of subject-matter, either in literary practice or in criticism”. In *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* the term formalism is described as a derogatory sense, which applied to several kinds of approach to literature in which form is emphasized in isolation from a work's meanings or is taken as the chief criterion of aesthetic value. In modern critical discussion, however, the term frequently refers more specifically to the principles of certain Russian and Czech theorists (Baldwick 101).

“*This is Just to Say*” by William Carlos Williams is a unique modern poem. The analysis on this poem reveals that this poem is about nothing, or about an experience from everyday life. This poems “nothingness” shows that poetry can be about anything and everything. Moreover, it proposes how really simple and ordinary experiences can be as poetry. The poem takes as its subject a very ordinary event of daily and family life: the speaker confesses to a woman, to his mother, or may be his wife, that he couldn't help eating plums kept in the kitchen. He means to confess the guilt and apologize for it. The tone is of a person confessing his mistake. Its simplicity, economy in words and its unique form are the main features of this poem. Even the title has to be a part of the poem. “This” may mean a ‘message’ left on the table, or it may also confession his guilt to everyone through ‘this’ poem. Besides the economy, the familiar setting and the dramatic situation clarified by a few words is also notable. The poem is simple in diction like children's poem. Only

speaker's sincere but annoying truth makes it differ from children's poem.

Its imagery is also another outstanding feature. Imaginary is very concrete, vivid and appealing. The 'cold' plums in the 'icebox' and their 'delicious' sweetness brings water in our mouths! The honesty of a speaker and sincerity of his thought is also striking: they were probably saved for breakfast.

The whole poem is written in just twenty-eight words and in two sentences without punctuation; the capital letter in the beginning of the last stanza indicates sentence break. The title can also be taken as the first line. So the whole poem can be summarized as: "This is just to say that I've eaten the plums and I want to apologize, but I couldn't help eating them because they were so cold and delicious".

**Archetypal approach:** The poem can also be interpreted symbolically. This approach focuses on connections to other literature, mythological/biblical allusions, archetypal images, symbols, characters, themes. Archetype, a symbol, theme, setting, or character-type that recurs in different times and places in myth, literature, folklore, dreams, and rituals so frequently or prominently as to suggest that it embodies some essential element of 'universal' human experience (Baldwick 19).

Archetypal imagery goes to the heart of mythology. Humanity's universal drama is captured and played out in a series of archetypal images and mythical moments. Erich Neumann, a follower of Jung, says that, in the course of life, everyone must pass through "the same archetypal stages which determine the evolution of consciousness in the life of humanity" (Neumann, 1970, p. xvi). According to Jung "Life is an archetypal journey". We begin life as an 'innocent,' the archetype that represents the child - pure, full of hope and becoming. But soon we must leave the world of innocence and the protective sphere of our parents and enter the adult world where we become seekers, travelers along the uncertain road of life. And as we journey through life we embrace different archetypes - warrior, caretaker, lover, mother/father etc. Each archetype brings with a different worldview and values. Archetypal characters often play important roles in story and myth. For example, we might have a story that involves an ancient myth (story), along with an archetypal hero like Adam and Eve, mythological characters who ate prohibited fruit.

We will interpret text through the universal experiences, common human concerns revealed in the poem, archetypal events and archetypal characters appear in the story, myths which attempt to explain the unexplainable things like the origin of man or unconscious behavior of human beings. The event in the poem *This is Just to Say* by William Carlos Williams can be compared with Adam and Eve's case. They ate the apple and realized

things like shame, disease, anger, guile, death, and so on. The experience of the evil only confirmed their knowledge of the good (or the right) and the value of the bliss that God had given them. They realized the value of "Garden of Eden" only when they had lost it. It is a human beings state to realize the value of ignorance, any possession, happiness, and anything that they have only after losing it. The knowledge of the dark, guilt and shame gives value or meaning to the bright side of life. It is interesting to mention about that, in classical myth tradition the fruit is associated with sexual love, the same when Adam and Eve discover, in some interpretations, after eating it. In the biblical story the "apple" is alluring and tasty, in William's story the "plum" is delicious, sweet and cold.

According to Michael Ferber's definition the most famous apple in western culture, the one from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, has a slender basis in the Bible. He considers that in Genesis 3.3 it was simply "the fruit", it is not certain, that Adam and Eve ate the apple, and so, it may be any fruit, may be an apple or a plum. The story how that fateful fruit got to be an apple was complicated by the fact that the Greek word for it *melon* meant any sort of tree-fruit, moreover apples were not known in ancient Israel (Ferber 12).

At the symbolic level, therefore, the child represents human beings who are like Adam in the mistakes they go on making and the knowledge they go on achieving. So the speaker of the poem may address to the God or Creator. The familiarity of subject matter and imagery tells us that we repeat mistakes of the same kind even in ordinary life and conditions.

**Psychological Approach** focuses on the psychology of characters. In this approach we consider what forces motivate the characters, which behaviors of the characters are conscious ones, which are unconscious, what conscious and unconscious conflicts exist between the characters, what characters' emotions and behaviors reveal about their psychological states (Eagleton 2003). According to psychoanalytical principles of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, psychoanalytic criticism may focus on the writer's psyche, the study of the creative process, the study of psychological types and principles present within works of literature, or the effects of literature upon its readers (Wellek and Warren, p. 81). In *This is Just to Say* we may determine the speaker's id, ego, and superego, his telling lie and honesty. According to Sigmund Freud's Structural Model of the Psyche we may say that the speaker "has eaten the plums" unconsciously, which shows his Id, completely unconscious part of the psyche that serves as a base of our desires, wishes, and fears. But, his ego - mostly to partially conscious part of the psyche, says "Forgive me / they were delicious / so sweet / and so cold". His superego, or his "conscience" part thinks about

the person who has left plums “you were probably / saving for breakfast”.

The paradox is in his confession that he ate plums “because” they were cool and delicious and then he apologizes. How did he know that plums were delicious? The lie (speaker’s id) and the honesty (speaker’s superego) are the paradox of this poem. He ate them first and then only found them delicious. He realizes the mistake only when he had done it.

**Feminist approach:** Feminist criticism is an umbrella term for a number of different critical approaches that seek to distinguish the human experience from the male experience. Feminist critics draw attention to the ways in which patriarchal social structures have marginalized women and male authors have exploited women in their portrayal of them. It gained widespread recognition as a theoretical and political movement in postmodern period (Selden ch.6).

Feminist approach examines images of women and concepts of the feminine in myth and literature; uses the psychological, archetypal, and sociological approaches; often focuses on how women’s lives are portrayed in the work, and on female characters, who have been neglected in previous criticism. Feminist critics attempt to correct or supplement what they regard as a predominantly male-dominated critical perspective. Analyzing “*This is Just to Say*” through this approach we get the answer to the question how the form and content of the work influenced by the writer’s gender, how male and female characters relate to one another, whether these relationships are sources of conflict and if a female character were male, how would the story be different (and vice versa), how the marital status of a character affects his/her decisions or happiness and how traditional archetypes of men and women are described. Through analysis we will discuss whether the poem’s voice was masculine or feminine, because it seems likely that he took a note left by his wife and turned it into a ‘poem’. It is obvious that Williams knew his wife was saving the plums but he ate them anyway. It’s a portrait of intimacy between husbands and wives. Even though he knew well that his wife was saving those plums he ate them. The fact that they were “*so delicious and so cold*” made him to act as a male person who is mostly thinks about himself more than his wife.

Of course, there are many interpretations of this poem: as we see some approaches say it is about the fall of Adam and Eve in modern times, who ate forbidden fruit; some approaches say it’s about repressed sexuality; some approaches say it is about the forces which motivate the character, explaining which behavior of the character is conscious, which is unconscious; some approaches claim

that this is about feminine or masculine behavior in everyday life. Yet these interpretations and thoughts are raised from so simple experience that makes this poem profound.

So, as we read, we may explore every meaning which is possible. Ultimately in interpretations we use our imagination. Only our imagination helps us to extend the ways of interpretation and find out the essence of the poem. We may decide whether this poem has a hidden metaphor for something sexual, or it is about the fall from the Garden of Eden, or about the conflict between male and female.

All in all, we may conclude that literary theory and literary criticism as interpretive tools help us think more deeply and insightfully about the poems that we read and analyze. Different schools of literary criticism with their own approaches to the interpretation of poetry help us to understand its idea better and to interpret them focusing on a particular aspects of a work which are considered important within those field. The different approaches also allow readers to use their experience and test these theories, to examine these different ways of reading, to answer the questions about how literary theories can be applied to poetry, how to interpret poet’s use of paradox, symbols, images, figures of speech, to examine the relationship between binary oppositions and to understand how literature and criticism relate to other aspects of culture such as psychology, gender, mythology and archetypes.

#### Works Cited

1. Baldick, Chris. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford University Press, 2001
2. Eaglestone, Robert. *Doing English: A Guide for Literature Students*. New York. 2002.
3. Ferber, Michael. *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*. Second edition. Cambridge University Press, 2007
4. Hans, Bertens. *Literary Theory. The Basics*. – London.: Routledge, 2001. – 256p
5. Hoover, Paul. *Postmodern American Poetry. A Norton Anthology*. Columbia College, Chicago, W.W. Norton & Company, 1994
6. Jung, Carl Gustav. *Analytical Psychology: Its Theory and Practice*, Princeton University Press, 1990
7. Rivkin, Julie and Ryan, Michael (eds). *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2004
8. Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Course In General Linguistics*. Eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye. Illinois, 1983
9. Waugh, Patricia. *Literary Theory and Criticism*. An Oxford Guide. Oxford, New York. 2006
10. Williams, Carlos William. Christopher MacGowan, A. Walton Litz (Editor). *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Vol. 1: 1909-1939*. New Directions, 1991. 604 p.

Рецензент: к.филос.н. Жапаров Д.