

Abstract

This thesis concerns the similarities between Flann O'Brien's novel *The Third Policeman* and fin-de-siècle literature, more specifically decadent literature and literature of the early avant-garde. The fact that, apart from metafiction, O'Brien's novel does not deal with aesthetics (neither when it comes to the form nor when it comes to the topic) does not invalidate the presence of fin-de-siècle elements or strategies in it; the elements only change and thus adapt to their new environment. Many of them become ironic, other ones actively contribute to the metafictional scope of the novel.

The first chapter explains the parallels between *The Third Policeman* and fin-de-siècle literature in general. It concentrates primarily on decadent literature and its central theme of "unnaturalness." Unnaturalness occurs in variegated forms, such as artifice, artificiality or make-believe. Unnaturalness can be detected also in the protagonists themselves and even (in compliance with the metafiction of the novel) in the form of O'Brien's hellish world where the narrator finds himself. Discovering and experiencing various forms of unnaturalness go hand in hand with sense perception which is what the chapter also refers to – *The Third Policeman* remarkably reflects descriptions of sense experiences known from fin-de-siècle literature. Unnaturalness from the perspective of societal demands is projected through fin-de-siècle motifs of effeminacy and sexual unconventionality – both appear in O'Brien's novel and gain a specifically absurd character.

The second chapter focuses its attention on *The Third Policeman* in relation to Joris-Karl Huysmans' novel *Against Nature*, a novel that Flann O'Brien was familiar with. It is shown that the main protagonist of *Against Nature*, Des Esseintes, is something like a figurative "ghost" of *The Third Policeman*. Similarities to the life, opinions or experience of this protagonist appear not only in O'Brien's nameless narrator and his beacon de Selby yet also in other characters like the policemen or "dead" Mathers. Through Des Esseintes many motifs of *Against Nature* seep in, even specific fin-de-siècle ones, such as synesthesia. Some of these motifs show themselves in a much larger and more detailed scale (for instance the pondering on the feminine

charm of a locomotive) some become altered (imagination that Des Esseintes fully uses is substituted by devices or the phantasmagorical reality of O'Brien's hell). Other ones remain, except for minor details, the same (the passage where hammering symbolises the fear of imminent death).

The third chapter aims to compare *The Third Policeman* with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. In this case the parallels are not apparent at first sight – they mostly lie in shared paradoxes. O'Brien's nameless narrator, as well as Dorian, can be understood as alive and dead at the same time. While the narrator of *The Third Policeman* is killed and despite that able to narrate his story, Dorian becomes, after his wish to stay young forever, a live work of art – his soul is imprisoned in the painting. Regardless of the essential difference between the two (the narrator of *The Third Policeman* has gone through a real death) the motif of the body and soul manifests itself similarly in both novels. The respective novels tell of crime and punishment and neither of them is unambivalent when it comes to the latter – both the nameless narrator and Dorian rejoice as well as suffer and therefore the novels can be read as simultaneously moral and immoral. Further motifs shared by the two novels are excess, the emphasis on the significance of objects, or the Atomic theory (in the case of *The Picture* only insinuated). The importance of the beauty of one's environment typical of aesthetes and decadents survives in O'Brien's novel only in fragments and is ironized – an observation of a beautiful object can turn into a terrifying experience contradicting traditional aesthetics.

The last chapter offers a comparison of O'Brien's novel with Alfred Jarry's play *Ubu Rex*, which no longer belongs to decadence yet to early avant-garde. Making such an analogy enables to view the fin-de-siècle elements in *The Third Policeman* from a different perspective and indirectly clarifies some of the transformations undergone by the decadent elements in the novel: it is shown that decadent and early-avant-garde elements are blended together in *The Third Policeman*, even within the same passage. The biggest resemblance between Jarry's play and O'Brien's novel is the presence of a fictional science called pataphysics, which does not appear only in the form of absurd inventions and thoughts yet also as a specific discourse; it influences the character and laws of the world where the action takes place and interferes also in the language of both works. Unlike decadence, pataphysics and its absurdity reacts, in agreement with the early avant-garde, at the real world by putting its exaggerated aspects on display.

From this point of view *The Third Policeman* can be read also as a commentary on the social or political situation.

Key words: O'Brien, fin de siècle, decadence, artifice, unnaturalness, irony, metafiction, avant-garde, pataphysics