

PHOTOEKPHRATIC NOVEL BY KATE MORTON “THE SECRET KEEPER”

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Abstract. The aim of the article is to study the novel by Kate Morton “The Secret Keeper” (2012) in terms of its genre specificity. The leading genre-forming feature of the novel is photographic ekphrasis, which performs a number of functions: plot-forming, chronotopic, characterological, narrative, and motive-thematic. An unfamiliar old photograph of 1941 depicting two girls, found in the family photo album by the main character of the novel Laurel in 2011, serves as the starting point of the plot. One of the two girls is her mother, the second is a mysterious stranger. Trying to identify her personality and fill in the unknown gaps in her mother’s past, the protagonist begins a detective investigation. The theme of a photo, which combines two planes of what is depicted – the external and internal – is a cross-cutting theme of the entire novel. In the simultaneously developing plot of the late 1930s – early 1940s there unfolds before the reader the so-called “off-screen” history of the photo, dotting all the i’s in the “small” biographical history of Laurel’s mother and other characters connected with her. Within the framework of postmodern aesthetics, photoekphrases, presented in the form of family photos, has an unlimited narrative potential, creating the so-called family mythology. Via the presence of military photos, which perform a documentary function, the novel creates a “big”, official, history of England at the beginning of World War II, which serves as a background for the development of the love affair line of the plot. Possessing an interpretive nature, photos determine the reflexivity of the protagonist, which results in unexpected discoveries and dialogue with herself and the surrounding universe. In the structure of the novel, this is explicated through a number of main themes and motifs: the motif of knowing the Other, the motif of acquiring existential knowledge, the theme of memory and acquiring one’s own identity. As a result of the study, the author of the article proves that from the point of view of formal characteristics, the genre form of K. Morton’s novel “The Secret Keeper” can be defined as a photoekphrastic novel with a subsequent clarification – the novel-photoreflexion, which includes the plot elements of psychological, family, love, socio-everyday life, biographical, detective, and historical novels.

Keywords: photographic ekphrasis; photoekphrastic novel; novel-photoreflexion; Kate Morton; “The Secret Keeper”.

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ФОТОЭКФРАСТИЧЕСКИЙ РОМАН К. МОРТОН «ХРАНИТЕЛЬНИЦА ТАЙН»

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Аннотация. Цель статьи – исследование романа Кейт Мортон «Хранительница тайн» (“The Secret Keeper”, 2012) с точки зрения жанровых особенностей. Ведущим жанрообразующим признаком романа является фотографический экфрасис, выполняющий ряд функций: сюжетообразующую, хронотопическую, характерологическую, нарративную, мотивно-тематическую. Отправной точкой сюжета является незнакомая старая фотография 1941 г. с изображением двух девушек, найденная в семейном фотоальбоме героиней романа Лорел в 2011 г. Одна из них – ее мать, вторая – таинственная незнакомка. Пытаясь идентифицировать ее личность и восполнить неизвестные лакуны прошлого матери, героиня начинает детективное расследование. Сквозной темой всего романа является тема фотографии, совмещающей два

плана запечатленного: внешний и внутренний. В параллельно развивающемся сюжете к. 1930–нач.1940-х гг. перед читателем разворачивается т.н. «закадровая» история фотоснимка, расставляющая все точки над «i» в «малой», биографической, истории матери Лорел и других персонажей, связанных с ней. В рамках постмодернистской эстетики фотоэкфрасисы, представленные в виде семейных фотографий, обладают неограниченным нарративным потенциалом, создающим т.н. мифологию семьи. За счет военных фотографий, выполняющих документальную функцию, в романе создается «большая», официальная, история Англии начала Второй мировой войны, служащая фоном для развития любовной линии. Обладая интерпретационной природой, фотографии обуславливают рефлексивность героини, результатом которой становятся неожиданные открытия и диалог с самой собой и окружающим мирозданием. В структуре романа это эксплицируется через ряд основных тем и мотивов: мотив познания Другого, мотив обретения экзистенциального знания, тема памяти и обретения собственной идентичности. В результате исследования автор статьи доказывает, что с точки зрения формальных характеристик жанровую форму романа К. Мортон «Хранительница тайн» можно определить как фотоэкфрасический роман с последующим уточнением – роман-фоторефлексия, включающий в себя сюжетные элементы психологического, семейного, любовного, социально-бытового, биографического, детективного, исторического романов.

Ключевые слова: фотографический экфрасис; фотоэкфрасический роман; роман-фоторефлексия; Кейт Мортон; «Хранительница тайн»

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This article is devoted to ekphrasis and one of its varieties – photographic ekphrasis, which in some cases functions as a technique, in others – the genre-forming dominant of the work. A number of studies are devoted to the latter aspect. For example, N. S. Bochkareva and other researchers recognize a direct relationship between genre and ekphrasis: “... ekphrasis as a type of discourse performs various functions in a literary work, including the genre-forming one” [Bochkareva 2012: 18]. Y. V. Yarovikova distinguishes between ekphrasis as a device (“text within a text”), a description of a work of art included into some other literary genre” [Yarovikova 2019: 146]) and the ekphrastic genre (“a combination of fiction and non-fiction works in which ekphrasis is viewed as a plot-forming component of their compositional structure” [Yarovikova 2019: 147]). The author of the article also shares the above-stated points of view: speculating on phototextuality as a category and its specific manifestation – the photoekphrastic method of text organization, the paper introduces the concept of “photoekphrastic novel”¹ (when photoekphrasis functions at several poetological

levels: plot-forming, characterological, chronotopic, narrative, motive-thematic, plot-forming. The literary critic O. A. Sudlenkova, analyzing modern British novels in which photography plays a text-generating role, pays special attention to the characters acting as professional photographers, and introduces such a genre variety as “Kunstlerroman” – “a novel about a photographer” [Sudlenkova 2018: 335].

Photo-ekphrastic prose has been actively introduced into foreign literature since the 1970s. For example, photoekphrasis determines all structural and content elements and becomes genre-defining in the novel “The Secret Keeper” (2012) by the Australian writer Kate Morton (b. 1976), who lives in England in the house built in the 19th century. Her passion for theater and writing started upon graduating from the University of Queensland, Trinity College London (Trinity College) and Shakespeare courses at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. According to the information posted on the official web page of the writer, her books got the status of bestsellers and became winners of prestigious awards; they were published in 42 countries in 34 languages².

¹ For more details, see Poluektova T. A. Phototextuality as a Poetological Category of the English Novel: Stating the Problem. Perm University Herald. Russian and Foreign Philology. 2021. Vol. 13. Issue 4. P. 100–110. DOI: 10.17072/2073-6681-2021-4-100-110.

² Kate Morton. URL: <https://www.katemorton.com/about-kate>.

Among her favorite authors, there are the Brontë sisters, W. Collins, A. Christie, D. du Maurier, I. McEwan, K. Ishiguro, E. Waugh, N. Mitford, etc.

Passion for the past (mainly Victorian, Edwardian) can be traced in each of her books: "The House at Riverton" (2006), "The Forgotten Garden" (2008), "The Lake House" (2015), etc. And this is no coincidence: her mother was a saleswoman in an antique store, where Kate used to admire rusty tin boxes, antique spoons and imagined their former owners: "My books are about secrets and the way they haunt their keepers; time and its passage; the interweaving go the present and the past; the knots and tangles of family; history, mystery and memory. Some of my favorite things are dusty attics, lost letters, tattered fabrics, locked gardens, foxed paper, sepia photographs, doors that say "don't enter", old bricks, wrought iron trims, fairy-tales and theatre" [Kate Morton]. This resulted in the so-called "hall marks" of the novels by the writer including the action taking place in an old English mansion – the keeper of the secrets of the generations living in it; the main characters are women, their social and personal self-determination; dialogue between the past and the present; often in the past the character makes a mistake, but he is granted the right to correct it, to accept this world being influenced by the miraculous power of love; the unpredictable ending allows the reader to reconsider a lot through the prism of a variety of view points as if refuting the very existence of the absolute truth.

In the novel "The Secret Keeper" old and practically unknown photographs presented in the form of photo ekphrasis define its photo ekphrastic poetics. According to N. S. Bochkareva, ekphrasis as a genre-forming feature can perform a number of functions in a work of literature: such as plot – and composition – forming, chronotopic, creating the effect of parody, etc. [Bochkareva 2009: 81]. Based on these, let us consider the functional potential of ekphrasis in the analyzed novel.

The plot-forming function of photoekphrasis

The novel consists of four parts, entitled by the names of the heroines, each showing how the characters' destinies and various time planes interweave:

Part One. "Laurel" (early 1960s, May 1941, 1938 and 2011).

Part Two. "Dolly" (late 1940, January-February 1941, 2011).

Part Three. "Vivien" (1929, March-April 1941, 2011).

Part Four. "Dorothy" (2011, May 1941, 1953).

The time of the novel passes in its main topos – London (partly – in Suffolk and Tamborine Mountain), it is capable of flashing back and forward.

The starting point that allows such a play with time is photography, presented in the form of photographic ekphrasis.

Let us refer to the main plot lines of the novel.

Early in the 1960s, in a remote corner of rural England, young Laurel witnesses her mother kill an unknown man who has come to their farm with a cake knife. In 2011, Laurel, who has already become a famous actress and is included in The Nation's Favorite Face list, accidentally finds a card in a family photo album the card depicting two girls and dated May 1941. One of the girls is Dorothy – Laurel's mother, and the other – unknown to her, arouses Laurel's interest. As it turns out, Rose's sister found this photo in the old edition of "Peter Pan" and did not have time to insert it into the album. This moment becomes the starting point for a detective investigation that Laurel undertakes in order to find out as much as possible about the past of her beloved mother, who is losing strength every day.

In 1938, a 17-year-old Dolly (a diminutive of Dorothy) Smitham and a 19-year-old Jimmy Metcalfe, an aspiring photographer, fall in love at first sight. Young Dolly, who left her parents and dreams of a luxurious life, meets a wealthy, dazzlingly smart, but cold beauty Vivien Jenkins. In January 1941 they both help in the canteen of The Women's Voluntary Service. One day, Dolly, having brought the previously lost locket with children's photographs to Vivien, considered herself undeservedly offended by Vivien's neglect and decided to take revenge on her. Suspecting Vivien of cheating on her husband, the famous writer Henry Jenkins, "who beat his wife severely and smiled charmingly at the rest of the world" [Morton 2012], Dolly persuades Jimmy to be photographed with Vivien. The photo will be provocative, and Vivien will pay an impressive amount of money to her, otherwise

the photo will be sent to Vivien's husband as direct evidence of adultery. However, how incredibly surprised will Jimmy be, when he sees Vivien surrounded by orphans in a private clinic. Fascinated by the co-production of the play "Peter Pan" and adored by little actors, Vivien opens up to the "secret" photographer from the other side: as sincere and direct. Inwardly giving up his malicious intent and afraid to admit his feelings for Vivien to himself, Jimmy Metcalfe, also participating in the production, invites Dolly to a long-awaited performance in the hope of the two girls' reconciliation. Seizing the moment, Dolly manages to take a photo of Jimmy touching Vivien. It is here, before the start of the performance, that Jimmy will take that joint photo of the two girls, which accidentally falls into Laurel's hands in 2011.

Vivien, who became aware of the conspiracy, generously pays off the young couple, endowing them with an impressive amount of money, so necessary for their future family life. After getting what she wants, Dolly abandons her plan and leaves the envelope with an incriminating photo (of Jimmy with Vivien) in the restaurant, which gets under airstrike. However, the policeman, having found this envelope in the ruins, will send it to the specified addressee – Henry Jenkins. The fatal photo will be a weighty reason for him to get rid of Jimmy. Beaten by her husband and depressed, Vivien persuades Dolly to run away, because her husband's anger will inevitably overtake her too. But the exploding shell will be fatal for Dolly. And Vivien, throwing on her fur coat and putting her wedding ring on the finger of the dead girlfriend, will leave her past life, which has turned into ruins, under a new name – Dorothy Smitham. For her second, ardently loving and beloved husband – Stephen Nicolson – she will be Dorothy, keeping inside herself a gentle, but courageous Vivien. Life will acquire a special meaning for her, because her family will have children she longed for so much.

At the end of the simultaneously developing plot of 2011, Laurel comes to the house where Vivien once lived and in which Marty and his family live now – Jimmy Metcalfe's grandson (who turned out to have been pulled out of the Thames having been severely beaten), in order to learn as much as possible about the stranger in a joint photo. Leaving this house, Laurel fixes her

gaze on the photo of her mother: "Laurel ... and it was on the tip of her tongue to say, "That's my mother," when Marty said instead, "That's her, that's Vivien Jenkins" [Morton 2012].

The novel ends with an episode dated 1953 where a man (who the reader will guess to be Jimmy) comes to Dorothy/Vivien's house and meets young Laurel. Eager to learn if her mom is happy, he looks at the wedding photo and pronounces the name "Vivien", but Laurel corrects him: "That's my Mummy," ... "Her name's Dorothy" [Morton].

The title of K. Morton's novel "The Secret Keeper" is metaphorical: the keeper of secrets is a generalized image of photography, the aesthetics of which contains both an explicit meaning that lies on the surface, and a hidden one – the past, shrouded in mystery.

Thus, the plot-forming function of photoekphrasis, which acts as the engine of the entire action of the novel, is obvious.

Chronotopic function of photoekphrasis

Photoekphrasis, presented in a work of art, as a rule, serves to expand the space-time boundaries of the plot. The novel by K. Morton is no exception. Retrospectiveness as a fundamental technique in this case is carried out at the expense of the mode of memories that a photograph contains. To understand its role at this poetological level, it is important to consider what is captured in the photograph, and in what context (where and when) it is presented. In this paper we will talk about two types of photographs: family and military. Family photographs are presented in photo albums and thus act as certain milestones in the biographies of the characters, fulcrum, one of the forms of their identity. Acting as a bridge from the past to the present, family photographs connect generations by giving the characters a sense of security and stability in the present. Here are some examples: "She moved on to the next page and found, as she always did, the series of her infant self. She narrated swiftly across her early years – baby Laurel sleeping in a crib with stars and fairies painted on the wall above; blinking dourly in her mother's arms; grown some and tottering plumply in the seaside shallows – before reaching the point where reciting ended and remembering began. She turned the page, unleashing the noise and

laughter of the others” [Morton]; “Here we are at Easter. That’s Daphne in the highchair, which must make it 1956. ... See – Rose has her arm in plaster, her left arm this time. Iris is playing the goat, grinning at the back, but she won’t be for long. Do you remember? That’s the afternoon she raided the fridge and sucked clean all the crab claws Daddy had brought home from his fishing trip the day before” [Morton].

On the one hand, these photographs serve as a means of dialogue with the past, linking two time planes – the past and the present, on the other hand, their diversity allows us to speak about elements of the family and biographical genres in K. Morton’s novel. If in the chapters dated from 1938 to 1953, photography serves as a structure-forming principle, then in the chapters dated 2011, the function of memory is added to photography expanding the same principle; in present reality, photoekphrasis acts as a way of reconstructing the family past, as a way of representing the memory.

In the novel by K. Morton, with the help of photoekphrasis, not only “small”, but also “big” history, which is official, is represented. Military photographs taken by the talented young photographer Jimmy Metcalfe acquire the status of the so-called message, a noeme in Bart’s terms. They plunge the reader into the military atmosphere of London in the early 1940s. – it was at this time that photojournalism took its place of honor [Sontag 2003: 34]. Stephen Lorant (1901–1997), an eminent American publisher and photojournalist, having seen Jimmy’s photographs in the *Telegraph*, offers him a collaboration in a London photographic magazine, which is “... dedicated to printing images that tell stories” [Morton]. Jimmy’s lens captures the realities of the wartime, those shots became his best shots, which “people will look at and exclaim: ‘That one day, when it was all ended, the images might survive and people of the future would say, That’s how it was’” [Morton]: 1) “There were the ones he’d taken at Dunkirk, a group of men so tired they could barely stand, one with his arm slung over the other’s shoulders, another with a stained bandage tied across his eye, all of them trudging wordlessly as they watched the ground before them and thought only of the next step; a soldier asleep on the beach, missing both boots and hugging his filthy water canister for

dear life; a horrifying helter-skelter of boats, and planes firing from above, and men who’d walked so far already only to be shot at in the water as they tried to escape from hell” [Morton];

2) “The East End family pulling the remains of their possessions on the back of a handcart; the woman in her apron hanging laundry on a kitchen clothes line with the fourth wall of the room missing, the private space suddenly made public; the mother reading bedtime stories to her six children in the Anderson shelter; the stuffed panda with half its leg blown off; the woman sitting on a chair with a blanket around her shoulders and a blaze behind her where her house used to stand; the old man searching for his dog in the rubble” [Morton];

3) “It was of a little girl, four or five years old he guessed, standing in front of the kitchen of her local church hall. Her own clothes had been destroyed in the same raid that killed her family, and the Salvation Army hadn’t had any children’s clothes to give her. She was wearing an enormous pair of bloomers, an adult-size cardigan and a pair of tap shoes. They were red and she’d adored them. The St John’s ladies were fussing about in the background, finding biscuits for her, and she’d been tapping her feet like Shirley Temple when Jimmy saw her, as the woman minding her kept an eye on the door in hopes that one of her family would miraculously appear, whole and intact and ready to take her home” [Morton].

Laurel will see these and other photographs from the early 2000s. in an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, made just after the death of James (Jimmy) Metcalfe. And now they have allowed Laurel to imagine, partly to “live through” that difficult war period that befell Vivien and Jimmy in 1941.

The nature of these cases of photo-ekphrasis is polyfunctional. Firstly, they reflect the destinies of the characters destroyed by the war. It is no coincidence that orphans in the hospital, under the direction of Vivien, and then with the participation of Jimmy Metcalfe, stage a theatrical production of Barry’s “*Peter Pan*”: all of them, like the main characters of the novel, are lost children, orphans, lonely and awaiting the return of their mothers. So, the whole family of the 19-year-old Dolly Smitham died from a firebomb in December 1940; in 1929 Vivien Jenkins lost her entire family in a terrible car

accident; Jimmy Metcalfe's mother, who was "his enchantment, his first love, the great gleaming moon whose wax and wane held his own small human spirit in its thrall" [Morton], left him with his father "for that rich man with a well-hung language and expensive cars" / "After she left with the other fellow, that rich man with his silver tongue and his big expensive motorcar..." [Morton]. After that, his father began to suffer from dementia, and Jimmy continued to wait for her at the window every evening.

Secondly, these photo ekphrasis act as Barth's studiums in the novel, appealing to the cultural memory of the reader / viewer, expanding and deepening the historical and cultural context of the narrative. Each of them is an independent photo story, and their author could become the hero of the so-called novel about a war photographer.

Thus, military photographs in the novel acquire the status of historical evidence.

Characterological function of photoekphrasis

Thanks to photo ekphrasis, portraits of characters are visualized in the novel, their three-dimensional visual image is created, their inner world, relationships with the outside world and with themselves are reflected. So, for example, when Laurel showed a joint photo of two girls to her mother, horror was reflected on her face, as if she had seen a ghost: "I did something, ... during the war... I wasn't thinking straight, everything had gone horribly wrong... I didn't know what else to do and it seemed like the perfect plan, a way to put things right, but he found out – he was angry" [Morton]. This proves that there was some secret in Dorothy's past that she kept all these years. Laurel, on the other hand, in the last days of Dorothy's life, tried to shield her from feelings of guilt and "...give Ma the comfort and true forgiveness she so surely craved" [Morton]. Having not solved this mystery yet, Laurel looks at her mother as at the Other, trying to understand and justify her (the murder of a man at a family picnic – Henry Jenkins, who found Vivien). Every time Laurel looks at an old photo, she starts to reflect: the photo reflects her thoughts, emotions. As a result of reconsideration, Laurel comprehends the truth that people, even the closest and loved ones, tend to make mistakes

and stumble. No one has the right to condemn, everything is relative, but there is another right – to understand and forgive.

The photographic image is able to convey the feelings between the characters. So, for example, when a policeman finds a provocative photo of Jimmy and Vivien among the fragments: "It was immediately clear that this was a couple in love: the young man looked at the girl, clearly unable to look away. She smiled, he did not, but everything in his face said that he loved her with all his heart. he couldn't take his eyes off her. ... the man in the picture loved that woman with all his heart" [Morton].

This photo and a number of others contain captured love stories of other characters that fit into the line of a romance novel.

Narrative function of photoekphrasis

According to N. V. Braginskaya, "not only the word tries to acquire the property of representation, but the image is endowed with the properties of narrative..." [Braginskaya 1977: 263].

According to R. Barthes, photography is a message. A joint photograph of two girls, found by Laurel, definitely tells something, reports: "It was a photograph she'd never seen before, an old fashioned black and white shot of two young women, their arms linked" [Morton]. In parallel, it provokes interpretations due to its "openness". And this does not allow Laurel to "subtract" the full meaning of the black and white photographic image, which has a communicative nature. In order for a visual image to "speak", a viewer is needed. The one who is able to count meanings, the boundaries of which are "violated and blurred" [Vasilyeva 2014: 85]. The reader, who perceives the photographic artifact verbally, participates, according to K. Wilkie-Stibbs, in a "quasi-visual experience" [Wilkie-Stibbs 2014: 367]. At the same time, the photographic image in the novel is "silent" and provokes many questions, primarily in relation to the unfamiliar and therefore mysterious Vivien: "Laurel peered at the picture, at the laughing girls. She glanced again at the picture, the two young women who seemed now to be laughing at her ignorance" [Morton]. But over time, more questions arise: "Where had the photograph been taken? ... And by whom? Was the photographer someone the

girls had known – Henry Jenkins, perhaps? Or Ma’s boyfriend, Jimmy?... So much of the puzzle still seemed out of reach” [Morton]. The representativeness of the captured objects is not equal to a fixed meaning: “This text is not finite and frozen, but acquires new meanings with each interpretation over time. Therefore, it is necessary to be open to a conversation with the text, to allow it to ‘speak’” [Lazareva 2019: 65]. It is a verbal commentary (in our case, the date on the reverse side of the photograph (May 1941), which determines the context of the of the photographic image perception that can serve as a kind of “assistant” promoting the beginning of the conversation.

An indispensable condition for dialogue is Barthes’ punctum, which “... rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me” [Barthes 1981: 26]. And the object of this “attack” of the past is Laurel: “Now, though, the past was everywhere. It had seized Laurel in the hospital when she saw the photo of Vivien, and it hadn’t let go since. It waited for her around every corner; it muttered in her ear by the dead of night. It was cumulative, gathering weight each day, bringing with it bad dreams Nothing seemed to matter except learning the truth about her mother’s secret past” [Morton]. Remarkably, the same photograph does not become a punctum for her sister Rose.

An old photo appears in 2011 from the distant 1941, thus offering Laurel a chance to fill it with meaning. However, the answers to the questions – where, by whom and under what circumstances this photograph was taken – will remain “open” for Laurel. The reader, however, will get the questions answered in chapter 27: a joint photo of two girls was taken by Jimmy during the theater production theatrical performance of “Peter Pan”. Laurel will never learn these circumstances of the past, unlike the reader. This fact once again proves the relativity of the absolute comprehension of the past, including and in relation to such a visual artifact as a photograph, which makes it clear that “a sign is not the only form of representation of meaning” [Vasilyeva 2014: 86]. The so called “off-screen” mystery will never be completely restored by the characters: “A photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its connection with the whole are torn apart. It drifts away into a soft abstractness,

open to any kind of reading (or matching to other photographs). A photograph could also be described as a quotation, which makes a book of photographs like a book of quotations” [Sontag 2005: 56]. One such “quote” is the photographs in the locket that Dolly brought to Vivien in January 1941. Inside the locket there was a photograph cut in half showing two girls and two boys. These are Vivien’s sister and brothers who died in a car accident. Laurel will take the same locket in 2011 to clean it and bury it with her mother. And if at first she examines in it her photo and the photo of her brother and sisters, who he would see a hundred times, then below them she will find old photos of four children. The photographs hidden behind one another in the locket, which Dorothy would always wear around her neck, become another of Laurel’s “discoveries” about her mother’s life. She wants her questions answered, but at the same time, confirmation it becomes clear and indisputable, that this is Love, sisterly at first, then it is maternal, giving support to children in their present and future.

Within the framework of postmodern aesthetics, photo ekphrases, presented in the form of family photographs, possess an unlimited narrative potential, creating the so-called family mythology. Their combination at the narrative level of the work determines a certain subgenre, which has received a number in Western critique. For example, B. MacLaine offers two synonymous terms “family album novel” and “photofiction”: “Family album novels, like most photo fictions, explore the tension between the simultaneously factual and interpretative qualities of photographs. More specifically, in their attempt to create a fictional family history, such novels treat the family photograph as a reliable historical document, on the one hand, and as a highly unstable and misleading image, on the other” [MacLaine 1991: 131]. At the same time, “... characters, while the narrative accompanying the photographs uncovers the unrecorded events, biographies, psychologies and souls” [MacLaine 1991: 132]. P. Lawrence uses the term “prose family album”. K. Wilkie-Stibbs, speaking about the presence of fictitious photographs from a family album in the novel, refers to such a principle as “a narrative montage of verbal snapshots” [Wilkie-Stibbs 2014: 367].

Despite the terminological variability, a number of points are fundamental in such novels: 1) “an elegiac mode” [MacLaine 1991: 141]; 2) “...an institutional ‘amilial gaze’ of the posed photographs is thus gradually shattered by an investigatory ‘narratorial look’ that pierces through the family’s flawless veneer and reveals a complex web of underlying secrets and deceptions” [Laurence 2006: 380]; 3) “... these images are scrambled in an achronological narrative of analepses and prolepses to effect a disquieting readerly experience and destabilization of yearning for the comfort of nostalgia that would normally accompany the flicking through one’s album of chronologically ordered photographs” [Wilkie-Stibbs 2014: 367].

By chance in the Nicholsons’ chronologically arranged family photo album there appears an unfamiliar photo that makes things uncertain. A sense of inexplicable anxiety leads Laurel to the understanding of the truth of the photo-fact: Dorothy kept her life before marriage secret, including her real name, Vivien Jenkins. Thus, the narrative potential of photographs from the family album in the novel represents the biographical and family lines of plot development.

Military photographs taken by Jimmy immerse the reader in the atmosphere of London in the 1940s–1941s. Thanks to them, a “big” history is represented through the prism of the gaze of an ordinary person who becomes the chronicler of his time. The key concepts here (just like in the description of any other war) are those of “suffering”, “pain”, “loss”, “separation”, “destruction”, “death”.

These photographs, which will later take their “honorable” place in the museum, will become an impartial evidence of what happened, a document of military reality, its evidence. For the characters living in the present, these black-and-white shots create a historical distancing, that allows to evaluate the experience of the traumatic past. In this connection S. Sontag’s statement seems absolutely irrefutable: “What is called

collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds” [Sontag 2003: 86].

Thus, the narrative of military photography in the novel creates a historical line of plot development.

Figuratively speaking, in the novel under discussion photography appears as a silent narrator, thus proving the truth of the statement by an American art historian Garold Rosenberg: “The less there is to see, the more there is to say” [Rosenberg 1968: 306], which determines interpretive nature and fragmentary character of the story, it is Laurel (as a viewer) who is meant to fill the gaps. The indexical nature of photography is characteristic of postmodernist photoekphrastic prose, in contrast to the iconic and unambiguous nature of photographs of realistic prose of the 19th century.

The combination of various novel genres forms directly correlates with the motive-thematic function of photoekphrasis: the motive of recognition, the motive of getting to know the Other and acquiring existential knowledge, the motive of mystery, the theme of acquiring one’s own identity, the theme of memory, post-memory, the theme of death. The cross-cutting theme of the entire novel is the theme of photography, which combines two planes of what is captured by it: the external and internal ones.

Thus, the functionality of photoekphrasis at several poetological levels of the novel is beyond any doubt. From the point of view of formal characteristics, it seems possible to define the genre of K. Morton’s novel “The Secret Keeper” as a photoekphrastic novel in broad terms, and further classify it as a – novel-photoreflexion³, which includes a mingling of features of a psychological novel, a family novel, a romantic novel, a social and every day life novel, a biographical, detective and historical novel.

³ For more details, see Poluektova T. A. Phototextuality as a Poetological Category of the English Novel: Stating the Problem. Perm University Herald. Russian and Foreign Philology. 2021. Vol. 13. Issue 4. P. 100–110. DOI: 10.17072/2073-6681-2021-4-100-110.

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