

Christmas every day

Beginning is always the hardest part, but it is important to be brave and start. And I thought I would start with my huge thanks to the committee, the people who chose such a great story for us to look forward to Christmas! As you may suppose, I won't do that, because the story is not about Christmas at all. But what I want to thank for, is the subject of my analysis itself. Great! I really enjoyed it. Thank you! The novel written by William Dean Howells (1837-1920) is something new and fresh and I think it just requires a good, still probably amateur translation.

I really expected some traditional Christmas tale, but found something much better. The events are set in old-fashioned XIXth century house, where we meet a typical American family – gentle realism founded by W. D. Howells is quite attractive, but rather intellectual too.

It would be too rough to say that the story has only two layers as a metafiction, i.e. the narration about a girl listening to a story. If you read properly, as an analyst should, you'll find that the first layer, though being unimportant in terms of the plot and consisting mainly of dialogues is just as charming as the plot itself. So, I think, it would be necessary to divide my essay into two parts. Let's start with the frame.

The author makes us familiar with the little girl and her papa (not dad, not even daddy, but papa, looks cute and aristocratic at the same time). The beginning is quite typical: "Papa, tell a story". Just as typical as papa's trying to get rid of a child as quickly as possible and her sitting on his lap and begging to tell a story she heard a million times.

But look at the dialogues! They are really clever and smart and I couldn't help saying "Wow!" every time I read girl's answers. It's like:

- *Well, what now? Did I say "pigs"?*
- *You made them act like pigs.*

Or another detail:

- *What did you promise, you, forgetful thing?*

Or even:

- *You're beginning to fib.*

(Here I should say that the girl considered fibbing high prices for turkey, coal and potatoes rather than everyday Christmas)

Child's behavior in the story is so charming and natural, that I guess many readers could say something like: "Well, that's me when I was five". I did so: the girl's questions and gestures and longing to hear happy ending contribute to the image. Still, what she says is untypical of a small child, she's either older than it seems or much cleverer than we think.

As for her father, he is just as bright as his listener, quite a witty and smart and sometimes even funny man. But still – loving papa, laughing at his small daughter like a good papa should:

- I should like to know what's the difference between a little pig and a little girl that wanted it Christmas every day!

No less charming are his remarks inserted in the text, but I'll have a closer look at the point later.

It is clear that the frame has no structured plot. The only development we can observe is time flow: the more papa tells, the closer is breakfast. The starting point here is a phrase "*before breakfast*" in the first paragraph. the logical ending of a frame is quite predictable: mum (or "mama", as you like it comes to tell that breakfast is ready and they should go downstairs and have it at once. Still, predictability in this case is not a poor taste, but the conventional thing.

By means of this frame the author makes us look at the body of the text by narrator's i.e. by papa's eyes, giving us not even second-hand but third-hand experience. Again, it is quite clear when we look at the remarks of so to say economical character (by the way, I highlighted them red and marked that they were terribly bright).

Let me precede with the "inner" part of the text.

This is where I have a right to say that the story is not for children at all. From the point of view of the plot, it seems childish, but again, if we have a closer look both at verbal and at supravocal layer, we'll find out that an old good idea of a Christmas tale can be implemented in different ways.

Once there was the little girl, who loved Christmas very much and wrote to a Fairy to ask if her dream could come true. Her dream came true, but everybody was bored to distraction by daily Christmas. Then the little girl asked the Fairy to get everything back. She did it. Everybody was happy. The end.

Looks boring. But what a colourful picture the author creates amid an obsolete plot!

Before I precede with the lexical units and the most impressive parts of the text, let me dwell on the structure, the link connecting frame and inner text.

It is papa, who on one hand remains the character of a frame and on the other hand becomes the narrator of a Christmas tale.

What really impressed me is not only ironical tinge of the text, but some allusions to real society and the category of presupposition which is inserted here quite finely and which, I must say, left me with a good deal of concern and questions, more asked than answered. I'm sorry in advance to have interpreted some details in a wrong way. Just in case.

What is usually expected from a classic Christmas tale? Hearth, Santa, children, gifts, traditional dishes. Passing huge hello to Dickens, there also should be an antagonist, who after all gets better. Well, it's all here, again, typical and basic. But don't judge a story by its pattern.

I find it necessary to elicit some ironically hyperbolized social problems depicted in the text. They are bureaucracy, economy and social problems and I will comment upon each point once it appears in the plot.

How about a Fairy, who answers your letters when the deadline is coming? What's perfectly nice here, is a phrase "*she might have it Christmas every day for a year, and then they would see about having it longer...*". It's like: "You can buy a demo-version, but to acquire a full one, you have to pay". Bureaucracy as it is, isn't it? Later on you will find such phrases as "*Not at home*", "*Engaged*", "*At dinner*" hanging at the Fairy's door whenever the girl came there (which is also quite interesting, as the world of people intertwines with the world of supernatural creatures).

Moving on, we find the description of a typical Christmas day, full of clichés. I had no questions until the girl's brother received tongs as a present. Well, probably that could be some present for a naughty child, but google knows nothing about it unlike her parents' presents. It is a well-known fact that naughty children usually get coal put in their stockings, so this could probably be an elegant joke from the narrator. Children often dream of their parents being punished when forced to eat soup or go to bed early.

And now I will ask you to be very attentive. As the narrator precedes with the second day of everyday Christmas, the girl says: "You needn't go over it all, papa, I guess I can remember just what is there". This is a very important phrase and I have two opinions about it. Firstly, the girl means that it will be boring to listen to the same story again and thus probably, to have it come true. The foolishness of the wish is explicit here. See? Great! Still, secondly, the girl may know that her father can think out something more interesting than recurrent description and she awaits some twists. And she asks for them. And she gets them.

And before I precede with twists, I must elicit another citation: "*She was dreadfully sleepy, but she sprang up like a lark – a lark that had overeaten itself*".

and gone to bed cross...”. Quite a good anticlimax for the whole passage I must say.

Nevertheless, let me move on. The characters of the story, though getting through some magical experiment face quite trivial problems: where to put presents? Where to take a Christmas tree, how to decorate it, where to take food for dinner and how to give presents? Problems roll into one snowball and people lose their tempers – “...*so many people could lose their tempers that you could pick up lost tempers anywhere; they perfectly strewed the ground. Even when people tried to recover their tempers they usually got somebody else’s, and it made the most dreadful mix*”. Nice pun, isn’t it?

Let’s get back to hyperbole for a while. Another important satirical feature is somewhat economical approach to the story as papa describes in details the price for each traditional Christmas attribute. The detail, I think, no one would muse on. And (to think of that!) this is the only point where the girl notices fibbing! Splendid, I think. The lexical means used here are “scarce”, “price”, “poor” and “poor house”. Quite official, but understandable for a child.

As we go on reading, we can see that the author doesn’t forget about child’s psychology. The main character’s feelings are described quite naturally, as she doesn’t want to tell anybody about her Christmas wish, but suffers from agonies of remorse. Let me provide another citation: “...*the little girl began to get frightened, keeping the secret all to herself; she wanted to tell her mother, but she didn’t dare to; and she was ashamed to ask the Fairy to take back her gift, it seemed ungrateful and ill-bred...*” – just like a good girl should behave.

And look what happens to the little girl after four months of endless holiday! To describe her state, the author calls stockings *ugly* and *lumpy*, and presents – *disgusting*. So do evolve other people: they don’t trouble to behave themselves anymore (but trouble to write “*Take it, you horrid old thing!*”).

Will there be any kind of revolt? There will be one, symbolically, on the 4th of July. But whenever people try to celebrate it, the attributes always turn into something else, usually candy and other sweet things and – another trick from the author – even “*God rest you, merry gentlemen!*” sounds horribly appropriate for the holiday.

And here Freud comes with his disputable theories. I don’t know whether the little girl talking about her wish in her sleep is a real allusion, but it might be. Otherwise, William Dean Howells is a prophetic. No doubt, the girl was not forgiven until she met Christmas Fairy again.

After a long and vivid discussion (in both parts of the text) their characters came to conclusion that one Christmas a year is enough. And here I struggled with another detail:

- *What’s your shoes made of?*

- *Leather*.

But fortunately, this detail didn't confuse Google. As far as I understood, the girl just wanted to know whether the Fairy's shoes are made of flowers. "*Unnecessary detail*" – says someone. "*Another proof of Fairy being a plain human creature like her tables*" – say I. Quite I witty one, by the way.

But even conducting my analysis, I didn't answer the question: why didn't people just change their attitude towards traditions, why didn't they neglect them? In this respect the story is a good example illustrating the power of traditions. Which, I must say, is strong and which is not that easy to overcome.

To sum up, I enjoyed the story like an adult usually enjoys a good children's literature worth re-reading now and then. I think of translating it one day and thus reveal for Russian reader one more American author.

And figure out the point in mentioning those stupid tongs for elder brother.