

**Shpak I.V.**

**Шпак І.В.**

*Dnipropetrovsk National University of Railway Transport after V. Lazaryan*

*Дніпропетровський національний університет залізничного транспорту ім. В.  
Лазаряна*

## **A Secret History: The Inverted Detective Story**

### **Таємна історія: перевернутий детектив**

**Annotation:** The aim of the investigation in question is an attempt to research the origin and functioning on the inverted detective story subgenre on the example Donna Tartt's novel "A Secret History". In course of the research the attention is drawn to the basic features and structure of the inverted detective story as well as to the psychological and philosophical allusions raised in the novel.

**Key words:** novel, literary work, subgenre, classical detective story, inverted detective story.

**Анотація:** Метою даного дослідження є спроба виявити та дослідити походження та функціонування текстів піджанру перевернутого детективу на прикладі роману американської письменниці Донни Тартт «Таємна історія». В ході дослідження увага концентрується на дослідженні основних рис та структури притаманних перевернутому детективу, так само як і на психологічних та філософських питаннях, які підіймаються в романі.

**Ключові слова:** роман, літературний твір, піджанр, класичний детектив, перевернутий детектив.

The first author who is credited with the creation of the inverted detective story is Austin Freeman with his collection of short stories *The Singing Bone*, which was published in 1912. [1] Once he said:

*“Some years ago I devised, as an experiment, an inverted detective story in two parts. The first part was a minute and detailed description of a crime, setting forth the antecedents, motives, and all attendant circumstances. The reader had seen the crime committed, knew all about the criminal, and was in possession of all the facts.”* [2]

The inverted detective story (another name is “howcatchim”) is a detective story, mystery story, where the crime is delivered to the reader in the beginning of a story, and the identity of the perpetrator is usually shown to reader. This is a story, where the reader has the advantage compare to the sleuth. There may also be subsidiary puzzles, such as why the crime was committed, but those are cleared up along the way. This format is the opposite of the more typical “whodunit”, where all of the details of the perpetrator of the crime are not revealed until the story’s climax. [3]

Despite the fact that the inverted detective story may be a little bit strange for the first time readers, who are used to a traditional one with a detective who is in the center of the story and who leads the reader to the solution of the problem, namely to the solving of the crime. There is a number of famous authors who wrote traditional detective stories and naturally the number of famous sleuths, though fictional. The most famous among them is undoubtedly Sherlock Holmes. Holmes was created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, a Scottish doctor, who worked in a number of genres, but is most widely-known for his sleuth. In 1893 after over fifty stories about Sherlock Holmes Arthur Conan Doyle decides to kill off his creation: Sherlock Holmes fights with his arch enemy Dr. Moriarty and both perish in the waters of Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland. However, in ten years after the death of the famous sleuth, to the greatest excitement of the readers, Arthur Conan Doyle revived Sherlock Holmes.

Regardless of slight differences and peculiarities of different writers, there is a notion in detective fiction such as “Holmes canon”, which is relevant to a traditional detective story, and which is totally uncharacteristic of the inverted detective story. Classic detective fiction tends to follow certain patterns and rules, this is pertinent both to Victorian detective story and to Conan Doyle’s detective story, however, this is utterly impertinent to the inverted detective story: “Deduction ought to be an exact science”, whereas in the inverted detective story there are other options, it is not about pure science, but rather about the cognition.

‘A Secret History’ by Donna Tartt is an inverted detective story. It commences with the murder of a student in the early days of April by five other students. It may seem obvious that the line of the narration would eventually lead to the arrest of these five students, however, it may only seem. To define this work solely as the inverted detective story may be linear, as far as it may be a case of that exceptionally in structural terms. The semantics of the novel is much deeper and not restricted to solving of a crime (by the detective). In fact neither the state police nor the FBI were able to solve this murder. Two murders as a matter of fact.

“A Secret History” deals with a number of issues that lie beyond the characteristics of any detective story. It dwells on philosophical matters, on the eternal, sublime things. One of those things is loss of self:

*“The Furies,’ said Bunny, his eyes dazzled and lost beneath the bang of hair. ‘Exactly. And how did they drive people mad? They turned up the volume of the inner monologue, magnified qualities already present to great excess, made people so much themselves that they couldn’t stand it.”[4; p. 58]*

Can we say that Tartt followed the rules of the inverted detective story and in the beginning of the novel explained the reasons of Henry’s suicide? Can we say that he gradually lost his self, that his inner monologue has finally reached such a volume that he couldn’t stand it any longer?

Another problem that the author poses for the reader is the issue of control. It is an opposition of conscious/subconscious. The conscious, the rational, the controlled:

*“Because it is dangerous to ignore the existence of the irrational. The more cultivated a person is, the more intelligent, the more repressed, then the more he needs some method of channeling the primitive impulses he's worked so hard to subdue. Otherwise those powerful old forces will mass and strengthen until they are violent enough to break free, more violent for the delay, often strong enough to sweep the will away entirely. For a warning of what happens in the absence of such a pressure valve, we have the example of the Romans. The emperors. Think, for example, of Tiberius, the ugly stepson, trying to live up to the command of his stepfather Augustus.” [4; p. 60]*

Whereas the irrational, the subconscious, the uncontrolled may set free. The Greek group being fascinated by their professor Julian Morrow under the leadership of Henry Winter decides to impress their teacher and reach the realm of irrational, they decide to make Bacchanal and after umpteen attempts they finally succeed. Being transcend they lose control, lose their self, see Dionysus:

*“Well, it's not called a mystery for nothing,' said Henry sourly.  
'Take my word for it. But one mustn't underestimate the primal appeal – to lose one's self, lose it utterly. And in losing it be born to the principle of continuous life, outside the prison of mortality and time. That was attractive to me from the first, even when I knew nothing about the topic and approached it less as potential mystes than anthropologist. Ancient commentators are very circumspect about the whole thing. It was possible, with a great deal of work, to figure out some of the sacred rituals – the hymns, the sacred objects, what to wear and do and say. More difficult was the mystery itself: how did one propel oneself into such a state, what was the catalyst?’ [4; p. 237]*

Having lost control, their selves, the young people kill a farmer. After the murder they have an extremely vague recollection of the event and absolutely no details, apart from horrific ones, which they deduced. They don't have any remorse; except for the one that they should have buried the farmer, because of according to the ancient Greek a body should be buried in order not to hunt the killers. The whole Bacchanal thing is described as something sublime, spiritual, purging, being worth of sacrifice – the blood was spilled. There is only a slight hint on the part of the author that the bacchanal could not have been complete without bloodletting.

The whole Greek class is delivered to the reader as suffering romantic heroes, superheroes who think in different categories – earthly problems are too insignificant, too minor for them. The murder of the farmer is quickly forgotten; however Bunny's disappearance drew attention of the authorities. Local law enforcement and the FBI lead the massive manhunt – this is the time when reader may start thinking that the authorities might bring the culprits to justice, however the FBI leaves as soon as the body is found and the local police closes the case as an accident. At this very moment the reader may reconsider character assessment. In this inverted detective story there is a very thin line between a protagonist and antagonist. While waiting for a traditional detective to appear as a protagonist, and fight the evil and bring to justice those who deserve it, one may miss the opportunity to enjoy playing intellectual game with Henry who plays both the role of antagonist and protagonist:

*“It's funny,' said Francis. 'I have a hard time believing he's really dead. I mean - I know there's no way he could have faked dying – but, you know, if anybody could figure out how to come back, it's him. It's kind of like Sherlock Holmes. Going over the Reichenbach Falls. I keep expecting to find that it was all a trick, that he'll turn up any day now with some kind of elaborate explanation.”*

Henry's character is enigmatic; Henry himself is a very mysterious young man. He thinks unconventional, he does unconventional things, and he tries to reason with unreasonable, though he understands the vanity of it. He plays the

game, measured, well timed and efficiently executed. He is always at least one move ahead of his adversaries, and in that game everyone is his adversary.

### **References:**

1. Inverted Detective Story. [Электронный ресурс]. Режим доступа <https://indigoseapressblog.com/2012/06/20/the-inverted-detective-story-by-christine-husom/>
2. Стаття [Электронный ресурс]. Режим доступа [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inverted\\_detective\\_story](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inverted_detective_story)
3. The Inverted Detective Story Approach <https://katthorsen.com/2016/09/21/the-inverted-detective-story-approach/>
4. Tartt, Donna. A Secret History. First Vintage Contemporary Edition , 559 pages. Published April 13th 2004 by Vintage (first published 1992)