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SELF-REFLEXIVE NARRATION IN J.M. COETZEE’S NOVELS *FOE*, *THE MASTER OF PETERSBURG* AND *ELIZABETH COSTELLO*

This paper explores the evolution of self-reflexivity in the works of South-African English-speaking writer J.M. Coetzee. The emergence of self-reflexivity – a narrative mode focusing on the process of literary creation – is highlighted as a reaction to modern complexities. Self-reflexive texts often address their own creation, revealing their artificiality and questioning the boundaries between fiction and reality. The theoretical foundation draws from structuralist and semiotic approaches, with contributions from scholars like L. Hutcheon, J. Genette, W. Shmidt, P. Waugh, V. Zuseva-Ozkan etc.

*The study examines Coetzee’s novels *Foe*, *The Master of Petersburg*, and *Elizabeth Costello*, where self-reflexivity manifests in different forms. In *Foe*, Susan Barton, the protagonist, embodies the act of authorship, deconstructing conventional adventure narratives and reflecting on the art of storytelling. The narrative frequently includes metatextual commentary, emphasizing the novel’s constructedness.*

*In *The Master of Petersburg*, the protagonist Dostoevsky transforms reality into an artistic narrative, blending his creative process with intertextual references to Russian literary traditions. The novel uses free indirect discourse to merge the narrator’s and protagonist’s perspectives, illustrating the fluidity between fiction and the creative mind.*

Elizabeth Costello blurs the lines between fiction and commentary, with the protagonist reflecting on the creative process and the nature of the novel itself. The narrative includes explicit interruptions, metatextual commentary, and sensory engagement with language, folding the story back upon itself.

The analysis underscores the significance of Coetzee’s self-reflexive narrative techniques in revealing the intricate relationship between text, author, and reader. By focusing on the mechanisms of self-reflective writing, the study offers new insights into how contemporary literature addresses the interplay between fiction, reality, and creativity.

Key words: self-reflection, reflexivity, narration, creativity, J.M. Coetzee.

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САМОРЕФЛЕКСИВНА ОПОВІДЬ У РОМАНАХ ДЖ. М. КУТЗЕЕ «ФО», «МИТЕЦЬ ПЕТЕРБУРГА» ТА «ЕЛІЗАБЕТ КОСТЕЛЛО»

У статті досліджується еволюція саморефлексії у творчості південноафриканського англомовного письменника Дж. М. Кутзее. Поява саморефлексії – наративного модусу, що фокусується на процесі літературної творчості – виникає як реакція на соціально-культурні зміни сучасності. Саморефлексивні тексти часто звертаються до власного творіння, виявляючи його штучність і ставлячи під сумнів межі між вигадкою та реальністю. Теоретичну основу дослідження становлять структуралістський та семіотичний підходи, а також праці таких вчених, як Л. Хатчеон, Ж. Женетт, В. Шмідт, П. Во, В. Зусєва-Озкан та ін.

У дослідженні розглядаються романи Дж. М. Кутзее «Фо», «Митець Петербурга» та «Елізабет Костелло», де саморефлексія проявляється в різних формах. У романі «Фо» головна героїня Сьюзен Бартон втілює акт

авторства, деконструюючи традиційні пригодницькі наративи та розмірковуючи про мистецтво оповіді. Оповідь часто включає метатекстові коментарі, що підкреслюють сконструйованість роману.

У «Митець Петербурга» головний герой Достоевський перетворює реальність на художню вигадку, поєднуючи свій творчий процес з інтертекстуальними посиланнями на російські літературні традиції. У романі використовується вільний непрямий дискурс для поєднання точок зору оповідача і героя, що ілюструє плинність між вигадкою і творчою свідомістю митця.

«Елізабет Костелло» розвиває межі між вигадкою і коментарем, коли головна героїня розмірковує про творчий процес і природу самого роману. Оповідь включає явні переривання, метатекстові коментарі та чуттєву взаємодію з мовою, що наче замикає оповідь на собі.

Аналіз підкреслює важливість саморефлексивної наративної техніки Дж. М. Кутзее у розкритті складних взаємин між текстом, автором і читачем. Зосереджуючись на механізмах саморефлексивного письма, дослідження пропонує нове розуміння того, як сучасна література розглядає взаємодію між вигадкою, реальністю і творчістю.

Ключові слова: саморефлексія, рефлексивність, нарація, творчість, Дж. М. Кутзее.

Introduction. The socio-cultural changes of the past few centuries have engendered a profound reassessment of self-consciousness, with the contemporary human worldview defined by chaos, plurality, and unreliability. This shift has significantly impacted the literary landscape and the broader approach of post-structuralist thinkers, who interpret human consciousness as a construct akin to a written text. In this view, literature, culture, society, and history are all interwoven as a single, expansive text (or intertext). This perspective has led to a sustained critique of the idea of an autonomous individual, giving rise to concepts such as “the death of the subject” (M. Foucault), in which language itself is seen as the true agent, “the death of the author” (R. Barthes) as an authoritative figure, and even “the death of the reader” as an individual interpreter, as their consciousness becomes absorbed into the larger intertext of cultural tradition. According to M. Foucault’s concept of the totality of language and J. Derrida’s idea of the totality of text, through which the author’s personality is replaced by self-generative writing, the literary text dissolves into explicit or implicit quotations. Consequently, certain methods of artistic thinking have emerged, based on the reflection of contemporary artistic consciousness, which operates with universal systems of cross-semantic connections, characterizing the contemporary cultural situation as an open, pluralistic, multilingual world-dialogue of cultures.

This has forced contemporary writers, who are trying to comprehend all the changes of rapidly metamorphosing reality through creative writing, to reconsider their position towards literary texts and assign a place in their works to their creativity and to a certain narrative “Self”, focusing on the creative process. As a result a self-reflexive

mode of narration appeared, that in contemporary texts can manifest at least in two ways: 1) a literary self-reflection – the reflection by literature on its own ontological status, mechanisms of the creative process; 2) a reflexivity as an introspective orientation of author, the writers’ addressing to themselves, the comprehending of themselves as writing subjects, not devoid of quite definite socio-cultural outlines (Kawin, 1982, p. 16).

Analysis of recent research and publications.

There is a considerable number of studies of J. M. Coetzee’s work that examine narrative aspects related to language and power discourse (Attwell, 1993; Dovey, 1988; Durrant, 2004; Dynarowicz; Gallagher, 1991). Early works, such as Dovey’s, explore Lacan’s allegories in Coetzee’s novels, where narrative creates an elusive identity through language (Dovey, 1988, p. 11). Other researchers study his works through feminist criticism, language practices, and language deconstruction. D. Attwell, analyzing the narrative level of J. M. Coetzee’s works, seeks to explore the boundaries of authorial power, its representativeness, legitimacy, and authority as manifested in language (Attwell, 1993). At the same time, the analysis of narrative instability and the limits of authorial power emphasizes the ambiguity and multiplicity of interpretations in his works (Danta, Kossew, Murphet, 2011). Despite the existence of a sufficient set of works devoted to the study of narration specifics in the writer’s works, a comprehensive study of the self-reflexivity of the narration of Coetzee’s novels has not yet been conducted in literary studies, in particular, the study of the mechanisms of self-reflexive writing and their manifestation in the text, which determines the **novelty** of this research.

The **purpose** of this article is to explore the specifics of self-reflexive narration in

the works of the English-speaking South African writer J. M. Coetzee, which is a relevant task in the context of the main interests of contemporary literary studies aimed at the analyzing of narrative modes and forms.

Methodology and methods. Theoretical basis for this research is settled on structural and semiotic definition of self-reflexive works as those that tells about creating literary works and are devoted to the creative process, discussing the topic of the writer and writing. The term “self-reflexivity is a broad category and includes all forms of reflexivity of the text on itself and on its coming-in-to-being” (Zuseva-Ozkan, 2023). L. Hutcheon, analyzing peculiarity of narration in metafiction, notes: “The text paradoxically requires the reader to participate, to be intellectually, creatively, and emotionally involved in the process of ‘co-creation’ of ‘self-conscious’ texts” (Hutcheon, 1984, p. 7). In literary studies, this narrative type is called “metanarration”, when the narrative subject discusses his status, doubts what form his story should take, “referring to the narrator’s reflections on the act or process of narration” (Neumann and Nünning, 2013). This narrative type manifests itself in the textual form of “meta-narrative phrases” (metareflection) – different forms of metatexts (narrator’s reflections/commentaries on the work), various types of intertext, and metalepsis – the transition from one narrative level to another, shift between two worlds – the world in which the story is told and the world about which it is told (Genette, 1980, p. 234). It is notable, that reflection in a work can be carried out by either an ‘extradiegetic narrator’ (J. Genette) or a character who performs the functions of the author-creator of the text. So, metanarration is an umbrella terms designating self-reflexive utterances which refers to the narrator’s reflections on the act or process of narration (Neumann and Nünning, 2012). Unlike previous scholars, V. Zuseva-Ozkan points out the influence of self-reflection on the stylistic organisation of the text, compositional forms of speech and the system of points of view (perspectives), which creates complex and subtly ordered subjective structures (Zuseva-Ozkan, 2023). As a result of this influence, a whole meta-level of the work emerges, which P. Waugh considers an integral part of contemporary metafiction that is considered as “works of art that consciously and systematically draw attention to their status as an artefact in order to raise questions

about the relationship between reality and fiction” (Waugh, 1984, p. 2).

Results and Discussions. In all three J. M. Coetzee’s novels *Foe* (1986), *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) the main character is a creative subject/person, that creates favourable condition for both – reflexivity and literary self-reflection in the texts.

In *Foe* (1986) the narration belongs to the main character of the novel – Susan Barthon who desperately tries to write a true story of Robinson Crusoe and their life on an island. Thus, there is an ego-narrator of first three chapters of the novel, the authorship of which belongs to the protagonist (the last one belongs to extradiegetic narrator and looks like author’s stream of conscious) and all of the events in the novel are described from her viewpoint, that open up more opportunities for using metatextual inclusions in the text. Thus, Susan in the novel is a virtual instance of the meaning subject of a certain narrative statement as a creative whole that defined as the “embodiment of the text’s intentionality” and defined as an abstract author of the text (Schmid, 2008, p. 57). The self-reflexive modus is represented first of all in the refutation of conventional plot, which according to P. Waugh is one of the main characteristics of metaprose, which is complemented by commenting on what is written, refusing to attempt to embody reality, and destroying narrative conventions in order to show reality as a dubious concept. Therefore, Susan continually demystifies the reader’s notions of the adventure novel. Instead of Crusoe, the coloniser who subjugated the island, the reader is presented with an elderly Crusoe who performs monotonous work and is constantly confused in his memories. The island of Crusoe itself was “a great rocky hill with a flat top, rising sharply from the sea on all sides except one, dotted with drab bushes that never flowered and never shed their leaves <...> such trees as there were puny, stunted by the wind, their twisted stems seldom broader than my hand” (Coetzee, 1986, p. 7, 16). At the same time, the narrator constantly refers to the fictional recipient of the text, not letting the reader forget that this is just a literary text, which deliberately emphasises the process of creating an artistic text: “I have already told you how <...>; now let me tell you <...>; <...>let me return to my story; you will probably ask <...>; I could tell you more about

our life <...>; I must tell you about Cruso's death <...>" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 160).

In two other novels – *The Master of Petersburg* and *Elizabeth Costello* – the narrator acts as an impersonal entity – an implicit non-diegetic impersonal narrator, having limited viewpoint (spatiotemporal and axiological) as the narrator is 'attached' to protagonists.

Self-reflexivity in *The Master of Petersburg* manifests itself in an implicit form, since the novel does not have commentary on what is written, but "the style, the choice of narrative instance, the characters' names, the structure of the narrative, the inner world of the characters, and their fate constantly instill in us the feeling that the artistic world of the work is an author's construct built on the basis of previous literary traditions and conventions" (Alter, 1975, p. 10). Through his conscious action as a writer, the protagonist Dostoevsky, transforms his reality into an artistic narrative that penetrates the thought process of a creative personality, are those elements of the novel that regularly draw attention to their artificiality and instill in readers the idea that they are looking at an author's construct based on the texts of a prominent Russian writer. The characters of the novel constantly emphasize their fictional status: Dostoevsky in the novels notes "I am behaving like a character in the book" (Coetzee, 2004, p. 27), investigator Maksimov, after closing Pavel's case, tells the protagonist: "I have ceased to exist, in the same way that a character in a book can be said to cease to exist as soon as the book is closed" (Coetzee, 2004, p. 147). Further Dostoevsky explains to the investigator how to read a literary text as if his statement were addressed to the reader: "reading is being the arm and being the axe and being the skull; reading is giving yourself up, not holding yourself at distance and jeering" (Coetzee, 2004, p. 47). Similarly, in the novel, the protagonist mentions that in order to "breathe new life" into the novel to "add vivid strokes" are necessary (Coetzee, 2004). The discussion of writing and reading artistic texts can be considered as a "form of reflexivity of the text on itself and on its coming-in-to-being", which "draws attention to their status as an artefact in order to raise questions about the relationship between reality and fiction" (Zuseva-Ozkan 2023; Waugh, 1984).

Additionally, the novel *Foe* reveals that the text imbued with nuanced reflections on the nature of creativity and the intricate craft of writing:

"<...> writing a better than most of passing the time" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 63); "writing proves a slow business" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 88); "the storyteller <...> must divine which episodes of his history hold promise of fullness, and tease from them their hidden meaning, braiding these together <...>" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 88–89); "it is thus that we make up a book: loss, then quest, then recovery; beginning, then middle, then end" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 117). Such inclusions perform the function of 'modelling modelling', emphasising a certain 'artificiality', 'createdness' of the novel, which establishes the rules of the game of literature between the author and the reader.

The novel *Elizabeth Costello* is rich with metatextual elements, blurring the lines between the narrative's events and the commentary on them. The narrator comments on the appearance of the protagonist *Elizabeth Costello* and her personal traits: "The blue costume, the greasy hair, are details, sings of a moderate realism" (Coetzee, 2003, p. 4), "For she is by no means a comforting writer. She is even cruel, in a way that women can be but men seldom have the heart for. What sort of creature is she, really? <...> A cat. One of those large cats that pause as they eviscerate their victim and, across the torn-open belly, give you a cold yellow stare" (Coetzee, 2003, p. 3). The text itself is full of reflections on both the genre of novel and the creative process, encouraging the reader to reflect on the creativity: "The novel, the traditional novel <...> is an attempt to understand human fate one case at a time" (Coetzee, 2003, p. 38), "Like history, the novel is thus an exercise in making the past coherent <...> As happens when one writes" (Coetzee, 2003, p. 39) "<...> the certain things are not good to read or to write. To put the point in another way: I take seriously the claim that the artist risks a great deal by venturing into forbidden places: risks, specifically, himself; risks, perhaps, all" (Coetzee, 2003, p. 137).

In the first part of the novel, at certain intervals, the narrator constantly draws attention to certain gaps in the text, which helps clearly distinguish the 'presence' of the narrator, who merges with the abstract author: "We skip", "<...> there is a scene in the restaurant <...> which we will skip", "The presentation scene itself we skip", "We skip ahead", "We skip ahead again, a skip this time in the text rather than in the performance", "A gap" (Coetzee, 2003, p. 15, 16, 17, 24, 27, 28). Such

“intrusions”, which indicate the author’s conscious shaping of the text, emphasize the process of creating a literary text and also model the image of the addressee: the narrator seems to address the reader, emphasizing the importance or triviality of the events described for his recipient. Moreover, the narrator ironically comments on his comments: “It is not a good idea to interrupt the narrative too often, since storytelling works by lulling the reader or listener into a dreamlike state in which the time and space of the real world fade away, superseded by the time and space of the fiction” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 16). Thus, the communicative aspect becomes especially noticeable in the novel, as the textual mechanisms are aimed at highlighting the image of the reader, although the author does not address his addressee directly.

In *The Master of Petersburg*, also, at certain intervals there are some “inclusions” which might seem as “alien elements” in the text: this is the word “therefore” or its interrogative variant “therefore what?” The explanation after them is not given, and in the novel itself it is difficult to determine who they belong to: the narrator or the main character – Dostoevsky: “He cannot think, therefore what? <...> Therefore...Therefore what?” (Coetzee, 2004, p. 236, 237, 238). W.Schmid identifies this narrative technique as free indirect discourse (FID), which he describes as “a segment of the narrator’s discourse that reproduces the words, thoughts, feelings, perceptions, or evaluative stance of a character, where the reproduction of the character’s text is unmarked, either graphically or by explicit indicators” (Schmid, 2010, p. 220). FID arises when indirect speech incorporates elements of direct speech, blurring the distinction between the narrator’s voice and that of the character. Schmid notes that FID allows the narrator to convey the character’s language directly while still maintaining narrative presence. This approach is often used to ironically underscore the character’s words or perspective (Schmid, 2010, p. 222). In this way, the narrator highlights Dostoevsky’s ambiguous stance, both toward the recurring visions in his dreams and the increasingly literary quality of the reality he perceives.

In *Foe*, recurring repetitions function as a metatext, as they actively reflect the process of the text’s creation. For instance, Susan repeatedly recounts the beginning of her story, first

to Cruso and later to Mr. Foe, asserting her position as the narrative’s sole proprietor and emphasizing her claim over its authorship: “At last I could row no further. My hands were blistered, my back was burned, my body ached <...> I slipped overboard” (Coetzee, 1986, p. 5, 11, 133). The repeated phrases emphasise Susan’s deliberate construction of the text, emphasising her role as both author and creator. She articulates this process by stating, “I describe the dark staircase, the bare room, the curtained alcove <...> I relate your words and mine” (Coetzee, 1986, p. 133). Similarly, the third part of the novel opens with an echo of these lines: “The staircase was dark and mean <...> My knocked echoed as if on emptiness” (Coetzee, 1986, p. 113). These metatextual elements emphasise the text’s self-referential and constructed nature, drawing attention to its intentional creation. In the final section of the novel, presented as a stream of creative consciousness, similar repetitions reappear when the narrator describes the act of slipping into the water. This mirrors the opening of the novel, where Susan is depicted as “could row no further” and “slipping overboard.” The recurring image of slipping into the water symbolizes the concept of being immersed within the author’s text, a motif that not only defines the concluding section but is integral to the narrative as a whole.

In the end of *Elizabeth Costello*, the protagonist, while composing her “confession,” engages with the sensory qualities of language, exploring how words resonate. She reflects, “she knocks on the frogs <...> the sound that comes out is clear, clear, like a bell. She hits the word ‘believe’ <...> the sound that returns ‘believe’ is not so clear, but it is clear enough” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 222). This scene recalls an earlier moment in the second part of the novel, where Emanuel Egudu discusses the essence of the African novel: “The African novel, the true African novel, is oral. On the page where it is contained, only half of it is alive; it [the novel] awakens when a voice from the depths of the body breathes life into the words, speaks them aloud” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 45). Elizabeth’s endeavor can be interpreted as an attempt to infuse vitality not only into her text but also into her own existence, as the city she inhabits is described as being “no more real than she is” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 195). Consequently, the novel appears to fold back upon itself, with the primary narrative

continually referencing its embedded texts, creating a self-referential closure.

Similarly, in the end of *The Artist of Petersburg* the text appears to fold in on itself, as the works of the protagonist, Dostoevsky, merge seamlessly with the fabric of the novel as a whole. For instance, the text “THE CHILD” parallels the chapter “Motryosha” where the protagonist-writer recounts the story of Lebyadkin (Coetzee, 2004, p. 72–74). In the text “THE APARTMENT,” a student dons a white suit, echoing the white pair of trousers worn by Dostoevsky’s character Pavel (Coetzee, 2004, p. 19). The student explores the room, opening drawers to discover a medallion containing portraits of the landlady and her late husband, mirroring a scene involving Dostoevsky’s protagonist (Coetzee, 2004, p. 70). The narrative culminates in a depiction of physical intimacy between the student and a girl, observed by the landlady’s daughter, paralleling Matryosha’s spying on the intimacy between Dostoevsky’s protagonist and Anna Sergeevna (Coetzee, 2004, p. 233).

This structure reflects a dual perspective: on one hand, Coetzee’s novel demonstrates how reality, as refracted through creative consciousness, becomes transformed into art. On the other hand, if the protagonist Dostoevsky serves as the ‘abstract author’ of the entire novel (Shmidt, 2010, p. 12), the text exerts authority over the narrator, compelling them to adhere to its inherent logic. Ultimately, the novel’s text becomes self-referential, its own source: Dostoevsky’s protagonist ostensibly seeks to record visions that haunt him but is, in fact, constrained by the pre-existing structure of the text, describing what is already inscribed within it.

Conclusions. Hence, the analysis of J.M. Coetzee’s novels *Foe*, *The Master of Petersburg*, and *Elizabeth Costello* showed that all novels are marked by a self-reflexive narrative structure that emphasizes the artificial and constructed nature of the text.

In the last chapters of all three novels the repetition of phrases and textual parallels from earlier chapters creates a self-reflexive narrative mode, emphasizing the constructed and self-contained nature of the novels. These recurring elements not only reinforce the central themes of authorship and textual creation but also draw attention to the interplay between the text’s formation and its meaning, ultimately folding the narratives back onto themselves in a deliberate act of metatextual closure. This creates a cyclical structure, with metatextual elements forming a meta-level framework that foregrounds the text’s artificial and literary nature. While *The Master of Petersburg* employs self-reflexivity to disrupt the mimetic illusion, embedding subtle mechanisms of literary reflection and recursive references that draw the narrative back onto itself. In the contrast, *Elizabeth Costello* and *Foe* exposes the creative process more overtly, using shifts between narrative levels and meta-commentary to highlight the constructed nature of fiction.

These findings open a new perspective on self-reflexive narrative and can contribute to the analysis of narrative structures in Coetzee’s works and provide valuable insights for examining the novel about a writer in contemporary literature.

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