How to translate culture? The select fragments of the Polish and English translations of the short story Der Sandmann by E.T.A Hoffmann

Introduction

An important issue the translator has to face, apart from the linguistic difficulties, is the difference between the source culture and the target culture. The translator’s particular task does not consist only in the conveying of the meaning of the source text into the target language while using the correct vocabulary and grammar. They also have to take into account the culture gap, which needs to be bridged in order to help the recipients from the target culture to understand properly the text from the source culture.

The article discusses the problems encountered by the translator when trying to convey the meaning of the source literary text into the target language. The analysed texts are fragments of the Polish and English translations of the short story Der Sandmann by E.T.A. Hoffmann, the leading representative of late German Romanticism, with special attention paid to their correspondence with the source text. The analysed translations are the Polish one by Felicjan Faleński, made in 1867 and the English one by John Oxenford, made in 1844.

For the purpose of analysing the text, the article employs Todorov’s theory of the fantastic for building an interpretation model of the Romantic short story Der Sandmann.

1. Culture and attempts at its translation

Researchers have proposed many definitions of “culture”, both with regard to the natural and non-natural world. In the widest meaning of the word, culture is everything added by people through their work to the existing reality. In order to present the complex picture of the possible distance between the text from the source culture and its translation directed to the recipients from the target culture, the present article
will be based on a somewhat narrower definition of “culture” formulated by the German sociologist and political scientist Max Weber. He claimed that “[c]ulture is a finite segment of the meaningless infinity of the world process, a segment on which human beings confer meaning and significance. This is true even for the human being who views a particular culture as a mortal enemy” (Weber, 1904, as cited in Shils, Finch [Eds.], 2011, p. 81). The process of conferring meaning and significance on the meaningless infinity leads to the emergence of different cultural circles, i.e. the separate areas defined by cultural phenomena peculiar to them. In order to take into account all the differences among the individual cultural circles and to avoid the danger of taking the selective cultural phenomena for the dominating ones, it is necessary to maintain proper perspective and pluralism in all the attempts to study culture.

As can be seen from the above, culture is not homogeneous but heterogeneous. This fact can influence the communication between representatives of various cultural circles negatively, since some kinds of meaning and significance in a given cultural circle may not exist, and the existing ones may be interpreted differently in another cultural circle.

When approaching literature as one of the cornerstones of culture, one should pay special attention to the danger of improper or mistaken understanding of some literary texts from the circles of the source culture and translated for the readers in the circle of the target culture, since they do not have enough knowledge about the phenomena of the source culture. In this respect, a special role is assigned to the translator, who has to convey into the target language not only the vocabulary and grammar, but is also obliged to cope with the special issues posed by the cultural dissonance. The translator, then, is a particular medium between the author of the text written in the source culture and his/her intentions, and the recipients living in the reality of the target culture. In this context it is noteworthy to mention that in the translation process the translators play the role of a cultural filter. It means that when translating, they are forced to make choices connected with various interpretations of a given literary text, owing to which they can be considered co-authors of the original text. It is due to the fact that translators as text’s recipients read it through their knowledge of language and the world, noticing the intended and unintended intentions of the author of the source text (Cf. Dąmbska-Prokop [Ed.], 2000, p. 84). All that leads to “the translation in which we can notice the degree of its comprehension by the translator and his ability to express it in a different language, so as not to surrender to the tyranny of the word, but at the same time, while not attempting the absolute fidelity, to retain the equivalence of the contents and the effect” (Dąmbska-Prokop [Ed.], 2000, p. 84).

2. Der Sandmann by E.T.A. Hoffmann
as an example of the fantastic in literature

The common starting point for most theories of the fantastic in literature is the reality known to the readers, which through the use of supernatural elements be-
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comes distorted in such a way as to become alien for them. The philosopher and literary critic Tzvetan Todorov sees the fantastic as a peculiar literary genre which arose as the result of the conflict of two opposing spheres. The key issue in his definition of the fantastic is the reader’s attitude (it could be also the hero’s attitude, although according to Todorov it is not a necessary condition for the fantastic) to both depicted worlds. The fantastic means the hesitation between two possibilities (Todorov, 1975, p. 26) of interpreting a doubtful phenomenon: as marvellous or uncanny. It could be classified as a real though uncanny event, or unreal and therefore marvellous. The uncanny events according to Todorov inspire fear, but they do not raise any doubts regarding the possibility of their existence outside literature. On the other hand, the marvellous phenomena are defined as the opposite of the uncanny and they are undoubtedly supernatural. The key issue for Todorov is, then, the constant hesitation of the reader/hero between the two possibilities of classifying a literary event mentioned above. If the reader/hero do not have any doubts whether what they see is reality or illusion, the fantastic is absent. When the reader/hero become certain that an event, which under normal circumstances inspires fear, can be explained rationally, we have to deal with the uncanny. When the reader/hero realize they had contact with the supernatural forces, we call it marvellous.

*Der Sandmann* is a short story written in the style of a Dark Romantic (*Schauerromantik*) fairy tale. The text was published anonymously in Berlin and opened the collection *Night Pieces* (*Nachtstücke*). It is one of the most important texts of Hoffmann and it is open to many possible interpretations. The protagonist of the story, Nathaniel, moves constantly between hallucinations and reality. All his life he has been fighting the memory of a traumatic episode from his childhood centred around the figure of the Sandman. Until the end of the story it is not certain whether protagonist’s experiences were real or just a dream of the young Nathaniel. The text does not reveal the answer: on one hand, the main character believes that the dark forces have control over him; on the other hand, his beloved Clara claims it is just a psychological issue. The author leaves the reader uncertain on purpose. It has to be emphasized that in Hoffmann’s work imagination, instincts and emotions play a more important role than reason and logic. The real and the supernatural world interlace. The boundary between these two planes is almost unnoticeable and the reader feels that fantasy is actually reality. Nathaniel is unable to cope with the traumatic reality of the past (imagined or not) and to find personal happiness. While everybody around him is surprised by his irrational love for Olympia, he believes he has noticed something which is invisible to others. Being unable to cope with the mystery of Sandman’s existence, which has been accompanying him all his life, he falls in love with illusion and commits suicide, because he is unable to exist in either of the two worlds, the real or the fantastic one. The open ending of the text, as the author intended, invites multiple interpretations.
3. Should the Polish and English readers be afraid of the German Sandmann?  

In German tradition Sandmann is a figure who puts children to sleep by throwing sand into their eyes. The figure should be understood as the personification of the feeling of drooping eyelids and does not have negative connotations in general. For the Polish audience Sandmann is a foreign figure and due to that, emotionally neutral. Only after having read Hoffmann’s story, the Polish reader can grasp the meaning of this figure. It will be decidedly negative, since the image of the Sandmann from German fairy tales was on purpose distorted by the writer, even though his positive original is briefly mentioned in the text. However, the prevailing image in the story is the reversal of the positive figure, which is reinterpreted through trauma and fear, creating a figure fit for a horror movie. The example of a positive (in mother’s tale) and negative (in the nurse’s tale) depiction of the Sandmann can be found in the following descriptions:

- Es gibt keinen Sandmann, mein liebes Kind“, erwiderte die Mutter; „wenn ich sage, der Sandmann kommt, so will das nur heißen, ihr seid schläfrig und könnt die Augen nicht offen behalten, als hätte man euch Sand hineingestreut (Hoffmann, 2003, p. 4-5).

There is no Sandman, dear child, replied my mother. When I say the Sandman comes, I only mean that you are sleepy and cannot keep your eyes open, -just as if sand had been sprinkled into them (Hoffmann, 1844, p. 141).

- „Ei Thanelchen“, erwiderte diese, „weißt du das noch nicht? Das ist ein böser Mann, der kommt zu den Kindern, wenn sie nicht zu Bett gehen wollen und wirft ihnen Händevoll Sand in die Augen, dass sie blutig zum Kopf herausspringen, die wirft er dann in den Sack und trägt sie in den Halbmond zur Atzung für seine Kinderchen; die sitzen dort im Nest und haben krumme Schnäbel, wie die Eulen, damit picken sie der unartigen Menschenkindlein Augen auf“ (Hoffmann, 2003, p. 5).

- Piaskun? – rzekła. – Nie wiesz jeszcze, co to za jeden? To taki niegodziwiec, który przychodzi na zawołanie, kiedy dzieci spać iść nie chcą, i rzuca im garścią piasek w oczy, až im z orbit wychodzą; wtedy je pakuje do worka i zanosí na Księżyck swoim dzieciom do zjedzenia. Te zaś nie wyłączaj nigdy z gniazda i mają jak sowy ogromne dzioby zakrzywione, którymi łapczywie żądają oczy, powydzierane nieposłusznym dzieciom (Hoffmann, 1999, p. 100).

“Eh, Natty,” said she,” do you not know that yet? He is a wicked man, who comes to children when they will not go to bed, and throws a handful of sand into their eyes, so that they start out bleeding from their heads. These eyes he puts in a bag and carries

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Points 3, 4 and 5 are an extended version of the article by the authors Sens a tekst literacki – Wybrane fragmenty polskiego przekładu opowiadania „Piaskun” E. T. A. Hoffmanna i ich korespondencja do tekstu źródłowego published in: Jolanta Knieja, Tomasz Zygmunt, Łukasz Brzana (Eds.), Literaturoznawstwo, językoznawstwo i kulturoznawstwo jako płaszczyzny przekazu we współczesnej glottodydaktyce, Wydawnictwo Werset, Lublin 2010, p. 159–165.
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them to the half-moon to feed his own children, who sit in the nest up yonder, and have crooked beaks like owls with which they may pick up the eyes of the naughty human children” (Hoffmann, 1844, p. 141).

Through Felicjan Faleński translation, Polish culture received a new idea, the one of piaskun. On the other hand, in English culture, the sandman, which meant originally only the imaginary being who makes children sleepy, received a new demonic meaning, similarly to German culture. At this point one should consider whether the title Piaskun evokes the same emotions and associations with the Polish reader, as with the German and English readers, who know the positive original of Sandmann and their surprise after reading Hoffmann’s text, which demonizes the figure from children’s tales, is even greater.

Faleński’s translation of Hoffmann’s story in this respect does not convey the real aim of the German writer. The Polish reader due to the lack of the cultural context will certainly not be as surprised as the German and English readers. A footnote from the translator describing the figure of Sandmann/Piaskun could be helpful in reading the author’s intentions.

4. What’s in a name? The names of the characters

Hoffmann’s choice of names for his characters is not accidental. They contribute to the multi-layered structure of the described world. The names of most characters, apart from their usual purpose of identifying their owners, contain the encrypted message about their character features or their world view. In case of such figures as Nathanael/Nataniel/Nathaniel, Coppelius/Coppelius/Coppelius, Coppola/Coppola/Coppola, the German, Polish and English readers need just to check the etymology of the words derived from other languages of their own in order to decipher these features.

The name Nathaniel is of Hebrew origin and means a gift from God. Its Greek equivalent is Theodor, which points to the middle name of the story’s author. Nathaniel, just like Hoffmann, is a Romantic poet, torn between the mundane and the unattainable and ideal world of poetry.

Also the names of Coppelius and Coppola are symbolic. Coppelius is the figure demonized by Nathaniel, who identifies him with the Sandman. In the story Coppelius is a lawyer who performs alchemical experiments together with Nathaniel’s father. Nathaniel, overcome by childish curiosity, sneaks into the room where his father and Coppelius perform black magic. After he has been discovered, Coppelius cries:

„Augen her, Augen her!” rief Coppelius mit dumpfer dröhnder Stimme. (…) „Nun haben wir Augen – Augen – ein schön Paar Kinderaugen.“ So flüsterte Coppelius, und griff mit Fäusten glutrote Körner aus der Flamme, die er mir in die Augen streuen wollte (Hoffmann, 2003, p. 9).

Eyes here, eyes! said Coppelius in a dull roaring voice. (…) Now we have eyes enough a pretty pair of child’s eyes. Thus whispered Coppelius and taking out of the flame some red-hot grains with his fists, he was about to sprinkle them in my eyes (Hoffmann, 1844, p. 144).

When we analyse this scene taking into account the etymology of the word Coppelius – in Italian coppo means eye-sockets and coppela is the crucible, used e.g. during alchemical experiments – it is quite understandable that the scared Nathaniel becomes traumatized by the contact with Coppelius. When during one of such alchemical experiments the boy’s father is killed, Coppelius disappears and Nathaniel during the following years manages to regain his balance. However, as a grown-up he has to confront his childhood trauma once again, since he believes that in the figure of the optician Giuseppe Coppola he meets the hated Coppelius. Also in case of this character his name and profession evoke fear in the reader and give rise to the question whether Nathaniel’s fears are legitimate.

Both the Polish translator Faleński and the English translator Oxenford retained the original names of the characters, which does not hinder Polish and English audience’s understanding of their meaning. Also in case of Clara/Klara/Clara the original name was retained, but the hidden sense of the name may not be as obvious for the Polish and English reader as for the German-speaking one. Admittedly, German-, Polish- and English-language readers automatically associate her name with the adjective klar – klarowny – clear; but only the German reader can reach the conclusion that Clara’s world view is typical for the Enlightenment – in German Aufklärung. The analysis of the text shows that the author constantly disputes the Enlightenment ideals, justifiably criticizing them. For instance, he writes:


W istocie, Klara posiadała żywą wyobraźnię dziecka, duszę kobieco tkliwą i głęboko kochającą, ale zarazem umysł bystry i przenikliwy. Stąd nie lubiła dziwaków i fantastów, i jeśli jej się zdarzyło spotkać gdzie którego, nie mówiąc wiele, bo z natury była małomówna, już bystrym spojrzeniem i ironijnym uśmiechem zdawała się mówić: „Moi przyjaciele, niech was nie zachciewa, żebym brała wasze przywidzenia za
How to translate culture? The select fragments of the Polish and English translations of the short story "coś prawdziwie istniejącego na tym świecie". Z tego względu Klara była nawet przez wiele osób pomawiana o chłód, nieczułość i prozaiczną (Hoffmann, 1999, p. 110-111).

Clara had the vivid fancy of a cheerful, unembarrassed child, a deep, tender, feminine disposition, an acute, clever understanding. The misty dreams had but a bad chance with her, since, though she did not talk, as indeed talking would have been altogether repugnant to her tacit nature, her bright glance and her firm ironical smile would say to them: "Good friends, how can you imagine that I shall take your fleeting shadowy images for real forms with life and motion?" On this account Clara was censured by many as cold, unfeeling and prosaic (Hoffmann, 1844, p. 151).

The reasonable Clara, who rejects with disgust the fantastic mysticism, is unable to understand even her fiancé Nathaniel, since she admits the possibility of demon’s existing only in his imagination. That is why he claims that her soul is cold and unfeeling, closed to the deep mysteries.

5. Das Perspektiv versus lornetka and pocket-telescope

The interpreters of Hoffmann’s work devote much attention to the analysis of the eye motif, as has already been pointed out above. The motif re-appears in another context through the recurring object in the story – the pocket telescope. In the German version the object is called *das Perspektiv*. Nathaniel observes through the pocket telescope he bought from the optician Coppola the adorable Olympia, daughter of Professor Spalanzani:


Olympia was sitting as usual before the little table, with her arms laid upon it, and her hands folded. For the first time could he see the wondrous beauty in the form of her face; only the eyes seemed to him singularly stiff and dead. Nevertheless, as he looked more sharply through the glass, it seemed to him as if moist morn-beams were rising in
the eyes of Olympia. It was as if the power of seeing was kindled for the first time; the glances flashed with constantly increasing liveliness. As if spell-bound, Nathaniel recli-
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How to translate culture?

References

Primary sources


Secondary sources


Abstract

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The article discusses the problems encountered by the translator when trying to convey the meaning of the source literary text into the target language. The analysed texts are fragments of the Polish and English translations of the short story *Der Sandmann* by E.T.A. Hoffmann, the leading representative of late German Romanticism, with the special attention paid to their correspondence with the source text. The analysed translations are the Polish one by Felicjan Faleński, made in 1867 and the English one by John Oxenford, made in 1844. For the purpose of analysing the text, the article employs Todorov’s theory of the fantastic for building an interpretation model of the Romantic short story *Der Sandmann.*

Keywords

German Romanticism, fantasy literature, theory of fantasy literature