

## **THE MYSTERY OF GUY FAWKES: PSYCHO-HISTORICAL RESEARCH**

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### **Abstract**

The article examines reasons for the popularity of Guy Fawkes, one of the key figures of the Powder Plot, in the XXI century. One can observe the evolution of collective ideas of Guy Fawkes over the past four centuries since his terrible execution. Based on the analysis of archaic rituals and mass behaviour, we put forward a hypothesis of the initially ambivalent nature of the "Guy Fawkes Night" celebration as a form of symbolic realization of taboo intentions.

**Key words:** ambivalence, symbol, national mentality, the Guy Fawkes phenomenon, collective psyche.

The English are known to adhere to their traditions, the origin and meaning of which they themselves can not always explain. The original meaning of many ancient holidays and customs is lost in the depths of centuries, but this does not prevent everybody in England, old and young, from enthusiastically fulfilling the requirements of tradition, unconsciously obeying the dialectic of ritual symbols by doing so. The mysterious night of Guy Fawkes, celebrated on the 5 November since 1606, is one of such holidays. The peculiarity of this holiday is that it was established officially by the order of a king in honor of a very significant event for the monarchy – the exposure of a conspiracy known as the Gunpowder plot and the miraculous

rescue of King James I together with members of the House of Lords. All of them were to have been killed by the explosion of barrels of gunpowder laid by the conspirators in the cellars of the Parliament.

Against expectation, the holiday established by the powers that be became extremely popular and truly national. On this night, burning barrels are rolled through the streets, huge bonfires are lit, into which an effigy of Guy Fawkes is thrown and firecrackers and petards are set off. The fun really has no limit, as it should be during folk carnivals. The holiday took root, so when in 1859 it was officially cancelled, and the day of November 5 ceased to be a holiday, it did not affect the existing tradition and the energy of the celebration.

How come that the official holiday, which prescribes to have fun in the glory of the monarch and state power, has become a truly national holiday and is so loved by people? And what, after all, is celebrated: the salvation of the King, the Parliament, or the execution of a dangerous enemy? And is Guy Fawkes perceived by the people as a positive or negative character? It turned out that these questions are not so easy as they might seem. They deal with history, ethnography, collective identity, psychology, and are difficult even for the British themselves. Thus, one of the respondents, an Englishman, who took part in the discussion initiated by us at a special linguistic forum, frankly admitted that he had never really thought what Guy Fawkes and his associates were like, and ironically remarked that if Fawkes lived today, he would wish him success: *We could do with a Guy Fawkes right now ... but a successful one this time 😊 (I've always thought it very typically English that we should celebrate something that didn't happen for hundreds of years 😊). Despite having grown up with all that stuff you mention, I personally don't have any particular mental image of him, or of any of his colleagues.* Another participant to the discussion, also an Englishman, suggested that in the current political situation, the figure of Guy Fawkes might enjoy people's positive attitude: *I don't know but with this endless Brexit squabbling I wouldn't be surprised if he were made a saint!*

However, the figure of Guy Fawkes had begun to emerge from the gloom of the past long before the Brexit debate. In 1988, the English scriptwriter Alan Moore and the artist David Lloyd began publishing a graphic novel (comic book series) called "V for Vendetta" in the *Warrior* magazine. The events described in the novel take place in the near future. An anonymous hero, who is wearing the mask of Guy Fawkes, fights the system alone and blows up the Parliament building to encourage people to continue fighting. The comic became so widely known that at some point it drew the attention of the Wachowskis – the well-known American film-directors – and they made a film based on the graphic novel with the same name, just in time for the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Guy Fawkes holiday.

After the release of the film, Guy Fawkes' fame became truly world-wide. The Guy Fawkes mask was first used in 2008 by representatives of the international hacker community "Anonymous". Although the organization "Anonymous," which announced its existence in 2003, by the year 2008 had long had its own emblem – a suit with a question mark against the background of the globe, they made the Guy Fawkes mask the symbol of their movement because it appealed to people very much. In addition, it proved to be a very practical attribute with demonstrators, allowing them to hide their faces and thus avoid identification and police pursuit. Soon, the mask started to be used by demonstrators around the world. During the eminent "Occupy Wall Street" protest in 2011 thousands of people in Guy Fawkes masks blocked this famous financial street. The mask is still very popular. It was actively used during the stormy youth protests in Hong Kong this autumn.

How did the Guy Fawkes mask become a symbol of protest four hundred years after the conspiracy was exposed? Guy Fawkes was neither a winner nor a hero. He failed to fulfil the assigned task, and was caught red-handed at the scene of the crime, with explosives in his hands (*"he was caught'd with a dark lantern and burning match"*). This is how the moment of arrest is almost documented in the well-known folk song "Remember, remember..." sung on the night of November 5<sup>th</sup> by English

boys all over the country for many centuries. Under torture, the unfortunate man gave out the names of the other members of the conspiracy.

Despite the deafening failure of the plot, the chilling punishment, and the ridicule which has been performed for four hundred years ("*A penny for the Guy!*" – boys begged for money carrying the effigy of the ill-fated Fawkes dressed in rags), all of a sudden the image of Guy Fawkes gains great fame and universal reverence now. The situation looks paradoxical. But this is only from a rational point of view. Rational explanation is only the tip of an iceberg, according to S. Freud's theory of the Unconscious [1], K. Jung's concept of archetypes [2], B. Rybakov's historical and archaeological discoveries [3], C. Levi-Strauss's structural anthropology [4], etc.

Perhaps the insistent and meaningful refrain: "*Remember, remember the 5-th of November!*" – not for nothing etched in the memory of people. Tradition has to be remembered. But what exactly should be remembered in this case? The text of the song is simple and contains dry facts<sup>1</sup>. As time went by, it was supplemented and altered more than once. But the basis remained almost unchanged – it is a purely factual description of what Guy Fawkes had come for ("*to blow up the King and the Parliament*"), and how he was caught red-handed, leaving no doubt about his intentions. The song praises the King ("*God save the King!*"), but there are no specific epithets that would present Guy Fawkes as a villain. There is nothing in it about torture, which could serve as a warning to future conspirators. It seems that the

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<sup>1</sup> Here are the old verses "Remember, remember November 5"

*Remember, remember the fifth of November,  
Gunpowder treason and plot,  
I see no reason why gunpowder treason  
Should ever be forgot.  
Guy Fawkes, Guy Fawkes,  
It was his intent —  
To blow up the King and the Parliament.  
Three score barrels of powder below,  
Poor old England to overthrow:  
By God's mercy he was catch'd  
With a dark lantern and burning match.  
Holloa, boys, make the bells ring.  
Holloa, boys, God save the King!  
Hip hip hoorah!*

common people even sympathized with his suffering. It is a documented historical fact that Guy Fawkes was subjected to cruel torture and then sentenced to a terrible execution (hanging, evisceration and quartering). However, according to popular legend, he escaped the last torment by jumping off the scaffold and breaking his neck.

No less surprising is the fact that the name Guy, very rare in England in those times, suddenly became a popular form of address, meaning "man, fellow" [5]. Modern etiquette experts say that this form of address has a shade of familiarity or friendship (Diane Gottsman) [6]. Thus, the meaning of the modern word guy has come a long way. Having come into public attention as the name of a state criminal, it turned into a common noun, meaning effigy, then an eccentric or oddly dressed man, and finally by the XIX century (according to written evidence) it had evolved into the friendly address "buddy, guy". How did it happen that the name of a state criminal began to be used (in an informal setting) for any male person, regardless of his political views? From the point of view of psychology, acceptance of someone else's name means identification with its bearer. And the positive connotations inherent in the address "guy" confirm this once again.

However, if the figure of Guy Fawkes arouses sympathy rather than hatred, what is celebrated on the night of November 5<sup>th</sup>? And what is still necessary to "remember"? From a psychological perspective, the answer is obvious: people symbolically do what the real Guy Fawkes failed to do – they blow up... Of course, it's just firecrackers and fireworks, but people's behaviour at this moment doesn't look like the behaviour of respectable citizens revering the symbols of state power. It rather resembles a wild freewheeling medieval carnival, which, by its nature, is the opposite of the official order and hierarchy [7]. It is no accident that the holiday was eventually excluded from the official list, despite its initially pro-government nature.

The desire to symbolically realize the dream of the conspirators, to "complete the work" of Guy Fawkes, can be seen in spontaneous remarks made by ordinary people (see above), and in pieces of literature created in different epochs. Thus, in the

Beatles' song *Remember*, John Lennon urges, "leaving it all behind," to remember November 5<sup>th</sup>. The song ends with the sound of an explosion. The already mentioned graphic novel by Moore and Lloyd, as well as Wachowski's film made from it, ends even with the demonstrative destruction of Parliament.

This destructive tendency would be difficult to understand if Parliament were only a symbol of democracy for the people of England. But Parliament is also a symbol of state power. And in a situation when the state system gets in conflict with national interests and begins to irritate a considerable part of society, as it is happening today with Brexit being procrastinated, the original ambivalence of the people's attitude to power – ambivalence inherent in the depths of the people's mentality – becomes extremely strong. Like the dull tremors that foretell an earthquake, or the distant rumble of thunder, the call "*Remember, remember the 5-th of November!*" is both a warning to the authorities, and a reminder to yourself that in the end anything is possible. You never know. This is, apparently, the real meaning of the message coming from the depths of the ages, which has always been unmistakably read by romantics, poets and rebels.

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