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“Distant death” in Maxim Gorky's short story “Obsession”

«СМЕРТЬ ДАЛЬНЯЯ» В РАССКАЗЕ М. ГОРЬКОГО «НАВАЖДЕНИЕ»

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Abstract

The paper analyzes the short story “Obsession” written by Maxim Gorky in the Nizhny Novgorod period of his work, which has been given little attention in philological works. On the one hand, the author himself defined its genre as a Christmas tale; on the other hand, this work cannot be brought into line with Christmas tales and short novels by Gogol and Dostoyevsky, since in Gorky’s story, no miracle occurs. However, this small text still deserves literary scholars’ attention. The short story introduces an interesting paradox of artistic space and time: in outward appearance, the action takes place within one room, on the couch, but the hero’s internal experiences, his conflict with the alter ego carry the reader into the distant past, the Christmas days of the main character’s family, and then the imagination, vision that visited Foma Mironovich come to the fore and become a plot-forming feature. The form in which the story content is

Аннотация

В статье анализируется рассказ нижегородского периода творчества М. Горького «Наваждение», которому в филологических работах уделялось мало внимания. С одной стороны, сам автор определил его жанр — святочный рассказ, с другой стороны, это произведение нельзя поставить в один ряд со святочными рассказами и повестями Н. Гоголя, Ф. Достоевского, поскольку у Горького чуда не происходит. Однако небольшой по объему текст все-таки заслуживает внимания литературоведов: в рассказе особый интерес вызывает парадокс художественного пространства и времени — внешне действие разворачивается в пределах одной комнаты, на диване, но внутренние переживания героя, конфликт с alter ego переносят нас в далекое прошлое, рождественские дни семьи главного героя, и тогда имажинация, видение, посетившие Фому Мироновича, выходят на

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presented (obsession, dream, delusion) is typologically similar to the structure of Russian folklore tales telling about encountering the phenomena of the “other world”. The results of the study may be of interest to both literary and cultural scholars.

Keywords: Russian literature, Maxim Gorky's work, philosophical questions of the text, mortal subtext, topos, end of the modern period.

Introduction

F. Aries, philosopher and historian, shows in his famous work “Man in the Face of Death” (1977) how human attitude towards death was changing in different periods of history. The scholar distinguishes five types of death: tamed death, own death (personal), distant death, your death (death of a loved one), inverted death (Aries, 1992, p. 15). Death is a priori incomprehensible; a number of works on apophaticism of death can be found in modern Russian humanitaristics – by Varava (2013), Dudareva (2019). The issues of thanatological nature, as well as the issues related to the phenomenon of the pandemics, are of increasing concern for researchers representing different fields of knowledge (Arbelaez-Campillo et al, 2019). Philosophers and culturologists point out that the issues relating to illness and death should be interwoven with the concept of life. In this regard, a new book by a German historian Buller (2019), as well as the articles in the magazine “Man” covering coronavirus infection (Asmolov, 2020), are of specific interest. However, at this point, we must immediately give a definition of the concept of apophaticism. Apophaticism is an ancient notion originally derived from theological discourse; it is associated with the concept of comprehending God through denial of any predicates as knowingly false. Today, apophaticism has irradiated into all research paradigms and is a prerequisite for immersion in the transcendental in culture. Death, illness, sleep, love are incomprehensible; these cultural absolutes should, for the most part, be considered within an irrational paradigm. This article addresses the phenomenon of death in Gorky's short story “Obsession”. The apophaticism of the work is rooted in the incomprehensible nature of the art cosmos of culture.

первый план и становятся сюжетообразующим элементом. Форма подачи материала (наваждение, сон, морок) типологически схожа со структурой быличек, в которых повествуется о встречах человека с явлениями «того света». Результаты исследования могут быть интересны как литературоведам, так и культурологам. Возможно их использование в курсах по истории русской литературы XX века.

Ключевые слова: русская литература; творчество М. Горького; философские вопросы текста; моральный подтекст; топос; конец Нового времени.

Materials and methods

M. Gorky's Christmas tale “Obsession” has been somewhat neglected by scholars. Possibly, this is due to the fact that the author himself did not include it in his collected works (deeming it to be an immature work and in many respects imitative – since one can feel the “presence” of Leo Tolstoy with his mortal story “The Death of Ivan Ilyich”, as well as Dostoevsky with his mysterious ambivalent image of a devil who appears to Ivan Karamazov). The “vulgar exterior” of evil, the unbreakable bond between the mundane and the infernal in a soul that lost faith in high ideals and the miraculous and that forfeited its metaphysical involvement, had been fully revealed by Dostoevsky. Still, Gorky, in many ways anticipating the appearance of a “petty demon”, the “black man” and other uninvited other-worldly visitors met in the Russian literature of the coming non-calendar age, proceeds in his successive mitigation of evil and naturally, the image of man along with it. That is on the one hand.

On the other hand, this work, which falls outside the tradition of the Christmas story genre, remains in the shadow; it is just briefly mentioned in the essays devoted to Christmas festive symbolism in the Russian literature in general. This is quite understandable since the Gorky's story does not suggest a miracle – it shows only the soul's attempt to believe in miracle. As reasonably observed by Starygina (1992, p. 123), this is an “endeavour to look for a possibility of psychic metamorphosis”. Here one can speak of anti-genre, with a high degree of certainty. This form is typical for the borderline reality, according to Davydova's subtle remark, who points to the complicated interplay with genre models in the works by

Zamyatin, Chapygin, and Prishvin (Davydova 1997). However that may be, this short essay written in 1896 at the turn of epochs deserves a separate study. The research methodology involves the use of the ontohermeneutical analysis of the text, supplemented by the semantic method, which allows to holistically analyse the architectonics of the work and to comprehend its ontological aspect. The authors also practiced the experience of slow reading, paying much attention to the hero's liminal state of mind. A consistent folkloristic analysis of the novel makes it possible to see the depth of images, the growth of the character, initiation path, to highlight the ontological subtext. The methodological basis of the work is a comprehensive analysis of the literary text, supplemented by the use of structural-typological and comparative research methods.

Results and discussion

The storyline is extremely simple: Foma Mironovich, a patresfamilias, is getting some rest after a family meal, staying in his study, where he probably falls asleep and has an interesting dream or vision which excites his soul. The external action takes place within a single topos – in a room, on a sofa. The actual plot is more profound and sophisticated, going beyond the limits of the storyline – since it is built on the perception of a dream bordering on delirium, obsession, delusion, which necessarily means falling out of linear time and space:

“Foma Mironov shuddered and opened his eyes. On a chair, in front of him, a short man was sitting, thin and pale, with large endearing eyes” (Gorky, 1969, vol. 3, p. 505).

So what does the protagonist dream or see? Foma Mironovich, a millionaire, elderly head of a large family, is visited by someone having no age or name, who sets on a philosophical conversation with moral and ethical implications, about the hero's “righteous” deals and “real” thoughts:

“Actually, if you are really curious to know about me I'll tell you this: you see, any human has a fatal hour in life – the hour when the human soul feels hesitation... Then a man senses the thoughts of his heart, very special thoughts, genuine, human thoughts...” (Gorky, 1969, vol. 3, p. 506). Just before that, Foma himself, when falling asleep on the sofa, thought of his father – how he lived, how his children bowed from the waist to him, respected and feared him:

“Everything was simple – clothing, food, manner of talking, and people themselves were simple and understandable. People, of course, sinned and showed disobedience, but they feared, had a great fear of the parent in the family! (Gorky, 1969, vol. 3, p. 503).

However, these reflections, understandable to the hero, are interrupted by a stranger who has come to visit him. Who is this wanderer? On the one hand, one may draw literary parallels to Dostoevsky whose “brutal talent” was highly valued by Gorky (Sukhikh 1999, p.9). Ivan in “The Brothers Karamazov” is visited by an unknown gentleman (Devil) at a crucial point in the hero's life. On the other hand, one should take into account the great influence of Schopenhauer's ideas, much favoured by Gorky, especially at the early period of his work in Nizhny Novgorod, when he studied profoundly the history of world philosophy, as evidenced by his reading preferences (Urtmintseva, 2017).

The German philosopher proclaimed the concepts of chaos of random impulses; referred to events in metahistory unrelated to morality. Essentially, everything Foma does in his life is unsavoury and even illogical to himself; he does not know himself what to do with his millions, therefore, no miracle happens:

“Well, use your millions to build schools, colleges, almshouses; build a house for the Duma, create something else needed by the city... – Fancy that!!! Won't it be a bit grand? – Foma Mironov smiled crookedly” (Gorky, 1969, vol. 3, p. 509).

Indeed, as the observers correctly note, this story is an attempt to revive the soul which longs for a miracle – but this does not happen (Starygina, 1992, p. 123). Gorky's protagonist is still stupid and deaf to the phenomena of “the other world”; he is more hopeless than Pushkin's- (Adrian Prokhorov from “The Undertaker”) and Dostoevsky's heroes (Ivan from “The Brothers Karamazov”), as he fears neither God nor Devil and fears only to lose money or overspend it. According to Deborah Martinsen, Dostoevsky showed Ivan's metaphysical suffering by relating his hallucinations with the Devil (Martinsen, 2014, p. 76). However, the situation is exacerbated for Gorky: no physical or metaphysical suffering is experienced by the hero. At the same time, the person who appeared to the hero in a dream or in a midday delirium has the qualities of a noble trickster (the demiurge is a noble hypostasis of a trickster (Meletinskii, 1986, p. 22).

On the one hand, the title refers to the phenomenon of obsession which has negative connotations involving delusion, demonic temptation and momentary blurring of consciousness (this is where parallels with Dostoevsky, Esenin's "The Black Man" and Andreev's "Someone in Grey" are appropriate); on the other hand, the nameless being invites the hero to do something good and awakens his feelings, the ability for reasoning and comprehending his past life. Thus, an impulse is born in this shadow, for something fundamentally new, for doing rather than lying dormant:

"...And all these buildings will remain for centuries and they will be indestructible monuments to you, Foma. And everyone will know, Foma, what you lived and saved for" (Gorky, 1969, Vol. 3, p. 509).

The old man in the story is endowed with ambivalent qualities; he is simultaneously a source of temptation, darkness, impulse, light, which can also be expressed by the concept of Ungrund referred to by Schopenhauer, following Böhme. Light is born from shadow and in shadow, which was expounded by Russian philosopher Berdyaev: "Light and God are born from Ungrund, from the Abyss; a theogonic process takes place and darkness recedes, as well as the evil that is a shadow of divine light. Evil has its origin not in the born God, but in the premise of God, in the Abyss that gives rise to both light and darkness" (Berdyaev, 1994, p. 155).

However, one should not reproach Gorky for directly following the German thinker's theory or any other philosophical tradition, although the considered story pertains to his early creative heritage, since the Russian intelligentsia, the Russian art mentality, as Andreeva rightly observes, did not accept Schopenhauer's denial of the moral absolute (Andreeva 2003, p. 83). The thing is that Foma, after his dream / delusion / obsession, wakes up sweating, and this detail, semiotically and semantically important, points to psychological changes in the hero's personality:

"...And he woke up all sweating. The chair was standing in front of the sofa. Foma Mironovich ran his trembling hand over it for some reason. Then he stretched out on the sofa again and pondered, frowning his eyebrows... And after some time, he said in a whisper: "And what if... I put up the money this way?? Well? Ugh, it's an

obsession! And he got absorbed in thought again..." (Gorky, 1969, vol. 3, p. 510).

The situation of obsession can be viewed here as an alternative to inner speech which is essentially described by G. Guillaume, a French linguist: "The structure of language in the depths of human nature represents a possibility of mental vision which is translated into the possibility of verbal or written utterance by language, in its striving for indispensability and sufficiency, and further – into actual speech or writing" (Guillaume, 1992, p. 22). The scholar's position on mental vision is akin to the idea of imaginative thinking, to living in reality through an image, this concept being is a part of the world culture (it was expounded in the early 20th century by a German anthroposophist R. Steiner and a Russian philosopher Golosovker (2012). Following this, it is not so important whether the guest who visited Foma is real or not (this guest is reminiscent of Ahasverus who exists and who at the same time does not exist in any of the worlds and whose image will be represented in the story "The Crook"). The millionaire feeling himself the master of the universe, capable of taking revenge on everyone and everything, suddenly grabs a chair and thus wants to make sure that his visitor was unreal; grabbing the chair for some reason is another semiotically important psychological detail.

If we take into account the myth-folklore code of the writer's creative heritage, which is necessary for profound comprehension of many Gorky's novels (according to a fair comment of Spiridonova (2002), then, in ontological terms, the situation of obsession in the story is a culminating and turning point in Foma Mironovich's life from the point of view of folklore reality and the logic of folklore accounts that tell of human encounters with substances from "the other side", the other-worldly reality. The following features point to the other-worldly nature of the creature that visited the millionaire. First, he has no name. Second, he has no age, turning from a man with a kind meek look into a sad old man:

"Now, listen... you, no matter who you are. You might be a devil or not; but you are not an angel", said Mosolov in a muffled voice. – Do you know what I should do before I die? If you know – then talk... – Of course I know! This is why I have come to you – to advise you", the sad little man smiled fondly." (Gorky, 1969, vol. 3, p. 508).

Third, he is like Lermontov's Stoss or Aksakov's cloud – dissolves, vanishes into space. This

apophaticism characterises him as a representative of the “other world” personifying death that has come to Foma before its due time. Besides, the old man is somewhat flawed, his eyes are tired, he is weak, he is physically inadequate, which also points to his “otherworldly” nature. As noted by Neklyudov, children, orphans and cripples are perceived as other-worldly beings, – they are between this and the other world, performing a mediatory function (Neklyudov).

The concepts of life and death always change at the turn of epochs, and we are facing a work of art typical of Gorky at the forefront of the impending non-calendar 20th century, since, according to F. Aries, death has become distant for a man of the New Age; the man sort of rejects it, repels it altogether, and further perceives it as a matter of fact: “The New-Age man begins to feel aloof from the moment of physical death... Life itself is now becoming full, rich and extended, “with no seams”, with no interruptions, while death, still present in human life, retains its place only at its far end, being easily abandoned despite the actual realism of *Spiritual Exercises*” (Aries, 1992, p. 273). This means that man moves away from the spiritual world, from “the other-worldly” phenomena, and can afford “enjoying a lavish lifestyle”, so to say, lives as he wishes – the way the hero of the story “Obsession” lives. He should have been surprised or frightened, like, for example, Pushkin’s undertaker, but he resigned himself, felt the space around, making sure of reality of the world around him, and decided not to spend any money, not to do any good expected of him. And this thought of “distant death” which seems to come one day for certain (and the son will certainly squander the father’s money), but not yet so soon as to rush to do good things, takes shape (finds confirmation) in some models of art space, or rather, in its inherent paradox in Gorky’s work: on the one hand, the action takes place in a room, on a sofa (Foma Mironovich is napping), while someone is sitting on the chair; on the other hand, the imagination takes place exclusively in the hero’s head, with all of the supposedly Christmas-related events. The millionaire is carried away to the past with his thoughts, recollecting Christmas days of his childhood, which is essentially the only reason to call the story a Christmas tale. In fact, the main event, namely, falling asleep after a hearty meal, takes place on a midday hour, which is a sacred time, ritually marked in the world culture, especially in the Russian cultural tradition. According to M. Tsvetaeva, midday is as mystical as midnight which is treated by us as

such, since bodies have no shadows in the noon: “...midday is the most corporeal of all hours of the day, most material, with bodies having no shadows and bodies asleep without dreams... It is the most spellful, mythic and mystic hour of the day, as magic-mythic-mystic as midnight” (Tsvetaeva, 1991, p. 544-545).

Conclusion

To conclude, Gorky’s story really makes attempt to reanimate the human soul; but perhaps, this failed attempt, in a kind of entropy, not so much demonstrates the author’s immaturity or imitation of predecessors as the ontological inconsistency of a man of the late New Age, a man enjoying all worldly blessings, but metaphysically estranged. This attempt took shape in searching for a genre: it is a Christmas story, as defined by the author, and at the same time, a non-Christmas tale, according to its axiological and ontological dominant. Still, this apophaticism, that presented itself at the figurative, linguistic and metatextual level, contains a subtle valuable meaning, along with anticipation of the impending non-calendar age.

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