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"THE DEVIL'S DOLL" BY ZINAIDA GIPPIUS: THE PREFACE AS
A LITERARY-CRITICAL TEXT

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Abstract

The preface of the novel "The Devil's Doll" by Zinaida Gippius has some unique features. It can be considered as an independent literary-critical text. But the readers and researchers of writing are scarcely acquainted with the full version of the novel. "The Devil's Doll" is better known in its first journal edition. Before long, the novel was published in its entirety. The book was supplemented by the author's preface "To Readers". The remarkable fact is that the preface appealed to both future readers and those who had read the literary work before. Thus, the novel is blended seamlessly with the literary and culture-historical dialogue. Being a structural element of the literary work, the text "To Readers" has unusual features and meaning. The preface functions as a postface, the author's comment and interpretation to the first edition, and also makes a critical assessment of the novel still being its part. Zinaida Gippius acts as both the author and the critic. The poetic and chronologic features of the preface make it function as an independent literary-critical text. "To Readers" of itself is brought into a multilevel dialogue beyond the boundaries of literary work. Being part of the novel, the preface still becomes a self-standing remark in the cultural and historical context. The novel takes on a new meaning but, in the meantime, it results in breaking the boundaries of literary work. So we believe that readers should read the full version of the novel including the preface to understand it properly.

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1. Introduction

In 1911, Zinaida Gippius's novel "The Devil's Doll" was published in the first three issues of the "Russian Thought" magazine, which immediately caused a wave of critical responses. In the same year, the "Moscow Publishing House" published the work as a separate book. This publication of the novel was supplemented by a preface entitled "To Readers" and dated April 1911. In the preface, Gippius precedes the reader's perception of the novel and at the same time answers those who have already read it. The chronological divergence of the preface is obvious: the text is directed both to the past and to the future at the same time. In stylistic terms, this contradiction is resolved very elegantly: Z. Gippius uses the verb form of the present tense, addressing both readers who "read" the novel and those who "ask" about it. In the preface, the author also acts as a critic of her own work, appearing as if "inside" her text. As a result of this, blurring of the boundaries of the novel as a separate, self-contained text is observed, and its structural elements are endowed with unconventional functions and meaning. The text "To Readers," which remains little known, has not yet been considered as the most important semantic element of the novel (Alekseev, 2016; Shcherbak, 2018; Zharikova, 2016, etc.), which allows us to talk about the novelty of the approach proposed in the study.

2. Problem Statement

The task of our study is to identify the semantic functions of the preface "To Readers," which has a sense-making meaning for the novel:

To determine the chronological features of the preface text, allowing the work "The Devil's Doll" to occupy a special place in the literary row;

To identify the structural and stylistic features of the preface, due to which two hypostases appear organically, in which Gippius appears within the same text, and at the same time, the dialogic nature of the preface in particular and the novel as a whole is enhanced.

3. Research Questions

To solve the problem of the study, we need to find answers to the main questions.

3.1. What are the structural and chronological features of the preface text? Using the specific examples, we will find out how uncharacteristic features of the researched text are manifested, how they interact with each other.

3.2. What influence do structural, stylistic and chronological features of the text of the preface have on the novel at different levels of its interpretation?

The answer to this question involves the identification of non-traditional functions of the text of the preface in relation to the novel. We will also be able to understand the reasons why the effect of "blurring" the boundaries of the literary text occurs.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of our study is to prove that the preface to Gippius's novel "The Devil's Doll" can be considered as an independent literary-critical text, as a separate critical remark of Zinaida Gippius, who appears here in two guises at once – as the author of the novel and as its critic.

5. Research Methods

To study the historical and cultural context of Gippius's work "The Devil's Doll", the method of polyintertextual analysis was used (Solomonova, 2018). It is known that any text "... can enter into relations with other literary phenomena, facts, texts" (Lazaresku, 2018, p. 140), as a result of which new meanings of the work are organized. In addition, to study the links relating to different levels of poetics and performing different tasks (dialogue, debate, strengthening or weakening of the motive), the structural-poetological method was used. Along the way, a biographical method was also involved.

6. Findings

Based on M. Bakhtin's dialogical theory, any literary text is endowed with a communicative function, acts as a statement, "wants to be heard" and assumes an answer (Bakhtin, 1986). "The Devil's Doll" is an example of such a statement. The journal's publication of the novel caused a lot of response from readers and critics, and Gippius (2001) considered it necessary to supplement the separate edition of the novel with a foreword, which at the same time was a response to the already voiced reviews of her work.

The text of the preface is built on the principle of a dialogue, although there is no formal division into separate remarks. The subject of this dialogue is the work "The Devil's Doll". The title is an address – "To Readers", which also contributes to the organization of the noted dialogueness. The preface begins with the sentence: "The book must speak for itself" (Gippius, 2001, p. 6), with which the brilliant critic Anton Krainy could begin his critical article.

The thought of the need for a preface, which came to the author after the initial reaction to the novel, reveals the main alleged flaw of the novel – the book did not express what it had to "say". In this preface, Gippius resorts to double discourse. Here is the writer reasoning: "And I am not writing a preface, but rather an afterword, referring to those of my distant readers who read the novel, thinking that it is a "novel about revolution" (Gippius, 2001, p. 6). And here are the words of the critic: "The fault lies with the author, with the imperfection of the book, when it seems to the reader that it is written about what is not actually written about" (Gippius, 2001, p. 6). The presence of two voices in the preface – a traditionally monological structure – is due to the fact that Z. Gippius appears in this text in two guises at once. Sometimes we can easily identify her role, and sometimes we cannot be sure who, the author of the novel or the critic, pronounces the next phrase. But this is natural! We remember that one person – Zinaida Gippius – speaks to us all the time, performing two functions simultaneously. And she manages to "combine the incompatible" (a characteristic feature of the literature and culture of this time, according to Shcherbak (2018).

The voices of the writer and the critic, alternating, form a single text that takes on the character of polemics directed outward, which is the evidence of the fact that this text belongs not so much to fiction as to literary criticism. Penetration, inclusion of a critical text into the text of the novel (and the preface is a structural unit of “The Devil’s Doll”) leads to the erasure, erosion of the literary work’s boundaries.

The author of the novel and the critic in the person of Z. Gippius participate in the polylogue with their statements, joining in the broader cultural context within which this work exists. But the recipients of these statements are different. The author in the preface to the work cannot respond to the criticism of her work – this is unconventional for the preface. The preface precedes the text of the work and, therefore, the reader becomes acquainted with it before the novel. However, the preface to “The Devil’s Doll”, containing the answer to the criticism that came after the magazine’s publication of the novel, introduces the reader to critical polemics about the novel before introducing the novel itself. It is interesting that Gippius intentionally emphasizes this, since she dates the text “To Readers” April 1911, emphasizing with this dating that the journal’s publication of the novel has already taken place. By its location, the text “To Readers” is undoubtedly the foreword of the novel, but given the chronology of its appearance, it can be considered an afterword. And in the afterword we will allow the answer to critics, if we take into account the factor of elongation in time of journal publication. Undoubtedly, the chronological divergence of the message contained in the preface also contributes to the destruction of the boundaries of the work, which is apparently a part of the author’s intention.

K. Chukovsky writes about the book "The Devil's Doll": "... It is customary to scold this new novel by Z. N. Gippius everywhere, but meanwhile it is very good. It has only one drawback: it has not yet been written" (Chukovsky, n. d.). Indeed, including the preface into the "frame" of his work, Gippius, having formally finished writing the novel, actually continues to work on it, explaining the author’s intention and at the same time acting as a critic, responding to the remarks about the novel which of course remain beyond the text of the work but at the same time constitute its integral environment, its context. Parallel to this Z. Gippius’s special case are auto-comments by N. V. Gogol to his comedy “The Inspector General”. They were called up “... by a specific need to convey to the reader and viewer the original meaning of this work” (Vinogradov, 2020, p. 167). At the same time, this is where the similarity of the situation of “writing up” and the simultaneous explanation of the work ends between Gogol and Gippius.

According to Gippius, critics took a deliberately false position, which led to a misunderstanding of the ideological side of the novel. The dialogue that went beyond the usual reading of a literary work – when the remarks were addressed not only to ordinary readers, but to contemporary critics – was continued in the literary and biographical space of the existence of the novel. In order to understand it, one must, in addition to creative materials, take into account the biographical ones: letters, diary entries, and other documents available to us.

Critics accepted the invitation to continue the debate, having heard the new remark-statement by the author. For example, A. E. Redko in the article on “The Devil’s Doll” pays special attention to the preface as an attempt by the author to explain the main idea of the novel: “Now the story is finished, and not only finished, but even partially explained in relation to the intent and the purpose of creative work – by the author herself, in the preface to a separate publication. Therefore, we have the opportunity to appreciate the story not only in what was given by the author in the image of Yurulya, but also what she, the author,

wanted to give and wanted to say” (Nikolyukin, 2008, p. 333). We see that the elements of literary-critical autoanalysis in the foreword did not go unnoticed. A. E. Redko sequentially analyzes the novel, constantly checking with the explanation proposed in the foreword, and from time to time turning to Zinaida Gippius (author of the work) or Anton Krainy (critic).

Another contemporary, Viktor Chernov, a former socialist-revolutionary (SR), in his detailed analysis of “The Devil's Doll” repeatedly compares the opinion of the author of the work Zinaida Gippius with the words of the critic Anton Krainy, including those said before the publication of the novel. He maintains this unusual dialogue with the author and the critic in one person and freely returns to phrases said even before the publication of the work. In other words, V. Chernov also perceives the preface of the novel as an independent literary and critical text, as embedded in the ongoing dialogue that began even before the novel appeared and beyond the borders of this text. Meanwhile, the preface functions not only as an internal dialogue, but also as a multi-level statement directed simultaneously to different addressees. The addressing multidirectionality of the text revealed by us is considered to a greater extent from a formal point of view. It primarily explains the chronological and structural features of the preface “To Readers” that arise due to the alternation of the writer’s two roles in this text.

The content side of this polylogue is no less interesting. According to Viktor Chernov, Zinaida Gippius wanted to frighten readers with the soulless dead beauty of Yuri, but portrayed him as an embodiment of cheerfulness and towards the end of the novel “... she loved him” (Nikolyukin, 2008, p. 343). The critic also accuses the author of building her ideas about all revolutionaries on the basis of brief acquaintances in high society and singular meetings at *jour fixes*. In her work, instead of real revolutionaries, there are only “pale shadows”. Gippius knew close enough some of the representatives of the revolutionary terrorists: “The radical attitude of the “trio” in the years following the defeat of the revolution was expressed in annual meetings with the Social Revolutionaries abroad. Z. Gippius, D. Merezhkovsky left St. Petersburg several times a year and certainly met with Savinkov abroad” (Goncharova, 2005, p. 189). But these were still social meetings. She cannot help writing about the most important time for her, as she sees it as the writer's service to the fatherland (Krycka-Michnowska, 2019). And, not having enough understanding for artistic generalization, the writer replaces it with newspaper stories in her novel.

The dialogue about “The Devil's Doll” has been going on for a long time in the correspondence of Z. Gippius and B. Savinkov (let us note that it began even before the publication of the novel). For Savinkov, the interpenetration of real life and literature was not unusual, so here we can already talk about the emergence of a cultural polylogue (Churich, 2017). Gradually getting acquainted with the work “The Devil's Doll”, Savinkov made critical comments. He explains the inaccuracies in the novel by the fact that Gippius is not well versed in some issues. Two of his most serious remarks (about revolutionaries and the protagonist) echo V. Chernov’s criticism. After reading the novel, B. Savinkov expresses his final opinion: “You took up a description of the environment which is unfamiliar to you <...>. You deny the love for Yurulya, <...> and the impression is (clearly, not subject to doubt): she loves, loves, loves...” (Goncharova, 2009, p. 200). In fact, Savinkov repeats Chernov’s words, but not in the review (literary space), but in the letter, that is, in the biographical space.

But the novel "The Devil's Doll" was not conceived as a work about revolutionaries! In Gippius's creative work there is "... the replacement of social revolutionism with moral revolutionism" (Magomedova, 2018, p. 125). In the last days of March 1911, in a letter to Savinkov, Gippius writes that he, like many, evaluates the novel from the wrong position: "... I will probably write this in the foreword." Agreeing with Savinkov's individual remarks, she explains to her addressee: "I didn't want and didn't bother writing a novel about the revolution. This novel is not about *revolution*, but about *reaction* ..." (Goncharova, 2009, p. 203). In the preface written in April 1911 for a separate edition of the novel, the phrase from the letter to Savinkov is repeated almost literally: "My book is not at all a book about *revolution*, but about *reaction*" (Gippius, 2001, p. 6). In both texts, the author emphasizes the words "revolution" and "reaction", focusing on their contrast. Gippius also returns to the accusation that she does not know the revolutionary milieu: "And to write "about revolution" you need special, different, knowledge that I don't lay a claim to ..." (Gippius, 2001, p. 7). In a similar way, she answers this accusation to her opponents not only in literature, but also in life (in letters). The phrases from the dialogues which sounded as a part of private correspondence pass into the literary text. They become the bonds that unite the fiction and its cultural and historical context into a single semantic space and enhance the literary and critical function of the text of the preface.

Valerian Chudovsky, one of the few critics who spoke positively of "The Devil's Doll", also considers it possible to compare the views of the novel's author and the critic Anton Krainy. He notes the fact that the author's explanations were not heard (Nikolyukin, 2008). The preface was intended to destroy the primary semantic system of pretext (journal publication) already existing in the literary and historical context and create a new perspective for its interpretation (Muratova, 2012). But the reader's expectation horizon turned out to be almost completely opposite to the author's expectation horizon (Kim & Belyaeva, 2019). And to change the point of view on the novel and the perception was not easy. We assume that one of the reasons for this lies in the chronology of literary events that we have already considered: the author first publishes a novel which is full of half-words, and only then takes the trouble to explain how to read this novel correctly.

The time of writing the preface "To Readers" does not become a reference point, but a temporal center, uniting many dialogues simultaneously developing in different cultural and historical planes and multidirectional in chronological respect. The meanings of all these dialogical flows (disputes, arguments, correspondence, and criticism) converged at one point and were closely intertwined. The preface text acquired features uncharacteristic of this structural unit of a literary work and enriched the novel with new meanings.

We have proved that the preface of "The Devil's Doll" exists simultaneously inside the novel as a part of it, above the novel (as a fragment of the work addressed to the past and the future readers), and outside the work as an independent literary and critical text included in the contemporaries' debates about the work. Beyond the scope of the novel, the preface also chronologically correlates to different cultural and historical levels.

7. Conclusion

At the end of our study, we conclude that the preface is not only an integral part of the novel, but also an independent literary-critical text with certain specific features. The preface, breaking the boundaries of the novel's text, enhances the dialogism of the work as a whole. With its help, the novel is included in different contexts, in each one of which the work can be considered as an independent remark-statement. Finally, by placing the novel in various contexts, Gippius thus enhances the self-sufficiency of the preface.

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