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IRONY IN THE NOVEL “THE HEART OF A DOG” BY M. BULGAKOV

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Abstract

The article considers the ambivalent game nature and axiological function of the ironic mode of artistry. It is known that a game may carry both a constructive and a destructive function. Destructive game action in literary studies is usually associated with an ironic attitude, that is, there is a perception of irony as a kind of disvalue in the ethical sphere of human life. It is proved that the ironic attitude is also ambivalent: it can be both destructive and creative. The authors prove that the title of the novel of M. A. Bulgakov “The Heart of a Dog” has an ironic context, due to which the writer carries out a critical reflection of the values of young Soviet society. The authors state that there is an ironic attitude of the author to two main characters of the story – the dog Sharik and P.P. Preobrazhensky. This fact implies the active participation of a reader in the interpretation of this text. It is supposed that the title of the story is a collective image that reflects symbolic and metaphorical meanings in accordance with the duality of the concept of “heart” in Russian philosophy: as an organ of senses and as the equivalent of a spiritual essence of a person. It is concluded that using irony, the writer shows the transformation of the value criteria of humanity in the era of revolutionary upheavals and affirms the priority of the moral principle in human nature.

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1. Introduction

The role and importance of the game in modern society is difficult to overestimate. Hypocrisy and game become a way of salvation from a catastrophic consciousness and in the aesthetics of postmodernism – this is the last milestone of human culture, the little that has not yet been ridiculed. At the same time, it is known that the game is ambivalent. In particular, it can carry the destruction of the meanings and values that they embody. Often, the destructive effect of a game is associated with irony, which is one of the forms of the beginning of a game. Irony turns out to be a direct weapon of destruction, introducing game principles: rearrangement of meanings, unpredictability of results, etc. Then an ironic play of meanings, reflecting the shift of values in individual consciousness, “the logic of inverse, the logic of continuous movement of the top and bottom,” according to Bakhtin (1990, p.58), from an innocent folklore action can turn into a destructive force that literalizes those values that are “played”. The more significant these values, the stronger the destructive effect of the game (Kovalevich, Shaidurova, & Dolidovich, 2015). Thus, gradually, irony plays the role of a certain disvalue in the ethical sphere of human being.

At the same time, irony can become a revelatory weapon against false values and human vices, a way to free consciousness, for example, Socratic irony in intellectual discussions or irony in literary texts (primarily in fables, satirical works, etc.).

2. Problem Statement

Destructive game action in literary studies is usually associated with an ironic attitude, that is, there is a perception of irony as a kind of disvalue in the ethical sphere of human life. Some authors have attempted to address the reasons for not recognizing the high value status of artistry (Akhmedov, 2014). According to Akhmedov (2014) the main reason is “a syncretic perception of aesthetic and unaesthetic experiences”, as well as “vicious practice of the value hierarchization of modes of artistry”, where “the first place on the hierarchical scale for aesthetic experiences, built by analogy with the value scale for non-aesthetic experiences, heroics and satire took at the dawn of the functioning of art, which gradually, during the emancipation of the personal principle, are replaced by idyllic and elegism. The second position – also long time ago – was entrenched in tragedy for role-playing behavior and, accordingly, drama for extra-role behavior. Comic element and especially irony were perceived and continue to be perceived as “low” modes, significantly inferior to those indicated above” (Akhmedov, 2014). However, an ironic experience (and the relationship associated with it), both aesthetic and unaesthetic, is ambivalent: it can be both destructive and creative.

3. Research Questions

Medvedeva (2014) reveals the specificity of irony in the fact that it is a communicative act expressed in the language of value-loaded signs. “Irony is a shift in the value position of the object of irony, its presentation in a different light, as a result of which it loses its absolute character. Irony, therefore, is a way ... of “validating” values” (Medvedeva, 2014). Then in the “logic of inverse” it is

possible to see a positive beginning: a thing that has not passed the test must be destroyed; irony allows the manifestation of healthy forces.

In one of the “fantastic trilogies” M.A. Bulgakov’s novel “The Heart of a Dog” there are “the main elements of playfulness: joke, humor, irony” presented as aesthetic experiences (Apinyan, 1992), and irony is the leading aesthetic experience here. In this context, we see a fantastic grotesque – one of the typical artistic means of translating the ironic attitude in literature.

4. Purpose of the Study

Thus, it is necessary to show that the ironic mode of artistry manifests an axiological function here. In addition, it is necessary to consider the creative potential of irony, which we find in the story. Let us show that the title has a figurative ironic meaning, offering a reader to reflect on the behavior of the characters from the point of view of the criteria of humanity and those values that are associated with the concept of “heart” in Russian and European culture.

It is also necessary to solve research problems that help to achieve this goal. What is irony as a satirical device? Irony is a satirical device in which the true meaning is not manifested or contradicts the explicit meaning. Irony should create the feeling that the subject of discussion is not what it seems. This technique is often used when it is impossible to express the true attitude for one reason or another, or when straightforward exposure is ineffective. The dramatic story of the publication of this story shows that even in this, in many ways allegorical, form, the story was hostile to representatives of the Soviet political bosses. This suggests, in particular, that irony can be a real social weapon.

To whom is the irony of the authors directed in this story? There are many objects of irony in the story, but they are thematically structured. Let us dwell on the analysis of its title, which, in our opinion, sets the main ironic topic. The title has a duality, which is predetermined by the duality of the very concept of “heart”: as an organ of senses and as the equivalent of a person’s spiritual essence (Golomonzina, 2011). Moreover, a character proposed by this title is not obvious. The title and the story present a well-known hermeneutical circle, where the title refers to the story as a part of the whole, and a reader seems to solve the riddle: who is the bearer of the “dog’s heart”? A literal reading of the title of the story usually indicates that one of the main characters, Sharikov, inherited his heart from Sharik; then the title is understood as an explanation of the unsuccessful result of the Preobrazhensky experiment. However, it remains unclear why the dog Sharik evokes sympathy, unlike Sharikov, because the latter even looks like a human. In addition, according to the “creator” of Sharikov – Philip Philippovich Preobrazhensky, he has “no longer a dog, but a human heart” (Bulgakov, 1991). The title probably has a non-literal, multifaceted meaning.

Since the dog Sharik is the only character of exclusively dog origin, in spite of the fantastic image, he can serve as a general criterion for dog features.

5. Research Methods

The main methods of our research are: the analysis of language tools, which helps to understand the value attitudes of the characters, as well as a hermeneutic approach, which makes it possible to

interpret the title of the story. Let us analyze the main tools that help the writer to convey an ironic attitude to the main characters. Moreover, Professor Preobrazhensky, in spite of the strength and charm of his personality, also fails to avoid him. The subject of irony at the beginning of the story is the dog Sharik, the narrator, who starts the story.

For example, in the monologue of the dog Sharik there are metalanguage expressions – “the means to describe and comment on what is said, how exactly, by whom, for what purpose, etc.” These expressions reflect the ideas of native speakers about typical ways of communication using natural language, pronunciation features, communicative intent and extralinguistic effect of speaking, the status of speaker and addressee (Ryabtseva, 2010). Already on the first pages, when Philip Filippovich appeared, the main communicative background of Sharikov's “speech” was the dog's irony in relation to the professor: “... he will start such a scandal! He will write to the newspapers – they fed me, Philipp Philippovich!” (Bulgakov, 1991, p. 25). Also, irony is showed in relation to the purpose of the professor's studies: as if answering the question of the poster “Is rejuvenation possible?” Sharik states: “Naturally possible. The smell rejuvenated me, lifted me from the belly...”, that is, he assures, that rejuvenation is possible of course; moreover, even sausage is enough for Sharik (Bulgakov, 1991).

In order to create an ironic effect, Bulgakov repeatedly uses special speech techniques – phraseological units, since “these units are not so much a means of naming, but a means of emotional and evaluative attitude to the signified” (Vuchkovich, 2017, p. 57). Thus, the transformation of phraseology “an intellectual worker” is intended to emphasize the nature of labor and the social status of Preobrazhensky (after all, a lord is one who is not engaged in physical labor): “He is a lord of intellectual labor, with a sophisticated pointed beard and a gray mustache, furry and dashing, like the French knights used to have ...” (Bulgakov, 1991, p. 28).

It would seem that Sharik is mimicking the speech style of “revolutionary figures” here and expresses his emphatically respectful attitude towards Philip Philippovich. However, upon further reading, it becomes clear that this is the preparation of the ironic effect (using metalanguage expressions): emphasized respectfulness discords with the characterization of the professor and the feeling of superiority expressed by Sharik: “... but you will not give anyway. Oh, I know rich people very well” (Bulgakov, 1991, p. 31).

There is also self-irony in Sharik's monologue, ending with self-disclosure in the form of a comment. After “thoughtful” conclusions and a “game” of psychologist (reasoning about the eyes, etc.), for example, such self-disclosure is presented (after trying to get sausage from Preobrazhensky and flattery before him) by the commenting: “Our slave soul, a vile destiny!” (Bulgakov, 1991, p. 32).

Finally, there is an ironic attitude of the author towards the two main characters of the story – the dog Sharik (as his narrator at the beginning of the story) and professor Preobrazhensky, and irony has one basis, which is revealed in their comparison. “The author's ironic attitude to his narrator is a phenomenon that can be represented as reader's planned participation in the interpretation of the text” (Paducheva, 1996, p. 19). In addition, the comparison of the mindset of the homeless dog Sharik and the famous professor Preobrazhensky is hidden; texts with monologues of a homeless dog and the description of the speeches of the European household title are chronotopically detached. Therefore, ironic meaning can

arise only in the broad context of the whole story and as a result of the active participation of the “ideal” reader, who is able to share the author’s irony.

Since in irony there is the possibility to compare various and unexpected revealing similarities of dissimilarities, in the context of the whole story we see the comparison of two, at first glance, completely dissimilar characters – a dog and a professor. It turns out that the main topic of both arguments is food. The main motives which guided Sharik to follow Preobrazhensky, who had beckoned him with sausage, are simple and unchanging: the satisfaction of hunger and, of course, the instinct of self-preservation. The desire for satiety and warmth is what drives Sharik. He is an expert on food, although his “diet” is limited to Soviet catering. An eternally hungry dog is afraid of everyone; accordingly, he notes that Preobrazhensky is not afraid of anyone, “he is not afraid because he always has fully belly” (Bulgakov, 1991, p. 44). Considering that Sharik’s monologue at the beginning of the story does not punctually separate from the narrator’s speech, this assessment takes on a range from comic to sarcastic.

The professor, in spite of his “satiety”, constantly talks about food, unfolds a whole “philosophy of food”, makes the intake of food a kind of sacred ceremony. Sometimes the topic of food for both characters is diluted with politics and sarcastic remarks addressed to the proletariat, Soviet newspapers, etc. At the same time, if the dog is glad to “pull the heel” of the “last lackey,” then Preobrazhensky, criticizing the Soviet system, skillfully enjoys the patronage of the Soviet regime and boldly defends his rooms, despite universal consolidations. His statement about 1917, when nothing important happened to him except the loss of a pair of his own galoshes, is especially impressive.

Considering the concept of “heart” as an organ of senses, the title of the story can reflect metaphorical meanings: Sharikov, Shvonder and his company have rough, “dog” hearts, due to low culture. The ironic effect exists in their appearance, behavior and style of their speeches, which is repeatedly parodied (by both Sharik and Professor Preobrazhensky), even in their surnames (for example, Vyazemskaya is the formerly famous breed of cows). There is an ironic oxymoron: the Vyazemsky cow would try to “explain” Preobrazhensky or omnipotent Peter Alexandrovich! Finally, Schwonder: “although he covered himself with a fig-foreign root and suffix, he still has a dog tail (Schwanz) and a pigsty (schwein)” (Stepanyan, 2009, p. 31). The ironic allusion to kinship with the dog world is completely obvious.

As Schwonder represents the semantic whole with his campaign, so the professor with his clients is also depicted with irony and sarcasm. The dog Sharik is shown here on the threshold of his reincarnation, as a creature of a higher order that rigidly outlined the professor’s surroundings (“A bawdy apartment, but what good is it!” (Bulgakov, 1991, p. 48). Did the dog incarnate here when “vulgar” in his mind faced “what good is it” when the animal felt a discord between the heart and the mind, already typical for humans? It is true that, this discord is familiar only to people of a rather high organization, and among the clients of the professor we no longer meet him. On the other hand, the dog Sharik at the beginning of the story appears more human than many of other characters. Preobrazhensky’s clients are only concerned with borrowing the physical capabilities of animals; the spiritual principle is suppressed by instincts. Probably, they no longer need operations on their hypophysis; they are ready-made material for involution. The dog, having “closed his eyes in shame,” did not yet know what kind of inversion of development he would go through under the Preobrazhensky scalpel.

In this context, we see the example of a generative node – a tendency to humanize a dog and an inverse tendency – to turn into an animal – a “mass person”. A generative node is such a point in the generation process or in a certain sequence of actions where one discrete phase (step) is completed and the other has not yet begun, and where the generation of the next phase (step) can receive both the desired solution (move) and the undesirable (Farino, 1988). The generative node can be represented as a collision of two semiotic systems, two different languages (Ivanshina, 2017); in the Bulgakov version it is the language of matter and the language of spirit.

Transmitting Sharik’s thoughts, the writer uses the Aesopian language, which reflects our human world and discredits some principles, for example, “learning to read is completely useless when meat smells like a mile away”; “He ... perfectly understood what a collar means in life” (Bulgakov, 1991, p. 51), etc. At the same time, epigrams can be perceived as quite comic harmless and satirically allegorical, using a title that gives them an ironic meaning.

6. Findings

As a result, it was shown that M.A. Bulgakov, referring in his novel to the symbol of “heart”, refers to the ironic form of critical reflection on the values of his century.

7. Conclusion

Thus, we see some similarities in the direction of Sharik and Preobrazhensky thoughts, on the basis of which the ironic play of meanings arises: the mismatch between the signified and the signifier. Here, the ambiguity of irony is intended to create a double “optics” of views on the personality and activities of the professor, to discredit the worldview of the intelligentsia of a certain circle, the representative of which is a scientist. The ironic description of other heroes of the story emphasizes the vagueness of the criteria of “humanity” also on the part of representatives of the proletariat.

It is necessary to note that when Sharik, thinking of Preobrazhensky, concludes: “just like me”, a fantastic grotesque is introduced here. The dog recognized the famous professor as related to himself, but not by his intellectual abilities. The dog has modest intellectual abilities, and Philipp Pgilippovich is a famous person, he is a god or demigod for Sharik (“The dog stood on its hind legs and made some prayer in front of Philip Philippovich” (Bulgakov, 1991, p.53). The heart remains. Of course, the view of Sharik cannot be a measure of objectivity, since he looks at the world with his dog heart, and it would be a significant mistake to equalize the multi-scale personalities of the professor and Sharik. We can only talk about a shift in the value accents of a part of the intelligentsia, contemporary to M. Bulgakov. Often, the work on the soul was inferior to temporal values, science turned out to be a hostage to the interests of a mass person.

This is indicated by social reality in Russia in the 1920s (for example, numerous experiments with the rejuvenation of human body) as well as its analysis, in particular, in the work of the cosmos philosopher N.F. Fedorov.

Then “The heart of a dog” is a symbol of the spiritual crisis of mankind.

Thus, it seems that the title of the story is a collective image that reflects symbolic and metaphorical meanings. The interpretation of this image is the subject of an ironic value reflection.

The story of M. A. Bulgakov “The heart of a dog” revealed a crisis condition of spirituality of the representatives of Soviet culture contemporary to the writer. The writer makes readers think about the criteria of “humanity”, which tend to erode under the influence of social disasters. The priority of the values of matter over the values of spirit is put in doubt and satirically debunked.

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