

Slapstick Comedy Functions in M. Bulgakov's Novel "The Master and Margarita"

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Abstract: The article deals with the analysis of the earthy, raw humour in M. Bulgakov's novel "The Master and Margarita". The authors show the functions of farcical episodes of the novel, their connection with the political and moral problems raised in Bulgakov's work. Guided by M. Bakhtin's concept of carnival culture role in people's life and meaning of folk comic forms in verbal art of the new time, the authors explore the peculiarities of implementation of those forms (humorously embarrassing events in particular) in "The Master and Margarita", which is justly thought to be the best Bulgakov's achievement, bringing the writer world-wide reputation.

Key words: Slapstick comedy • Grotesque • Satire • Humour • Laughter • Fantasy • Farce • Irony • Carnival • M. Bulgakov's work

INTRODUCTION

Mikhail Bulgakov, one of the well-known Russian prosaic writers of the XX century, became really famous not only in Russia, but in other countries as well due to his main work – "The Master and Margarita".

In his home country the novel "The Master and Margarita" was published for the first time in an abridged version in 1966, a quarter of a century after Bulgakov's death. English-speaking countries got acquainted with this work in 1967, when the USA and Great Britain published two translations of the novel – by M. Ginsburg [1] and M. Glenny [2]. The novel acquired the status of modern classical literature in no time, because it belonged to those masterpieces of Russian literature which equally appeal to professional critics and readers [3].

It was in 1967 that M. Glenny foretold that "The Master and Margarita" would become *the glory of the Russian literature* [4]. A bit later Max Heyward observed that if Bulgakov had been known only by his early works, he would have been considered to be a gifted satirist, not more than that. The novel "The Master and Margarita" made him the greatest Russian writer [5].

Some literary critics refer "The Master and Margarita" to the sort of allegoric satirical narrations about the Stalin regime time or generally about the history of Russia. This idea dominates in the works by D.J.B. Piper [6],

R.W.F. Pope [7], E.N. Mahlow [8]. At the same time, among the critics there are many of those who insist on much deeper, philosophical and aesthetical treatment of the novel. For instance, from the point of view of A.C. Wright, the author of the first detailed Bulgakov's biography in the English language (1978), the essential idea of the novel "The Master and Margarita" lies in depicting of the conflict between the spiritual world of the individual and existing reality [9]. It would be wrong to interpret the most significant Bulgakov's work only as an allegory to Stalin's Russia, E. Proffer states. In her mind, "The Master and Margarita" is a conclusive evidence of the post-revolutionary Russian literature connection with the traditions of the Russian literature of the XX century [10].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In the sphere of comicalness along with many other forms M. Bulgakov used so-called "slapstick form of humour". As it seems, the role and meaning of farcical, absurd elements in Bulgakov's work haven't received enough interpretation in scientific and critical literature so far. It happened partially because of the fact that the problem of slapstick (earthy, absurd, raw) humour generally in literature science is not successfully settled. There is no definition, as well. "Slapstick comedy" is

traditionally detected by conventional range of distinctive marks. Here we meet everything connected with the human body and its functions, messy clothes or absence of them at all, grotesque appearance, fights, scuffles, falls and so on. Many aesthetics refer this kind of laughter to the most brutish ones. It is the raw laughter of market squares, folk holidays and general hilarity, the impetuous, uncontrollable and unrestrained earthy laughter. Such laughter originally reflects the animalistic joy of folk's physiological existence. [11].

Expert in literature, literary critic and philosopher M. Bakhtin in his book "François Rabelais's work and folk culture of the Middle Age and Renaissance" showed us the roots and origin of slapstick comedy, going back to the depth of the thousand-year back history of the folk laughter culture, carnival world outlook [12]. Exactly under this angle of view, basing on Bakhtin's concept, the authors are going to make a close study of Bulgakov's novel "The Master and Margarita".

Farcical Elements in M. Bulgakov's Humour Structure:

M. Bulgakov widely used slapstick forms of humour for creating a special carnival atmosphere of utopian freedom. At the same time Bulgakov, being the writer of the new time, not only follows the carnival tradition, but also digresses from it.

Let's refer to the text. Filled with biting irony dialogue between Woland and barman of the Variety Theatre about the "second-grade-fresh sturgeon" became proverbial, classical example. The action, happening simultaneously with the conversation, at the first sight, is not connected with the general idea of the episode and is able to provoke light thoughtless laughter: the barman Andrei Fokich Sokov sits down on the oak stool offered to him by Azazello, its back legs immediately break with a crash and the barman falls onto the floor. Notice the details: "...the barman, with a groan, fell painfully backward onto the floor. As he fell he kicked the leg of another stool and upset a full glass of red wine all over his trousers".

Nevertheless, Bulgakov has for an object not an only (lying on the surface) aim – to relieve the stress and fear with the help of laughter. The writer dramatizes the situation by the following remark of the Satan: "I love a low seat. One's not so likely to fall". So, Bulgakov seems to remind us the history of Satan - "fallen angel", who falling from the heaven damaged his leg. Woland himself also has a pain in the knee, though it would be explained differently. As a result, the fall of the barman is compared with the fall of Satan, thus, the physical fall is transferred to the moral layer. We can remember here Yuri Lotman's

opinion about universality of contradistinction up/down for all human cultures, with all the range of contents interpretations – religious, social, political, moral and so on [See: 13].

Apart from that, this case is only one episode from the whole serial of various oddities and nuisances pursuing Sokov in the flat where the devil settled to live. Having come to get some monetary compensation for the damage Andrei Fokich gets to know the horrible truth about his speedy death.

All in all, as V. Propp reckons, farcical situations demonstrate that the character is thoroughly thrown out of gear, his mind blown, all his plans upset. Comicalness is malicious in episodes where the man is ruled by egoistic worthless impulses and tendencies; failures disclosed by outer circumstances in those situations bring to light pettiness of aspiration, the person's wretchedness and contempt and has a character of the deserved punishment [11]. We must note that the first phase of the punishment is comic – the fall from the chair. It is soon followed by the tragic – information of Sokov's coming death: "The barman sat motionless. He had aged. Black rings encircled his eyes, his cheeks were sunken, his lower jaw sagged".

Now we are up to the upset glass of red wine over Sokov's trousers. Feast motives literally run through the episode of Woland and barman's meeting. Except split wine the episode includes: 1) talks about the buffet, "second-grade-fresh sturgeon" and so on; 2) Azazello, cooking fish; 3) colourful depiction of the set table; 4) Woland's remark "there's something unpleasant lurking in people who avoid drinking, gambling, table-talk and pretty women. People like that are either sick or secretly hate their fellow-men"; 5) Woland's advice to Sokov: "What's the use of dying in a ward surrounded by a lot of groaning and croaking incurables? Wouldn't it be much better to throw a party with that twenty-seven thousand and take poison and depart for the other world to the sound of violins, surrounded by lovely drunken girls and happy friends?".

Sokov is of a mean, greedy, unsociable and gloomy nature, unable to accept joy from life. It is a peculiar type of a "man in a case", burdened additionally by thirst for money and fear of losing the acquired wealth. Upsetting the glass of wine by the abstentious barman is a strike on his case. In the context of the above-listed feast images, wine is a source of sensational pleasures, a symbol of material affluence. It helps to dethrone «encasement», meanness, pettiness and purposelessness of the character's life.

Now let us look into another episode: Woland's assistants Azazello and Behemoth beat Varenuška, house manager of the Variety Theatre (the writer mentions blood spurting from his nose and down his shirt), deprive him of his case with the documents and take Varenuška to the haunted flat where he is made a vampire. Nature reflects the whole series of events as well: there is a thunderstorm with the wind blowing in the face and throwing sand in the eyes. It seems the situation should be classified as tragic, mysterious and exalted. But the writer neutralizes those lofty motives by comicality and farce.

First of all, manifestly symmetrical strikes on the left and then on the right ear of the house manager who doesn't make any attempts to strike back or dodge blows add to the whole action some comic, parody character. Secondly, this beating up unfolds near the public conveniences, which serves not only as a "geographical centre" of the event, but also takes part in the process of punishment: *Varenuška's cap flew off and vanished without trace into one of the lavatory pans.*

Thus, we deal with lowering of the mystics and fear. This fear and mysticism become corporal, not spiritual. The lowering spreads on Varenuška as well as his reprisal. Y. Borev mentions that comedy character can get into any circumstances, including ruinous ones. But sometimes those ruinous, disastrous circumstances may be typical of comedy with respect to the character himself [14].

One of the bright carnival scenes of the novel is the episode of "a session of black magic" in the Variety Theatre. Arkady Apollonich Sempleyarov, chairman of the Moscow Theatres' Acoustics Commission demanded disclosure of the magic tricks by Woland's team. But Woland's helper Koroviev disclosed or exposed Sempleyarov himself, as an unfaithful spouse. As a result, the latter got hit on the head with a short, fat, mauve umbrella from his young companion. Then there was a general scuffle and *melée*.

Hits with an umbrella may be regarded as traditional farcical furtigation. With respect to Sempleyarov they don't carry any positive, contenting sense. There we definitely see the semantics of punishment and not only for the weakness of the character for the female sex. Sempleyarov is an odious to the writer type of the official, running culture. Besides, general scuffle is a way to create for a short time carnival atmosphere of freedom, permissiveness and lack of restraint, to break up laws and norms of the Soviet society and span the last boundaries between the executors and viewers.

The episode with the change of clothes on the scene of the Variety Theatre provokes great interest on the slapstick comedy side. Soon foreign dresses of the

women-spectators vanished and their owners remained naked outside in the street. The word "disclosure" acquires here its first original meaning, antonymous to the word "clothing".

It's common knowledge that changing clothes has immemorial unwritten tradition both in the folk laughter culture of the West and Russia. Changing clothes at festive carnival activities symbolized refreshing clothes and renewal of one's social image. The authors of the book "Laughter in Early Rus" mentioned that nakedness in Early Russian literature originally meant deliverance from troubles, sins, anxiety, from the fuss of the world. It is a sort of holiness and sanctity, ideal of equality, "a bed of down". Nakedness equalizes all the people [15].

In "The Master and Margarita" an unexpected for the women disappearance of the clothes is not only the atonement for their insuperable thirst for "freebie". Doubtlessly, social and philosophical motives are also interwoven here. M. Bulgakov, first of all, laughs at the morals of credulous philistines; secondly, he ironizes over the low quality of the homemade clothes, which are willingly changed by the audience for the foreign-made dresses; in the third place, he creates a delicate mockery at a so-called equality of the people of those times. And finally, indecent exposure of the body outside the street, though involuntary, means troublemaking and public order offense, which leads to carnival stepping over the norm bounds of official gravity.

At present let's look thoroughly at comic specifics in portrait depiction of characters. Comicality in this respect is, as a rule, justified by the person's inner traits of character. For instance, the description of Nikolai Ivanovich is twice as comic. With the help of the magic body cream he was turned into a fat pig. This assumed aspect reflects "pig" core of Nikolai Ivanovich perfectly, so it is comic in itself. But Bulgakov does not forget about former Nikolai Ivanovich's traits of Jack in office and bureaucrat: the character is clutching a briefcase in its front legs, a pince-nez "had fallen off its nose and was dangling on a ribbon, whilst the pig's hat kept falling forward over its eyes". A pince-nez, a hat and a briefcase with papers which even in this situation are on his mind, - is a second row of slapstick comedy signs, which immensely intensify the effect.

Comic description of Woland's gang (Azazello, Koroviev, Behemoth) is remarkably expressive. These characters answer to the signs of ironic parody personage. According to A.Z. Vulis's words, such personages flaunt intentionally clownish speech, farcical behavior, motley clothes, play habits, which are deliberately simple, playing up for deception, or

mischievous, cultivating trickery and spoof. He sees double and he himself doubles in other people's eyes. This dual nature finds continuation in doubling of the plot [16].

M. Bulgakov's characters of merry demons integrally fit in this definition. Characters from Woland's gang have many prototypes – mythical, literary, domestic and so on. Actually, those characters are organized in compliance with circus and show booth comics.

The following descriptions attract attention of readers. Here is the description of Koroviev: a jockey cap, a check jacket, *"seven feet tall but narrow in the shoulders, incredibly thin and with a face made for derision"*; *"...feathery little moustache, his little eyes, mocking and half drunk, his check trousers pulled up so tight that his dirty white socks were showing"*. And Azazello is no less funny in appearance: *"...a short but unusually broad-shouldered man with a bowler hat on his head"*; *"a fang protruding from his mouth disfigured an already hideous physiognomy that was topped with fiery red hair"*.

Generally, pairs of comic characters are common for many literary works. They can be comic doubles or, vice versa, contrasting images. But the descriptions of Koroviev and Azazello suit more not to the literary, but to the show booth, circus or carnival origin: a tall thin Koroviev and a short red-headed Azazello, clownery mess of the clothes of the one character and almost flawless cleanliness of the second one (only the chicken bone stuffed into his pocket reminds us of the ephemerality of this elegant image). As for the cat, he directly fulfills the duties of the man of motley for Woland.

Those three clowns do things which were done by buskers for centuries – spread holiday carnival mood around, the mood of utopian freedom.

Summary: Thus, detailed analysis of the specifics and functions of the slapstick form of humour in M. Bulgakov's novel "The Master and Margarita" we can discover the transition of "earthy, raw laughter" into the inner comicality, we deal with the interaction of farcical and tragic elements. We can't help admitting the great role of contribution of those forms of humour into implementation of social, ethic and philosophical problems, set in the novel. Furthermore, the role of slapstick comicality is indispensable while creating the atmosphere of carnival, when life is "wrenched out" of its usual normal mode and transferred into an oddly strange, queer, phantasmagoric surface. It goes without saying, M. Bulgakov used farcical elements to create the carnival mood of vivacious freedom, interim deliverance of existing

truth and dominating system. Bulgakov glorifies temporary abolition of all the hierarchy relationships, norms, privileges and prohibitions. At the same time we can't fail to notice M. Bulgakov's deviation from folk laughter tradition which is clearly seen in the intensification of tragic moments and motives and extension of the problems, raised in the literary text. Tragicomic perception and representation of life is typical of Bulgakov.

CONCLUSION

M. Bulgakov's wide use of slapstick forms and elements of humour in his novel originally throws us back in the past of antecedent epochs of folk carnival comic culture. Carnival world outlook started to break down several centuries ago. For us carnival images and characters don't hold any significance, as it was, say, in the Renaissance era. Nevertheless, certain traditions of carnival world view are found in the literature of the XX-XXI centuries. At the same time, the valuation of carnival role in the modern culture is diverse on the score of suspense of questions about compatibility if individual forms of contemporary human reasoning with the holistic folk reasoning implemented in carnival.

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