

SIMILARITY AND TRANSFORMATION IN LITERATURE: TWO SHORT STORIES BY GOGOL AND ANDREYEV

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Abstract: *Similarity across objects, either real or artistic, implies the existence of analogy or resemblance between them. Writers often consciously or subconsciously rely on approximate repetitions of patterns already found in previous works and re-conceptualize or transform these patterns. This study investigates similarities and dissimilarities in the portrayal of the 'small man' in two short stories by Russian writers Nikolaj Gogol and Leonid Andreyev. Gogol's 'Overcoat' is recognized in Russian literary studies as an archetypal portrayal of a small insignificant person with the story-line or 'fabula' centering around his transitory moment of glory and a subsequent downfall. The story 'Fitjuljka's Triumph' by Andreyev follows the same story-line, but creates a markedly different mental representation.*

1 INTRODUCTION

According to the early 20th century Russian literary critic Ekhenbaum (1969), the organizational force of a novella (or a short story) is 'an intertwining of motifs'. In literature, we often see these motifs and their patterns transformed from one work into another. It may therefore be possible to trace the degree of similarity and transformation across literary works in a way similar to the descriptions of pattern transformation in geometry and art.

The motif of a 'small man' was introduced into the Russian literature by Alexander Pushkin in his story 'The Stationmaster' (written in 1830 along with other 'Tales of the Late Ivan Petrovich Belkin'). Nikolai Gogol picked up and fully developed this concept in his story

'Overcoat' written between 1839 and 1841. Gogol's Akakij Bashmachkin became the prototypical insignificant person of low social standing with a limited worldview and low self-esteem suffering from material hardships and ridicule of others (Lotman, 1997). Gogol's character was an 'anti-hero' so much lacking charisma or any 'heroic' features, that it even scared some literary critics (Mann, 1988).

The image of a 'small man' was recreated in subsequent works of classical Russian literature including Dostoevsky's 'Poor Folk' (Bakhtin, 2000). The 'small man' concept can be seen as a motif which is transformed into other literary works with alternations involving higher or lower degrees of similarity. Dostoevsky deliberately makes his character Makar Devushkin strikingly similar to the protagonist of the 'Overcoat'. Both of them are copyists burdened by financial difficulties which are further aggravated by their 'projects': Bashmachkin's quest to save for a new overcoat and Devushkin's financial help to a woman he admires at a distance. There are strong structural similarities across the stories. Both 'small men' lose the objects of their fantasies. Bashmachkin is robbed off his precious new overcoat, and Devushkin's love is taken away. The inner monologues of both characters contain a generous amount of diminutive forms (particularly abundant in Dostoevsky's narration) as a marker of their 'diminished' personalities. Dissimilarities in structure relate to the lack of 'triumph of justice' in Dostoevsky's story as apposed to the phantasmagorical ending in the 'Overcoat' where the ghost of Bashmachkin punishes the abusers.

A later remake of the same motif of a 'small man' is 'Fitjuljka's Triumph', a story by Leonid Andreyev completed in 1899 and based on memories of Orlov, his native town. The story was never published during Andreyev's lifetime (1871-1919) and was only included in the collection of research materials about the author in 2000 (Andreyev, 2000). The analysis of similarities and dissimilarities between Andreev's transform and the original Gogol's motif is presented in the next section.

2 THE PROTOTYPICAL CHARACTER. THE MOTIF AND THEIR TRANSFORMATION

The famous quote 'we all came out from under Gogol's 'Overcoat'' (Rancour-Laferriere, 1982) is no less applicable to 'Fitjuljka's Triumph' than to Dostoevsky's 'Poor Folk'. There is a number of striking parallels between the plots and characters of 'Fitjuljka's Triumph' and 'The Overcoat'. On the other hand, the old 'small man' motif gets a strong 'twist' which makes 'Fitjuljka' a truly original and significant contribution to Russian and world literature.

The two stories are of almost exactly the same length (10129 words in 'The Overcoat' and approximately 10100 words in 'Fitjuljka's triumph'). The resemblance is found already in the opening passages of the stories: while Gogol warns the readers that his character 'is not very remarkable', Andreyev echoes with the introduction of his protagonist as a person who is 'not a sample of virtue'. While Gogol's Bashmachkin is an office copyist, Andreev's Fitjuljka is a house painter, and they are both extremely skilled in their humble occupations. Both characters have unattractive appearance and are thin. They are equally subjected to humiliation and pranks, but have the ability to enjoy the simple pleasures of life.

Andreyev creates an original work by playing with the 'small man's' figure and

exaggerating, developing or rotating some of the prototypical features. While Bashmachkin is hopelessly single, Fitjuljka is hopelessly married (his wife beats him and runs the household). Bashmachkin is an 'all work, no play' individual, whereas Fitjuljka has almost given up his work and spends his time drinking and meditating on the wonders of life. Bashmachkin talks very clumsily in real life, curses and swears terribly on his deathbed and becomes surprisingly eloquent and bold in his after-death rebuke of his tormentor. Fitjuljka is also somewhat clumsy-tongued, but yet demonstrates an enjoyable mastery of situationally-appropriate speech styles. Gogol provides his character with the first name, last name and patronymic, but the writer selects a name which is unusual and ridiculous. Andreyev exaggerates the character/name connection omitting Fitjuljka's real name in the text, since everyone calls him by the derogatory nickname 'Fitjuljka' (a word meaning 'a trifle, and insignificant thing' in Russian).

The major 'fabula' or plot-line is almost directly copied by Andreyev from the 'Overcoat'. Bashmachkin's dream of having a new coat, the accomplishment of the dream and subsequent loss of the overcoat and death transform into Fitjuljka's momentary triumph when his son gets engaged to and marries the ward of the local rich man. Fitjuljka's happy world collapses when it turns out that the marriage was arranged to cover up the affair the girl had been having with her guardian's son. The major literary devices connected with the turns of the fabula are similar as well. The stories start comically and then grow into tragedies with elements of melodrama, sarcasm and farce, as the protagonists' dreams collapse. The difference is found only in the ends of stories: Gogol's writes the phantasmagorical 'out-of-this-world' ending when the ghost of the copyist takes its revenge on the abusers. In Andreyev's story, life carries on, as it always does, and there is no reward to the sufferers and no punishment to the villains. However, the image of sleep-death in 'Fitjuljka's triumph' gives a point of equivalence to the story endings. The death of Gogol's protagonist is echoed in Fitjuljka's drunken sleep which ends his story. The ancient metaphor of sleep as death is emphasized by Andreyev with the images of a street lamp-post and the surrounding darkness (see Fig 1 for the representation of the plot line and major literary devices).

3 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Contrary to modern copyright laws requiring absolute originality from authors, 'recycling' of characters, motifs and plot lines is as old and imperishable as literature itself. Examples (to give only a few notorious ones) include Shakespeare's "Hamlet" and Sophocles' "Oedipus the King", Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina" and Flaubert's "Madame Bovary", Akutagawa's "The Graden" and Chekhov's "Cherry Orchard". Many perplexed men of letters tried to rationalize the reasons for this phenomenon that some may fancy calling 'tradition' and others -- 'plagiarism'. The classical work addressing this subject is T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (Eliot, 1920).

Eliot reinstalls the value of tradition as opposed to novelty in the artistic expression by stating that a new work of art can only appear for contrast and comparison with previous works, it is 'measured' against the earlier works, and that all the earlier existing works 'readjust' themselves after each supervention of novelty, whereby the past is altered by the present and the present is directed by the past, and each new work is judged against the standards of the past (ibid). Eliot's statement about art is truly inspirational, since it finds its confirmation in modern studies of similarity and symmetry in psychology

and cognitive science. Establishing similarities between objects (real or imagined) is an essential part of concept building in human mind. Our cognitive system simply ‘refuses’ to deal with ‘absolute novelties’. Each new object is classified in our minds “in terms of concepts which group the new object together with others which have been previously encountered” and “the cognitive system judges whether new objects are similar to old objects” possibly comparing it with the ‘prototype’, comparing the features of the ‘old’ and ‘new’ objects or checking the number of transformations it takes to convert the new object into the old (Hahn & Chater, 1997; Hahn, Chater & Richardson, 2003). It appears therefore that the repetition of characters and motifs in literature is inevitable, since literature is one of ways to comprehend the world, and the concept building in literature goes along the same always as general cognitive process, i.e., via establishing the degree of similarities across objects. This repetition enriches literature, because it adds value and a new angle to the previous works and allows the comprehension of the new one.

A number of mathematical procedures exist in psychology for evaluating the degree of perceived similarity among objects (e.g., special models, continuous dimensions, feature-based models, neural networks, case-based reasoning, Kolmogorov complexity, transformations (Hahn & Chater, 1997; Hahn, Chater & Richardson, 2003). It may be fruitful to apply psychological tools of evaluating the degree of similarity to works of literature.

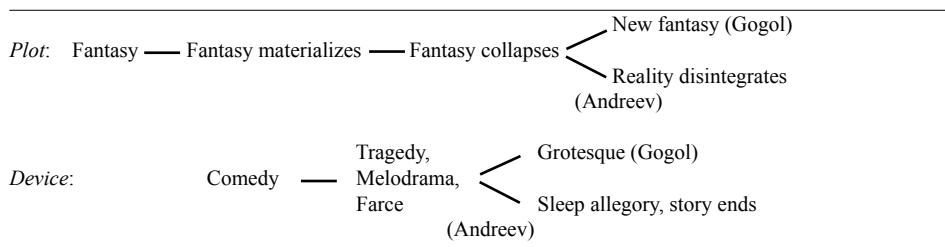


Figure 1. Similarities and dissimilarities of story-line and major literary devices in the stories.

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