

## THE FUNCTION OF IRONY AS A MEANS OF CREATING POLYSEMY AND MULTI-LAYERED TEXT

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### Abstract

The article deals with the role of irony as one of the most important literary devices that contribute to the creation of multilayered and multivalent text. Different functions of irony are analyzed: from comic to tragic, from hidden author's mockery to deep philosophical reflections. Special attention is paid to the specifics of Chekhov's irony, its manifestations in the relations between characters, in the author's position and in the symbolic system of the works. Examples from Anton Pavlovich Chekhov's works are given, demonstrating how irony helps to reveal hidden meanings, creating the effect of double reading of the text.

**Keywords:** Irony, multilayered text, hidden meanings, verbal irony, situational irony, dramatic irony, Chekhov, artistic text, comic and tragic, author's position.

### Introduction

Irony is one of the most complex and polysemantic devices in literature. It can simultaneously be a form of hidden ridicule, a way of distancing the author from events, a tool for revealing deep meanings. In a literary text, irony plays a key role in creating a multi-layered narrative, helping the reader to see deeper, sometimes tragic motives behind the superficial comedy.

Irony is presented especially subtly and multifacetedly in the work of Anton Pavlovich Chekhov. His works are based on a hidden play of meanings, where acute social and existential problems are hidden behind the ease of the style, humor and sarcasm. Chekhov's irony is multi-layered: it can be soft and good-natured, bitter and sarcastic, but it is always permeated with a subtle understanding of life and human nature.

"Irony is one of the essential features of Anton Chekhov's work, his artistic and personal vision of the world. Irony is present in a number of Chekhov's works, starting with the earliest things: at first, the ironic assessment is expressed openly, frankly, but as the writer's artistic skill develops and the transition to an "objective manner", the critic A.P. Chudakov speaks about irony in the works of A.P. Chekhov<sup>1</sup>.

This article examines the role of irony as a literary device, its influence on the polysemy and multi-layered nature of the text, as well as the specifics of the use of irony in Chekhov's works. Irony (from the Greek *eironeia* - "pretense", "mockery") is a stylistic device in which the true meaning of what is said is opposite to its literal meaning. It can be expressed in various forms: verbal irony is a direct verbal mockery, in which words convey a meaning opposite to what is expected; situational irony – the discrepancy between the character's expectations and the real

<sup>1</sup> Chudakov A.P. Poetics and the World of Anton Chekhov: Emergence and Approval. Eksmo Publishing House, LLC, 2024, Moscow, Zorge str., 1c1 стр.206 , 5 стр.



course of events; Dramatic irony is an effect in which the reader knows more than the character, which creates additional meaning in what is happening.

Irony allows the author to hide the true attitude to the events described, creating the effect of a double reading of the text. It makes the narrative deeper, opening up new interpretations. Irony in literature performs several functions:

- creating a comic effect. irony can cause laughter or a smile, but often this laughter is bitter, sarcastic, with a tinge of sadness;
- expression of the author's position. through ironic comments and descriptions, the author conveys his attitude to the characters and what is happening;
- disclosure of hidden meanings. Behind the ease of the syllable and the ridicule, deep philosophical reflections are often hidden;
- distancing the author from the text. Chekhov, for example, often refuses direct moralization, allowing irony to "speak" for him;
- creating multi-layered text. The reader can perceive the work on different levels: superficially, as a light comedy, or more deeply, as a tragic reflection on life.

Anton Chekhov is a master of hidden, polysemantic irony. In his works, irony is manifested not only in the dialogues of the characters, but also in the structure of the text, plot moves, and compositional devices.

The relationships of Chekhov's characters are often built on the basis of misunderstandings, ridiculous situations and conflicts in which irony is manifested. An example is the story "Chameleon", where the police and officials change their attitude towards a dog depending on who it belongs to. "Do you have any idea of the new great Russian literary talent, Chekhov?.. In my opinion, this is the future pillar of our literature" is what P. I. Tchaikovsky said about A. P. Chekhov<sup>2</sup>. There is no condemnation in his irony, even when he depicts people with their weaknesses. For example, in "Chameleon" we see how the character changes his mind depending on the circumstances, but Chekhov does not condemn him, but only shows the very essence of human nature.

In Tolstoy and the Thin, the comedy arises from the difference in the social status of the two old friends. Their conversation begins on an equal footing, but as soon as the "thin" one learns that his friend has reached a high rank, his speech instantly changes to ingratiating. This scene is both funny and bitter, as it shows how easily a person loses dignity in order to please a more powerful one.

Chekhov rarely gives direct assessments of his characters, allowing their words and actions to speak for themselves. The author's irony in his works is subtle and unobtrusive, but it is this irony that makes the text multi-layered.

In the story "The Man in the Case", irony is manifested in the description of the main character, the teacher Belikov. His habit of living in a "case" is not only a literal allusion to his love of closed spaces and fear of life, but also a metaphor for inner constraint, an unwillingness to go beyond the usual. Chekhov shows with subtle mockery how people voluntarily create "cases" for themselves, hiding from real life.

The peculiarity of Chekhov's irony is its multi-layeredness. In his works, comedy often turns

<sup>2</sup> P. I. Tchaikovsky about A. P. Chekhov. From a letter to E. Y. P. Shpazhinskaya, 1889., Moscow  
<https://a-chehov.ru/publikacii/chehov-i-chaykovskiy/p6>



into tragedy, and vice versa.

One of the most important methods of its expression in the writer's works is the ironic detail as an attribute of the "poetics of infinitesimal quantities" (G.A. Bialy). <sup>3</sup>This can be seen in "Ionych", where the main character gradually turns into a cynical and greedy person, but not because he is bad, but because this is life.

In the story "The Death of an Official", the main character, who accidentally sneezed on a high official, drives himself to death because of the fear of punishment. At first glance, the situation looks comical, but gradually laughter is replaced by the realization of tragedy: a person finds himself a victim of a bureaucratic system in which fear is stronger than reason. «... psychological and life truth... <... > < won't die... > in reality an official from the fact that the boss, in response to his excessively obsequious and annoying apologies, <... > finally shouted to him, "Get out." <... > But the downtrodden nature of a petty official, for whom a dignitary in the full sense of the word is some kind of superior being, is again captured in this caricature in its very essence. In any case, there is very little fun in Chekhov's "humorous" caricatures. The general tone is gloomy and hopeless..."<sup>4</sup>

This can be seen, for example, in the story "The Death of an Official", where the hero dies of anxiety because of an insignificant incident. In the play "The Cherry Orchard", irony is manifested in the inability of the characters to realize the inevitable changes. Lopakhin, who buys a cherry orchard, sincerely wants to help Ranevskaya, but his joy at the deal contrasts with her despair. Here Chekhov balances between the comic and the tragic, creating a deeply symbolic scene.

Irony makes the text polysemous, allowing it to be perceived in different ways. The reader can catch the naïve, comic layer of the narrative, but upon careful reading, he will discover deep philosophical motives. For example, in the story "The Lady with the Dog" a light resort story is outwardly depicted, but behind it there is a deep theme of loneliness, lack of freedom, and the impossibility of changing one's fate.

Vladimir Nabokov admired Chekhov for his ability to see tragicomedy in everyday situations. He noted that Chekhov has no villains, but only ordinary people who sometimes look funny, but this does not make them any less real<sup>5</sup>.

Irony in Chekhov's works often carries a symbolic load. In "The Seagull", the title of the play acquires an ironic meaning: the seagull, as a symbol of freedom, turns out to be a victim of circumstances, just like the heroine Nina Zarechnaya.

## Conclusion

Irony in literature is not just a way of ridicule, but a complex tool for creating polysemy and depth of the text. Chekhov's irony is unique in its subtlety and multi-layeredness: it helps the reader to see complex social and philosophical problems behind seemingly easy plots. Chekhov uses irony not only to create a comic effect, but also to reveal the tragedy of human life, illusions and fears.

<sup>3</sup> Bialy G.A. Russkii realizm: ot Turgenev k Chekhovu [Russian realism: from Turgenev to Chekhov]. – St. Petersburg: Soviet Writer, 1990. – P. 130.

<sup>4</sup> S. A. Vengerov, "Vestnik i biblioteka dlya samoobrazovanie", 1903, No 32, stlb. 1329

<sup>5</sup> [https://translated.turbopages.org/proxy\\_u/en-ru.ru.5b409f7a-67ebef5f-9b779e66-74722d776562/https/www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2005/08/vladimir-nabokov-on-chekhov/304127/](https://translated.turbopages.org/proxy_u/en-ru.ru.5b409f7a-67ebef5f-9b779e66-74722d776562/https/www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2005/08/vladimir-nabokov-on-chekhov/304127/)



I support the critics: Chekhov's irony is really special. It does not humiliate the characters, does not make them caricature, but only emphasizes their natural weaknesses. His stories make us smile, but after this smile there is always a residue - after all, we understand that each of us can find ourselves in these situations.

Chekhov does not give the reader ready-made conclusions. He simply shows life as it is, with its ridiculous situations, with its comedy and inevitable sadness. That is why his irony is so valuable: it is not topical, not tied to a specific era, but timeless.

His stories still make us think, recognize ourselves and others in the characters. And this is the genius of his irony. Thanks to this, his works remain relevant today, forcing the reader to think about the nature of man and society.

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