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Features of the parable in the structure of A.P. Chekhov's "A Story Without a Title"

Yuriy D. Bagrov

*Saint Petersburg State University of Industrial Technology and Design,
18 Bolshaya Morskaya St, Saint Petersburg, 191186, Russian Federation*
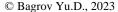
✉ ybagroff@gmail.com

Abstract. The study deals with the composition of "A Story Without a Title" by A. Chekhov in the aspect of its genre affiliation. The methodological apparatus of narratology is involved in the analysis of the text structure, which makes it possible to describe the implementation of the parable plot model in Chekhov's story. Of all Chekhov's stories, "A Story Without a Title" most consistently reproduces the genre features of the parable. The characters are referred to with common nouns, the plot is schematic, not overloaded with events and details. It is based on the antithesis of two worlds: a monastery and a city. However, behind the outwardly simple text of the story there is a system of narrative entities, where each narrator differs in point of view in terms of space, time and ideology, the events they cover. At the same time, the point of view of the author-narrator remains spatially static. The world of the city, external to the characters, is described by two diegetic narrators, so that the burden of value judgments is removed from the author. Thus, the composition structure of the text causes direct edification avoidance. At the same time, the rejection of the authoritarian narration type makes it possible to introduce into the story the theme of art, also built on the opposition of descriptions of the same world by two different characters.

Keywords: genre, narratology, chronotope, parody, plot

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Черты притчи в композиции рассказа А.П. Чехова «Без заглавия»

Ю.Д. Багров

Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет промышленных технологий и дизайна, Российская Федерация, 191186, Санкт-Петербург, Большая Морская ул., д. 18
✉ ybagroff@gmail.com

Аннотация. Рассматривается композиция рассказа А.П. Чехова «Без заглавия» в аспекте его жанровой принадлежности. К анализу структуры текста привлекается методологический аппарат нарратологии, позволяющий выявить и установить реализацию сюжетной модели притчи в чеховском рассказе. «Без заглавия» из всех чеховских рассказов наиболее последовательно воспроизводит жанровые особенности притчи. Действующие лица поименованы нарицательно, сюжет схематичен, не перегружен событиями и деталями и строится на антитезе двух миров: монастыря и города. Однако за внешне простым текстом стоит система повествовательных инстанций, где каждый нарратор отличается точкой зрения в плане пространства, времени и идеологии, событийностью. При этом точка зрения автора-повествователя остается статичной в пространственном отношении. Внешний по отношению к персонажам мир города описывается двумя диегетическими нарраторами, что снимает с автора бремя ценностных суждений. Таким образом, построение текста позволяет избежать прямого назидания. В то же время отказ от авторитарного типа повествования позволяет ввести в рассказ и тему искусства, также выстроенную на противопоставлении описаний одного и того же мира двумя разными персонажами.

Ключевые слова: жанр, нарратология, хронотоп, пародия, сюжет

Introduction

The parable scheme of certain later short stories by A.P. Chekhov have already attracted the researchers' attention. According to G.A. Byaly, Chekhov's parable can be characterised with complicated plot, unexpected denouement and clear expression of the author's ideal reaching, as the researcher stated, "direct and open edification" (Byaly, 1983, p. 203). V.I. Tyupa considers anecdote and parable as two preliterary genres giving roots to Chekhov's short story in general corresponding to the author's method of characterising mores through situations

and not through plot (Tyupa, 1989, p. 14). V.Yu. Darensky characterises Chekhov's genre transformation as "antiparable", where traditional moral is replaced with life problematisation and open ending (Darensky, 2022, p. 158).

At the same time as the parable, we should mention Chekhov's experience in another genre also closely connected with the Biblical tradition by origin. In Easter stories, as Ya.O. Kozlova states, the writer recedes irony, parody and mockery in favour of ethical and philosophical content (Kozlova, 2021, p. 121). Evangelic allusions are not necessarily a matter of genre or form. As V. Grechko shows, evangelic parables are an intertextual source of Chekhov short stories (Grechko, 2021, p. 373).

"A Story Without a Title" stands apart standing out from other Chekhov's parabolic texts with its abstract time plane instead of realistic present habitual for the writer. The composition structure of this story is to be analysed in a more detailed way in this paper.

Discussion

The exact date "A Story Without a Title" was created is unknown, but drafts and memoirs of contemporaries suggest that, most likely, it was written in late December 1887. Shortly before this, Chekhov returns to Moscow from St. Petersburg, where, according to A.S. Lazarev memoirs (Lazarev-Gruzinsky, 1986, p. 107), he creates this story and sends it to St. Petersburg, where the work was published in the first issue of the "Novoye Vremya" newspaper in 1888. Chekhov did not resort to using a pseudonym, and the story comes out under the name "An. Chekhov".

"A Story Without a Title" is based on the opposition of two worlds – the monastery and the city. While the monastery is narrated by an exegetical narrator, correlated with the abstract author, the description of the city is given by explicit narrators i.e. by the characters of the story.

The text opens with the setting description. The historical time in the story (5th century) is compared here with the present. Phraseologically, this is indicated by the marker "as it is now" and the comparison "day was like day, night was like night", where the times of the day in the past are compared with themselves in the present. The historical time in the story is nominal: the text does not indicate any events or concepts relating specifically to the early Middle Ages or any other exact period of time. But it is functionally significant, as it creates a temporal distance between the narration time and the time of the action, so that the abstract author's point of view becomes external on the plane of time. Hereinafter, speaking about the points of view problem, we will follow the approach developed by B.A. Uspenskii (Uspenskii, 1995, p. 9).

However, as Pierre Marillaud notes, direct biblical references and the timeframe are ironically combined with measuring the distance in *versts*, old Russian unit of length, which, according to the French scholar, places the setting in Russia that did not exist in the 5th century but is already marked as Holy Rus' (Marillaud, 2015, p. 34). It seems to us that such a far-reaching conclusion is not confirmed by the entire text. The mention of *versts* as an anachronism might achieve some ironic effect but only locally, as a stylistic device but not as a characteristic of

space and time in the world of the story. Rather, such word usage works for the aforementioned correlation of historical time with the present, which contributes to the generalization, symbolization of time in the text. The symbolic is described in terms of the present, just as in the parable, the generalized and symbolic is actualized in the present, correlates with it.

The description of the monastery norm is based on a "central text-forming mechanism", in terms suggested by Yu.M. Lotman (Lotman, 1992). Time here is cyclical, synchronized with natural processes, such as: the change of time of day, the passage of years (e.g. "the sun rose every morning", "dozens of years passed" (Chekhov, 1983, p. 455)); no starting point is given: we do not know how and when the monastery was founded, how the monks appeared there. The space of the monastery is remoted and sharply delimited from the outside world.

The event the story starts with is the citizen's unexpected arrival to the monastery. He crosses the frontier between the two worlds thereby breaking the norm. Therethrough, the chronotope also gets broken. The temporal motion converts from cyclical to linear, which is marked inter alia with the abbot's age-specific changes. The Oldman as he appears in the beginning of the story had been living for decades with his friary with neither external nor internal development but having returned from the city "he aged a lot" (Chekhov, 1983, p. 457). As a result of the cycle linear unrolling he gets vulnerable to age-related changes. The space ceases to be isolated. The possibility to cross the frontier in both directions appears, and all the characters translocate, though the monks are not shown outside the monastery. Here the dynamic text-forming mechanism is involved.

The importance of the isolated – open space in Chekhov parables was noted by V. Grechko, who traced it back to the parable of Lazarus (Grechko, 2021, pp. 374–375). But if the isolated space metaphor in the story of Lazarus and in Chekhov's "Rothschild's Violin" symbolises death, in "A Story without a Title", on the contrary, this isolation and apartness had been the monastery norm, habitual and joyful, while the breakthrough and exit to outer space cause the perish of this small world.

While the monastery fully belongs to the sphere of authorial narration, Chekhov introduces two diegetic nattators to describe the city. They represent both worlds, which is significant for the *monastery – city* opposition. The monastery and the city are two conflicting norms whose relations are dialogical, not hierarchic. Two characters acting like mediators between these worlds are also the addressers in communication to describe one norm for the bearers of another one (i.e. for the monks) and for the reader. In this description external point of view is replaced with the internal one. Subjectivity and evaluativity appear. Both narrators evaluate the city negatively, but the citizen is also outraged with the friary inactivity.

Here the dependence of the point of view on the subject of description is manifested, when the choice of the observer position depends not only on the describing agent, but also on the described object. The city in the text is presented only in the cited world and is given from the points of view of two narrators, while the implicit narrator limits the area of his story telling to the monastery, and spatially his point of view turns out to be static.

The words of the wanderer, representing the world of the city, are marked as a direct speech addressed to the monks. His words are emotional, characterized by exclamatory sentences and rhetorical questions. Ideologically, his point of view is internal to what is being described. There is no eventfulness in the citizen's speech itself. The author, with the words of the wanderer, sets the norm of the city, that is, reconnects the central text-forming mechanism. Time in his story is cyclical. The mention of the event that happened to him is framed in the text as indirect speech. Important for this character, it does not carry a semantic load for the text as a whole and just motivates the unexpected arrival of a lost hunter to the monastery. Also, this mention serves to characterize the citizen and emphasize his belonging to the sinful world of the city, since it is said that the hunter was drunk.

The abbot's narration is organised in a completely different way. It is not marked as direct speech but belongs to the old man, not to the narrating author. This attribution is supported with special markers ("he said"), evocative vocabulary ("viper"). Substitute direct discourse, in terms suggested by V.N. Voloshinov (Voloshinov, 1995, pp. 346–356), helps to reach author's and character's position affinity. Due to this affinity, the old man's story, given from external point of view on the ideological plane, is perceived as more reliable than the citizen's narration. Time is also cyclical here. There is no traditional eventfulness. The abbot's arrival is not an event for the sinners and does not break the norm of the city. The cycle is not unrolled into linear narration and the city norm stays unchanged, its inviolability is reinforced.

But here a mental event takes place i.e. an event which, according to W. Schmid definition (Schmid, 2003, p. 13), changes initial point in the mental state of a character. For the abbot, such mental event is his understanding of devil's power, evil attractiveness and people weakness.

Below, here is a Table of narration entities.

Narration entities in "A Story Without a Title"

Narration entity	Position in the fictional world	Point of view on the ideological plane	Point of view on the temporal plane	Correspondance to abstract author's point of view	Eventfulness
Implicit narrator	Absent	External	External	Identical	Present
Citizen	Present	Internal	Internal	Not affined	Absent
Abbot		External	Internal	Affined	Mental event

The restructuring of the *fabula* (narrated events in their chronological sequence) into a *plot* and their discrepancy are due to Chekhov's compositional intention – a description of the city from the point of view of the character – and the need to introduce the hero's speech, albeit substitute, into the text so that the motif of the abbot's talent is repeated at the end of the story. The old man, with the same art, with the same inspiration and vivid imagery, no longer describes "God, Heaven and Earth", but the world of sin. The equivalent repetition of this motif brings a new meaning to the story.

The fabula sequence of the story is as follows: the citizen's arrival and his conversation with the monks, the departure of the abbot, the journey to the city,

the arrival to the tavern, where the abbot realises the attractiveness of sin (mental event), the return of the old man, the monks escape. When constructing the plot, the author transfers only the return of the abbot, placing this element immediately after the departure of the old man, and tells about the events located between them through the mouth of the character.

In addition to the locales of the monastery and the city highlighted above, a part of the space in the text is occupied by the desert. It serves as a frontier that spatially separates and opposes these two worlds, an obstacle in the way of the hero, but if we turn to the cultural context, we will see that the monastery is traditionally associated with the desert. Indeed, in Chekhov's story, the desert is correlated with the monastic locus. It spatially adjoins it, is comprehended by the hero more as his own than as alienated space in terms of us/them opposition. Underway, he composes poems and hymns, as well as in the monastery, experiences joyful feelings, that is, the norm of his behavior changes only in connection with the transition from a static state to a dynamic one. It is interesting that paradise – the place of residence of the righteous – in the cultural tradition is associated with happiness, joy, and in Chekhov's story, joy and unrestrained fun characterize the city – the receptacle of sinners, while monastic life is monotonous, and the only source of joy is the abbot, as the author points out in the exposition. Thus, the same topos is able to include opposite meanings, and the space of the text is symbolized.

Movement in space is traditionally correlated with movement along the vertical scale of spiritual and moral values. For "A Story Without a Title" this correlation is one of the organizing ones. The upward movement is made by a drunk citizen, who called on the abbot to take care of the sinners salvation, and the monks escape is a choice in favour of sin. The opposition between hero and antihero is also important here. The hero is able to cross the frontier in both directions. In Chekhov's story, this role is played by the abbot, who went to the city, but then returned to the monastery, and the monks are similar to anti-heroes. The fate of the citizen remains unknown. He does not want to stay in the monastery, but there is no mention of his return to the city, since according to his function in the text he cannot be either a hero or an anti-hero.

The most important spatial opposition in the story is the opposition of *own* and *alienated* (*us/them* in spatial extrapolation), *home – anti-home*. The city turns out to be alienated space for the old man, and the monastery, on the contrary, is that for the citizen and he refuses to stay there ("I'm not your friend"). The categories of *far* and *near* are also significant. The monastery is located far from human settlements, and this causes its isolation.

Intermediate time, as in folklore, is determined by sacred numbers: the abbot's journey lasts three months, he does not leave his cell for seven days after returning to the monastery. Sacred numbers in folklore traditionally designate not specific, but immeasurable or indefinite periods of time.

Thus, in addition to the possibility of multiple interpretations and moral issues, one can also name the purely compositional features of the parable implemented in the story: a schematic allegorical plot, a schematic depiction of characters and the absence of their personality traits, naming characters according to

their roles, and the absence of names. The abbot can also be called an old man, but a citizen has only one designation. The parable usually has no title and is named after the main character or theme (e.g. "The Parable of the Prodigal Son"). The title is always the sphere of the author. It orients the reader to one or another interpretation and understanding of the work. However, Chekhov emphasizes the lack of a title for his story, thereby leaving open the possibility of multiple interpretations, which, as mentioned above, is one of the genre features of the parable.

The changes made by Chekhov to the original version of the story are interesting. In 1899, A.P. Chekhov prepared the story for the "*Help for the Victims of Crop Failure*" collection, which was published in the same year in Moscow. While preparing the story for the new publication, the writer made minor changes to the text, but they are extremely important for its understanding and interpretation. Initially, in the "Novoye Vremya" version, it was titled as "Fairy Tale". However, this title created a genre reference uncharacteristic for this text and did not produce the effect mentioned above.

It is the parable nature of the story that the corrections the writer made directly to the text can be explained with. First of all, A.P. Chekhov removed the oriental flavour from the work. He consistently removes all the details that in the first edition referred to the Middle East. So, in the "Novoye Vremya" version, the citizen was an Arab, but for the new publication Chekhov removes the phrase originally put into the mouth of this character: "You can save your soul only in Latin, but as you can see, I can speak and understand only Arabic" (Chekhov, 1983, p. 608). However, for understanding the story, the ethnicity of the character is not at all important, so this detail is removed from the laconic, not overloaded with details text. The writer also removes the mention of fig trees, that was present in the Tale, from the description of the desert in the new edition. The fig tree is also a characteristic feature. Although the distribution area of this tree in reality is quite wide, due to the fact that it often appears in Scripture, the fig tree was associatively perceived as a detail that created the biblical allusion. The mention of palm trees in the exposition of the story pointed to a specific place of action to an even greater extent.

The removal of these details made the space disconcretised. While in "The Tale" the real space was limited to the Middle East, in the 1899 edition of "A Story Without a Title", instead of the real space, a symbolic, generalized space appears. It includes two loci: a monastery and a city, separated by a desert.

It should also be noted that the Middle East was not accidentally chosen by the author to set the story in its original version. The text itself does not seem to justify such a choice, and while working on the final version, A.P. Chekhov refuses it for the reasons stated above. At the same time, the parable genre, especially the evangelic parable, is characterized by referring the place of action to some sacred space, which in the Christian tradition is the Holy Land. However, for Chekhov's story, such a reference was not motivated, since, despite the fact that the main character is the abbot of the monastery, the meaning of the story is not limited to religious themes. The theme of art and its ability to equally attractively describe the positive and negative aspects of life, including vice, is one of the central topics in the story. Setting any certain place of action contradicted the creative

task of the writer, and he abandoned it while revising the text. Let us note, however, that the disconcretising of space does not mean the abandoning of any sacred meaning associated with Palestine. The generalised locus of the monastery and its remoteness, delimitation from the world contribute to the preservation of sacredness, in a certain sense even emphasize it. This emphasis is also facilitated by the symbolization of the space of the story as a whole. In the most general terms, the desert as the frontier of two worlds also refers to the sacred biblical space.

Also, in the "Novoye Vremya" version, the place, which in the final version was called "the house of filth", was simply called a tavern. This change strengthened the opposition between the world of the monastery and the sinful world of the city, however, the abbot's arrival there had to be motivated, and the author introduced the necessary motivation into the new version of the story, adding the words "by misadventure".

The story ends with a kind of twist. An unexpected twist of the plot – the escape of the monks – finally confirms the inviolability of the city's norm, and the world of the monastery, as its order was violated, collapses irreversibly. V.I. Tyupa calls the ending of "A Story Without a Title" distinctly anecdotal (Tyupa, 1989, p. 15). The twist is indeed a standard figure for ending a joke, but "A Story Without a Title" does not contain anecdotal poignancy. The ending remains multi-layered and cannot be reduced to an anecdotal interpretation as an incident with the abbot, who achieved the opposite effect with his art. At the same time, the unexpected twist replaces the proverbial ending of the traditional parable, leaving room for open interpretation instead of edification and didacticism. It also reduces the author's voice, which is, as we have shown above, statically connected in the story precisely with the world of the monastery and disappears with it. Chekhov implements deliberately neutral statement of fact and silence in the assessments where in a traditional parable one can expect moralising from the author-narrator. Genre combination allows the author to present the parable in a new way: not as a direct edification, but as a cause for independent thinking of the reader.

Conclusion

Thus, the composition of A.P. Chekhov's "A Story Without a Title" is schematic, not overloaded with details. The main device is the antithesis, which can be traced at various levels. The text remains open to many readings and explanation, casual or deep interpretation, which is already set by the title itself and is supported by a compositional rapprochement with the parable.

Of all Chekhov's works, "A Story Without a Title" implements the genre model of the parable most consistently. This is supported, on the one hand, by the choice of characters, the spatio-temporal organization of the text, and, on the other hand, the narratological structure: a parabolic plot, narrative entities. Following the parable model enhances the effect of breaking the narrative in the ending, which deceives the reader's expectations not only from the plot, but also from the genre. Such an ending, while preserving the symbolism and multi-layered interpretations of the parable, allows Chekhov to get away from didacticism and imposing ready-made answers on the reader.

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Bio note:

Yuriy D. Bagrov, Candidate of Philology, Associate Professor, Associate Professor of the Department of Technical Translation and Professional Communication, Saint Petersburg State University of Industrial Technology and Design, 18 Bolshaya Morskaya St, Saint Petersburg, 191186, Russian Federation. ORCID: 0000-0002-6225-5442. E-mail: ybagroff@gmail.com