



DOI: 10.22363/2312-9220-2026-31-3-626-635

EDN: AYAUSN

UDC 82-192

Research article / Научная статья

The Comic in the Artistic Anthropology of V.V. Veresaev's Works

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Abstract. The sources of the comic effect in the literary works of V.V. Veresaev have scarcely been studied and therefore require systematic scholarly investigation. The purpose of this article is to analyze the functions of the techniques and devices used to create a comic effect within the artistic anthropology of Veresaev's prose. The study demonstrates that the principal source of the comic effect in Veresaev's works lies in the portraits of literary characters. These portraits form a system in which each element manifests a specific character trait of the character. The poetics of the comic in Veresaev's writing is realized in either a humorous or a satirical mode. Satire constructs a form of negative artistic anthropology, while the objects of satirical ridicule are depicted through aggressive rhetorical strategies. Humor, in contrast, produces a more benevolent rhetorical perspective toward the characters. Both the physical and inner qualities of the characters are actively involved in the creation of the comic effect. To achieve the desired artistic result, the author transforms elements of portrait description – either by hyperbolizing or reducing particular features. This transformation creates the conditions necessary for the emergence of the comic effect. Each component of the literary portrait of a satirical or humorous character functions as a sign carrying a specific semantic dimension of the comic. Humorous and satirical contexts thus concretize and give visible form to the artistic anthropology of Veresaev's prose. The elements of the comic impart a realistic character to the artistic anthropology of Veresaev's works.

Keywords: prose, poetics, comic, humor, satire, character portrait, literary hero

Author contributions. Concept development, collection & analysis of research data, text writing – Darya A. Novichkova; writing & editing – Salakhitdin O. Muminov, Alyona S. Demchenko; data interpretation & scientific consulting – Svetlana V. Ananyeva. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Funding. The study was carried out within the framework of the scientific project BR27101897 “Digital Transformation of the Ecosystem of Literary Studies, Folklore Studies, and Art Studies in Kazakhstan: Interdisciplinary Research”.

Conflict of interest. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Article history: submitted January 25, 2026; revised March 18, 2026; accepted May 20, 2026.

For citation: Novichkova, D.A., Muminov, S.O., Demchenko, A.S., & Ananyeva, S.V. (2026). The Comic in the Artistic Anthropology of V.V. Veresaev's Works. *RUDN Journal of Studies in Literature and Journalism*, 31(3), 626–635. <http://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2026-31-3-626-635> EDN: AYAUSN

Комическое в художественной антропологии произведений В.В. Вересаева

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Аннотация. Источники комического эффекта в литературном творчестве В.В. Вересаева практически не исследованы, поэтому нуждаются в последовательном изучении. Цель – проанализировать функции приемов и средств создания комического эффекта в художественной антропологии произведений В.В. Вересаева. Портреты литературных героев этого автора образуют систему, каждый элемент которой выражает определенную черту характера персонажа. Поэтика комического реализуется в юмористической или сатирической форме. Сатира формирует негативную художественную антропологию. Объекты сатирического осмеяния вырисованы с помощью агрессивной риторики, юмор более дружелюбен по отношению к персонажам. В процесс воплощения комического активно вовлекаются внешние и внутренние качества литературных героев. Для создания художественного эффекта автор трансформирует (гиперболизирует или редуцирует) элементы портретных описаний действующих лиц. Портреты литературных героев В.В. Вересаева отражают их комически окрашенные социальные и психологические характеристики, комическое обогащает и конкретизирует художественную антропологию прозы.

Ключевые слова: проза, поэтика, комическое, юмор, сатира, портрет персонажа, литературный герой

Вклад авторов. Разработка идеи, сбор и анализ исследовательских данных, написание статьи – Д.А. Новичкова; написание и редактирование – С.О. Муминов и А.С. Демченко; интерпретация данных, научное консультирование – С.В. Ананьева. Все авторы прочли и одобрили окончательную версию рукописи.

Финансирование. Исследование выполнено в рамках научного проекта BR27101897 «Цифровая трансформация экосистемы литературоведения, фольклористики и искусствоведения Казахстана: междисциплинарные исследования».

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

История статьи: поступила в редакцию 25 января 2026 г.; отрецензирована 18 марта 2026 г.; принята к публикации 20 мая 2026 г.

Для цитирования: Новичкова Д.А., Муминов С.О., Демченко А.С., Ананьева С.В. Комическое в художественной антропологии произведений В.В. Вересаева // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Литературоведение. Журналистика. 2026. Т. 31. № 3. С. 626–635. <http://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2026-31-3-626-635> EDN: AYAUSN

Introduction

The comic reflects the ideological perspectives and worldviews of authors: “Laughter, as a universal human capacity to perceive the world in all the intricate weaving of its light and dark sides, undoubtedly harbors a wise principle” (Stolovich, 1999, p. 246). M.M. Bakhtin further observed that “...the vast world of laughter forms and manifestations stood in opposition to the official and serious (in its tone) culture of the church and feudal Middle Ages” (1990, p. 8). The problems of the culture of laughter in Ancient Rus’ were examined in the work of D.S. Likhachev and A.M. Panchenko (1976), which also advances the idea of the worldview-based nature of laughter.

The comic takes many different forms and can be classified in various ways, but we are interested in its two main forms. The comic manifests itself in two main forms: satire and humour. Humour is less categorical in its evaluation than satire. Satire harshly and consistently exposes vices, whereas humor is characterized by kind and indulgent laughter. Humor is the good-natured ridicule of amusing human traits that do not pose a threat to society. Of significant interest is the book by B. Dzemidok (1974), which characterizes various concepts of the humorous within European philosophy and aesthetics, and identifies specific techniques for generating the comic.

One of the fundamental works devoted to the theory of the comic is V.Ya. Propp’s book *Problems of Comic and Laughter*, in which he proposes the following methodological principle: “...in each individual case, it is necessary to determine the specificity of the comic and to verify to what extent and under what conditions, always or not always, the same phenomenon possesses comic qualities” (1976, p. 15). The value of Propp’s work lies in the fact that it presents a classification of comic devices and characterizes their functions.

Contemporary literary studies demonstrate a certain interest in investigating the comic in fiction. For example, researchers have analyzed the techniques of representing the comic in the prose of V.V. Erofeev (Oleshkevich, 2019), in the works of F.M. Dostoevsky (Mukhina, 2012), and in those of N.A. Teffi (Bochkareva, 2009).

The comic serves as one of the means of realizing artistic anthropology, which encompasses various ways of depicting the human being in a literary work. Literary

scholarship offers diverse approaches to the study of artistic anthropology. For instance, the anthropology of A.P. Chekhov's prose has been examined in relation to the architectonics of his works (Lipke, 2017); the artistic anthropology of I.S. Turgenev has been analyzed with regard the typology of his literary characters (Davydov, 2022).

The poetics of the comic constitutes a system of signs reflected within a literary work. Philological science presents diverse approaches to studying the semiotics of the comic. For instance, A.G. Kozintsev (2024) examines the semiotics of humor, while N.A. Orlova (2010) investigates the semiotic mechanisms of the comic in the prose of S. Dovlatov. S.V. Ivleva (2010) identifies the linguosemiotic characteristics of comic absurdity.

Recent studies examine the reception of A.S. Pushkin in the works of the Satyricon writers (Karpov, 2025), mockery as a special type of laughter in the prose of Leonid Andreev (Mytareva, 2024), and irony as a means of creating comic effects in the works of M.E. Saltykov-Shchedrin (Sultanova, 2024). Researchers have also investigated the poetics of the comic in E.I. Zamyatin's "English" novellas (Bystrenkov, 2022) and in A.P. Chudakov's novel *Darkness Falls upon the Old Steps* (Elepova, Orlova, 2025).

All major studies devoted to the work of V.V. Veresaev were published in the twentieth century. Their authors include I.M. Geizer (1957), G.A. Brovman (1959), Yu.V. Babushkin (1966), and V. Nolde (1986). More recent studies of Veresaev's work include articles analyzing the image of women in his novel *Sisters* (Novichkova, 2020b) and in his short story *Euthemia* (Novichkova, 2020a). These and other studies provide analyses and interpretations of the poetics and thematic concerns of Veresaev's prose. However, significant gaps remain in the study of the category of the comic in his works. The comic and the mechanisms of creating comic effects in Veresaev's writing have received little scholarly attention.

The relevance of this work lies in the fact that its topic has been insufficiently explored. The poetics of the comic in Veresaev's prose requires a consistent analysis. The goal of this work is to explore the elements of the comic in the artistic anthropology of V.V. Veresaev's works, that is, to elucidate the nature of the comic, determine its primary functions in Veresaev's fiction, and analyze the poetics of the comic.

Materials and Methods

To explore the research topic, a stylistic analysis was conducted, a typological approach to interpreting the material was employed, and a poetic-structural analysis of the literary text was performed.

The study was carried out within an interdisciplinary framework, drawing on findings and theoretical principles from linguistics, literary studies, aesthetics, and cultural studies. The advances in these fields served as the basis for analyzing the modes of representing the comic in the prose of V.V. Veresaev.

Results and Discussion

The comic is embodied in literary works in various ways. The description of the characters' appearance contains anthropological characteristics. This approach to the artistic depiction of humanity in literature is one of the key approaches in realism. The comic is a form of creative interpretation of the human image in art. The main source of comic effect in the realistic works of V.V. Veresaev is portraits of literary heroes. The portraits form a unique artistic system, each element of which reflects a specific character trait of the literary characters.

Consider a typical example of a humorous portrait in V.V. Veresaev's story *The Beautiful Elena*:

In Lesnoye, where Voronetsky was planning to go that evening, his university friend Mozhzhelov, a mathematics teacher recently transferred from the provinces to St. Petersburg, lived at a dacha. Voronetsky sincerely loved him, but he couldn't help but smile ironically at the image of him, with his good-natured, hairy face, his awkward laugh, and his rapid, halting speech. Mozhzhelov remained exactly the same as he had been as a student: he still saw every cab driver and janitor as a "brother", and still passionately discussed Spencer, Marx, and Mikhailovsky¹.

The poetics of this portrait creates a humorous context. The object of humor is the literary hero's appearance. The artistic details of the portrait – a good-natured face, long hair, a shy laugh, and a rapid, halting speech – form the semiotics of a typical, democratically minded intellectual. This is the social aspect of the portrait description. The portrait also reflects the character's psychological traits. Mozhzhelov is a kind, sensitive, and tactful person. This is also indicated by the poetics of the portrait. Thus, the portrait of a literary hero constructs the character's social and psychological traits. The protagonist travels to a summer garden for a performance of the operetta *The Beautiful Elena*. The main source of artistic anthropology for this episode is the portraits of the actors. The poetics of the portrait may contain negative characterological assessments. Here is a description of the actor playing the role of Calchas:

Calchas, bald and red-faced, examined the offerings to the gods and, shaking his head in disappointment, said: "Too many flowers!"².

The portrait reveals the obvious degradation of the character, depicted through the eyes of the protagonist, Voronetsky, who is imbued by the author with arrogance and a contemptuous attitude toward others. The bald head and red complexion in the portrait serve as sources of comedy. These elements form a negative artistic anthropology. The aggressive nature of the vulgar epithets "bald" and "red-faced" testifies to the protagonist's arrogance and spiritual callousness. The portrait reflects the "evil" perspective of a cynical protagonist, devoid of delicacy and kindness.

¹ Veresaev, V. (1961). *The Beautiful Elena*. In *Collected Works* (Vol. 1, p. 193). Pravda Publ. (In Russ.)

² Veresaev, V. (1961). *The Beautiful Elena*. In *Collected Works* (Vol. 1, p. 194).

The exaggerated nature of the performance and the actors' insincerity are reflected in the portrayals of the characters, which are also seen through the eyes of the story's protagonist:

Elena, a pretty, plump blonde with heavily made-up eyes, tossed her head majestically and spoke in an unnatural, theatrical voice; Paris, with unpleasant, sensual lips beneath a light moustache, kept glancing bewilderedly at the audience³.

In the above fragment, the critical language of the comic is expressed through the description of the face, gestures, and body movements. The negative characterization is conveyed by the facial semantics: the lady's painted-on eyes and the unpleasant lips of the actor playing Paris. These anthropological elements of the portrait create a satirical context. The semantics of the body and body movements are also comically tinged. The actress's ample figure belies the image of the classical Elena. The actress uses clichés in her performance ("she threw back her head majestically") and clearly indulges in pompous and empty declamation ("she spoke in an unnatural theatrical voice"). The confused looks of the actor playing Paris and his unpleasant lips are also signs of a satirical anthropological discourse, depicting a man unsure of himself and his talent.

Artistic anthropology is constructed not only through the depiction of literary characters but also through the integration of objects and material artifacts. The semantics of objects are embedded in shaping the contexts of the comic. Furthermore, material items impart a comic appearance to a literary character. As noted in the text:

Calchas announced that the gods commanded Menelaus to go to Crete; a ridiculous hood was placed on Menelaus, a multicoloured umbrella and a suitcase were put into his hands, and Menelaus began to say his goodbyes⁴.

A hood, a multicoloured umbrella and a suitcase are taken out of their historical context and placed in the ancient world. These are not items that Menelaus could have used. In this instance, the objects serve as an additional backdrop for the creation of a humorous anthropology. The book is also used to create a comic effect:

Voronetsky had long wanted to become familiar with philosophy and bought Falkenberg's History of Modern Philosophy for this purpose, but he could not get past the fourth page of the introduction. There was one phrase there that distracted him twice from reading and from which he began again each time. This phrase became very tiresome to Voronetsky; he would read it, and he would lose the desire to read further. And so he would put Falkenberg aside and take up Maupassant⁵.

The book is a sign of the protagonist's intellectual and spiritual inadequacy. The author uses the semantic of the book image in this fragment to create a negative characterization of the protagonist, who is incapable of reading a work on philosophical issues.

³ Veresaev, V. (1961). The Beautiful Elena. In *Collected Works* (Vol. 1, p. 194).

⁴ Veresaev, V. (1961). The Beautiful Elena. In *Collected Works* (Vol. 1, p. 194).

⁵ Veresaev, V. (1961). The Beautiful Elena. In *Collected Works* (Vol. 1, p. 192).

The centrality of the object in the portrait sketch creates a comic plane. The following examples from V.V. Veresaev's story *Towards Life*:

Cab horses run. A high school student with a crooked backpack buys halva, which looks like putty, from a Greek. A gentleman walks by, his new top hat gleaming. And they all seem to twitch slightly: all soulless, dead and flat. And their earnest self-assurance, their ignorance of their involuntary participation in the world cinematograph, is inexpressibly funny⁶.

The backpack and the new top hat dominate the characters. These objects create the effect of automating the behavior of people devoid of individuality and soul. The humorous dimension can be constructed through the author's focus on specific facial features of a character. As illustrated in the text:

Along the icy path, beneath the ropes with hung laundry, rolled Gavrik, Praskovya's little brother. Fenya had pulled his hair – he had tied all the strings on the laundry into knots, and that was how they froze. He skated along – thin, with a sharp, sniffing nose, and his roguish eyes were scanning around, looking for where else to play pranks⁷.

Here, the artistic significance lies in the description of the boy's nose and eyes. The nose and eyes are given a certain independence through their personification, which, coupled with the content of the portrait, creates a humorous context. The author endows the nose with its own distinct semantic field. The hyperbolization of specific elements within the character's portrait – namely, the nose and the forehead – generates a comic context. As described in the text:

Kracht, who had arrived from Moscow, sat there – a small man with a huge forehead and a fleshy nose. Everyone listened to him respectfully⁸.

The description of the forehead and nose is exaggerated. The enormous forehead and fleshy nose are key elements of the portrait sketch, creating an impression of the character's appearance. The artistic details of the portrait may indicate a person's spiritual and physical degradation:

The people all around were disgusting, the organ boomed disgustingly. Men with cheeky, sallow faces shouted and waved their arms listlessly; thin, unattractive women laughed with greenish-pale lips. As if they had all been piled up in a damp basement for a long time and now emerged – crumpled, caked, moldy... With what fragments of their tattered souls can they still embrace life?⁹

The given fragment paints a satirical, generalized portrait of characters who have lost their physical and spiritual health. Negative anthropological characteristics (the cheeky, sallow faces of the men, the greenish-pale lips of the women)

⁶ Veresaev, V. (1961). *Towards Life*. In *Collected Works* (Vol. 4, p. 65). Pravda Publ. (In Russ.)

⁷ Veresaev, V. (1961). *Towards Life*. In *Collected Works* (Vol. 4, p. 46).

⁸ Veresaev, V. (1961). *Towards Life*. In *Collected Works* (Vol. 4, p. 65).

⁹ Veresaev, V. (1961). *Towards Life*. In *Collected Works* (Vol. 4, p. 76).

demonstrate their complete degradation. The emphasis on deviation from the norm is the source of the satirical tone of this fragment. The process of spiritual degradation is indicated by the comparison of the literary heroine to an animal:

From the living room, from the kitchen, from the hallway, the choking voice of Anna Petrovna constantly echoed. In tune with it, the hens in the henhouse clucked hysterically¹⁰.

The heroine is indirectly compared to hens, and this zoologization of her image points to a process of moral decline.

A contradiction in a character's behavior serves as a mode of constructing a humorous anthropology. The description of the literary character's appearance in V.V. Veresaev's short story *Isanka* is built precisely upon such contradiction:

Nikolai Pavlovich is a bustling man, constantly rubbing his hands; beneath his nose, there is a small, dark triangle of hair on a clean-shaven lip. His entire figure suggests that he is about to rush somewhere obligingly, to do something for his interlocutor. This stems from his shyness in front of unfamiliar people. Alone with his inner circle, he is calm and even slow¹¹.

In shaping the humorous context here, the hands play a pivotal role. The rubbing of the hands acts as a sign of the character's misplaced obsequiousness. Furthermore, the nose and the lips are drawn into this humorous semiosphere, while other significant facial features, such as the eyes, are omitted from the portrait. The author's strategy lies in describing only those portrait elements that are relevant to creating a comic tone.

The following humorous description of a character's appearance from one of Veresaev's stories is similarly structured around the actualization of of specific portrait features:

His name was Ivan Mikhailovich. He was a paramedic in the triage area of the hospital where I was working as a resident doctor at the time. He had a sparse mustache and beard, and maintained a solemn demeanor with great dignity. He possessed a profound look, viewing life and people with condescension, a hidden, pitying smile lingering in his eyes¹².

The author foregrounds the sparse mustache, beard, eyes, and smile, with each element conveying a specific semantic function. The mustache and beard serve an informative function; these portrait elements provide external data about the character, primarily indicating his physical attributes, which precede the mention of the eyes and the smile. Meanwhile, the eyes and the smile fulfill a characterizing function, directly constructing the character's personality. Consequently, they operate as dominant micro-images within the portrait. Through them, the image of

¹⁰ Veresaev, V. (1961). Towards Life. In *Collected Works* (Vol. 4, p. 105).

¹¹ Veresaev, V. (1961). *Isanka*. In *Collected Works* (Vol. 4, p. 205). Pravda Publ. (In Russ.)

¹² Veresaev, V. (1961). Paramedic Kichunov. In *Collected Works* (Vol. 4, pp. 271–272). Pravda Publ. (In Russ.)

a character who is arrogant and skeptical toward people is drawn – a disposition that stands in stark contrast to his modest social status and level of education. This incongruity serves as the primary source of the comic effect.

Thus, the poetics of the comic in V.V. Veresaev's prose emerges as a distinct form of satirical or humorous representation of the characters' appearance and psychological profile.

Conclusion

To conclude our analysis of the forms in which the comic is embodied in the artistic anthropology of V.V. Veresaev's works, let us summarise the findings.

Portraits of literary characters are a means of character construction. Descriptions of the characters' appearances form an artistic system, each element of which contains specific anthropological semantics. In the works of V.V. Veresaev, the comic is realized in humorous or satirical form. Satire generates produces negative artistic anthropology. Humour conveys benevolent anthropological meanings.

Portraits of literary characters are based on the deliberate transformation of facial and physical features, which creates to the comic effect.

The comic is one of the main means of shaping the artistic anthropology of V.V. Versace's prose, which is situated within the context of Russian realism literature.

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