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ScienceDirect

Russian Literature 81 (2016) 1–47

Russian
Literature

www.elsevier.com/locate/ruslit

HOW GOGOL'S 'OLD WORLD LANDOWNERS' IS MADE: THE IRONIC WEAVE UNRAVELLED

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Abstract

Most commentators regard Gogol's 'Old World Landowners' ('Starosvetskie pomeschiki') as an idyll into which elements of the tragi-comic intrude, but there is an overwhelming consensus that the story's iconic opening passage, which describes the rural setting and introduces the protagonists, still presents a virtually unbroken idyll. The present article sets out to show that the anomalies critics have occasionally discerned already here are not sporadic but sustained and programmatic, forming the basis of a highly subtle, intricately woven and ultimately definitive narrative irony in which the narrator comes to be seen as a profoundly disturbed urban snob who is praising the sentimental rural visions that haunt him against his better judgement.

Keywords: *Gogol*; *'Old World Landowners'*; *Narrative Irony*

'Starosvetskie pomeschiki' ('Old World Landowners', 1835) is the first tale in Gogol's *Mirgorod* (1835), the second volume of his two-volume cycle of Ukrainian stories. The story tells of a childless elderly couple, whom we take to be man and wife, living a simple but apparently self-sufficient life in a traditional country setting, which we take to be an estate in the rural Ukraine. The story focuses on the details of the couple's daily life, apparently showing their mutual love and commitment, their goodness and generosity to others,

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ruslit.2016.03.001>

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and the natural bounty that surrounds them; it ends with their death and the ruin of their estate, which falls into the hands of a distant relative. Aside from this, little of any consequence seems to happen. The most dramatic event is the temporary disappearance of the heroine's cat and its return in a strangely feral state. It is without doubt one of Gogol's best-known texts and its opening passage, which sets the scene and introduces the two main characters, has acquired an iconic status.

However, despite the story's apparent simplicity, it has continued to confuse and divide its commentators. While some insist on seeing it as an unadulterated idyll in the Karamzinian tradition (Ševyrev, Leger, Slonimskij, Čiževskij, Galster, Karlinsky, Maguire, LeBlanc),¹ others prefer to think of it as a "broken" idyll – an eclogue with satirical, tragic and/or tragicomic overtones. Erlich describes it as "an idyll with a difference", as "a seedy pastoral" that is "neither a pure idyll nor a straight satire";² Ermilov calls it a "satirical idyll" on the "fine boundary-line between humanity and parody" ("на тончайшей грани между человеческим и пародийным").³ Puškin, famously, refers to it as a "humorous, touching idyll that forces us to laugh through tears of sorrow and tenderness" ("шутливая, трогательная идиллия, которая заставляет нас смеяться сквозь слезы грусти и умиления").⁴ Even Belinskij, who sees it as a "tearful comedy" ("слезливая комедия"), finds himself bound to admit that the boundless goodness and hospitality of the elderly couple and the constancy of their love for one another move us and engage our sympathy.⁵

Among those who are unwilling to read 'Starosvetskie pomeščiki' as a straightforward idyll, there is nonetheless a clear consensus that, whatever its conclusion, it does at least start out that way. Günther, who believes the story to combine elements of a "paradiesische Idylle" with a sense of spiritual impoverishment brought about by a life of ease and limitation, seems to be in little doubt that the narrative begins in an unalloyed idyllic mode:

Die Novelle [...] beschreibt das zurückgezogene Leben eines alten Gutsbesitzerpaares in der Ukraine. Der Ich-Erzähler beginnt im wehmütigen Ton der Erinnerung die Abgeschiedenheit und Stille ihres Daseins zu schildern. Wohlwollend hebt er die Güte, Gastfreundschaft und gegenseitige Liebe der beiden Alten hervor.⁶

Braun, who agrees that the story ultimately reveals itself to be a false idyll, also describes the opening setting in purely idyllic terms:

In der Tat wird hier das Leben eines patriarchalischen Gutsbesitzer-Ehepaars nahezu wie ein Paradies auf Erden geschildert. Die beiden alten Leute lieben einander, tun niemandem etwas Böses, das Land ist so fruchtbar, dass niemand Hunger zu leiden braucht.⁷

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