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The Concept of Irony in the Study of Literature

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Abstract. With the lapse of time the interpretation of irony and its technique has changed and complicated greatly. Moreover, an irony – it is not only a stylistic device, but a method of mentality, state of spirit, a way of thinking that appeared as a general tendency of our time. Irony as the equal concept of the comic is singled out. It is a reflection of implicit meaning, which differs from or is contrary to overt meaning, by verbal means (verbal irony) or situations of the story (situational irony). Verbal irony includes two types: situational irony – overt type of irony realized in micro- and macro-context, and associative irony, which is realized mostly in mega-context. This understanding of irony allowed widening the scope of analysis of linguistic means from lexical level to syntactic and textual levels. An irony as hidden parody expressed by inverse text lets see what an author wants to tell indeed. Existing approach to an irony has led and philologists and linguists to necessity to divide two concepts: an irony as stylistic device and an irony as an ironical meaning created by different means of language.

Keywords: *irony, subtext, fiction, interpretation, trope*

Among existing phenomena in cultural practice there is a whole line of those which are widely applied but they remain problematic. One of these examples is an irony. We willingly use it in our speech we easily notice it in the literary texts, but during an attempt to reveal its internal mechanism we stumble upon the complications. It dominates in the most bizarre and colorful art styles. Antic comedy, grotesque world of Rabelais, philosophical story of Voltaire, rich in shades the comic element of Gogol and Chekhov indicate the presence of ironical element at all stages of history of European literature, and the XX century according to the famous expression became “the kingdom of an irony”.

The concept of an irony we meet in three areas of our culture and generally of our spiritual life. We know irony as a term of philosophy, specifically as one of the rhetoric means. Further in the literature generally, that is in drama, where it is said about dramatic irony as an irony is often an integral part of dramatic structure, it is also used a term “structural irony”. Thirdly, the concept of an irony is used in everyday life, when we talk about an irony of fate, unexpected incidents. [10] Certain attitude to people’s deeds that is characterized by tolerance, even by ambiguity, humor and lightness, an elegance of expression is called an irony.

Writers working over linguistic organization of their works very often resort to so called contextual, that is unfixed in dictionaries synonymy. The contextual synonyms are words and expressions which denote a subject and in the same time are used in improper for them or figurative meaning. A word that is used in improper for it figurative meaning traditionally is denoted by the term “trope” (from the Greek – *turn of speech*). [1] As fine-expressive means tropes attracted the attention from the time of classical ancientness and they were described with details in rhetoric, poetics and other arts. The essence of tropes is in comparison of the meaning presented in traditional usage of a lexical unit and the meaning that is given by the same unit in artistic language during realization of special stylistic function. Tropes play the main although the supporting role in the interpretation of the text but of course the stylistic analysis must lead to the synthesis of the text and it cannot be reduced in no way only to the recognition of tropes.

Linguists divide tropes into two groups: verbal and semantic (or the tropes of sentences). They refer to the first group: metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, onomato-

poeia, and catachresis. Semantic tropes or the tropes of thoughts – are allegory, irony, paraphrase and hyperbole. [4]

In order to add the modern views in general history of irony study, we should characterize the main previous periods. A short introduction into a history of a problem will help to come to a modern understanding of its nature.

Irony derives from special stylistic device even known for antique writers. Ancient Greeks called so verbal hypocrisy, when a person wants to seem more stupid than she/he is in reality. [7] A master of an irony – ironic – is a half-comic figure. According to dominant features of character he is as a rule an incredibly deceptive scamp, a scoundrel. His lie, hypocrisy, and often vulgarity cause laughing. The main feature of this figure is a pretense, simulation. In other words he pretends to be other, not as he is in reality. In ancient drama his role is similar to a scapegoat. The audience despises him, laughs at him and maybe in such a way satisfying its own negative impulses. We can meet this character later on, especially in neoclassical comedy.

A word “irony” is translated from Latin as “dissimulation”, and here we have a precise definition of an irony properly as hypocrisy, dissimulation. In rhetoric, classical or contemporary, irony is understood as a comic proposition which aim is to claim something contrary from what was said. Rhetorical irony – is a device widely used in pedagogy, political discourse and journalism. [6] A classical example of rhetorical irony is a claim of Plato that Socrates is the wisest person because he knows that he knows nothing. This as it would seem a simple statement includes almost all borders of this difficult concept. Socrates’ method is especially effective when it is used with easiness, naturally, as a play. In the irony nature is always present an element of the game, that is an esthetic element. [9]

Socrates’ irony is also rich in that there is at one time and simulation and a literal truth. So Socrates’ claim – it is and pedagogical method and a deep philosophical truth as for human’s limitation, borders of personal knowledge. So in the very essence of an irony there is an element of ambiguity, and only very rarely even rhetorical irony is completely mono-semantic.

If to look at the question of historical perspective, actually this immanent ambiguity of ironical structure, or more precisely, its dialectical nature lets to extend our understanding of irony far beyond the borders of a sim-

ple stylistic device (when a word or a phrase is given an opposite meaning with the aim of mocking), to extend in philosophy or even more clearly in philology and in the study of literature. This reinterpretation reached so far borders, that about the main structure of the literature is said as about ironical, as a literary work is offered to a reader at the same time as “truth” and “lie” (that is “fiction”). Northrop Frye almost fifty years ago affirmed that the essence of the literature is – irony. [10]

In esthetic of classicism irony was understood as an attribute of comic, one of the methods of humorous criticism in satire. Belonging of an irony to a low style was fixed strictly, but at the same time the word combination “the irony of fate” existed, that meant a fatal mismatch of human’s perceptions of what was predicted to her by gods. “The irony of fate” more correlated with a tragic than with a comic collision.

At the end of the XVIII – beginning of XIX century the views on irony were radically revised by romanticism. Though the process of expansion of a concept of irony was occurring almost synchronously, it is greatly connected with a phenomenon of German philosophical idealism, especially with the philosophy of an absolute “I” (Fichte J.G., 1762-1814), and also of German philosopher Schlegel F. (1772-1829), who is hitherto considered as one of the most original theorist of the literature. The first task Schlegel put for himself implied the inclusion of an irony to agenda of the literary discourse: “Socrates’ irony is the only spontaneous and at the same time completely conscious hypocrisy. For a person who has not an irony in her nature, it will always remain a mystery, even after its complete disclosure... In irony everything must be funny and at the same time serious, naively sincere, and even deeply artificial. An irony contains and evokes our consciousness of unsolved conflict between something implicit and something conditioned, between impossibility and necessity of complete expression”.

In such his utterances Schlegel allegedly remains on the old soil of rhetoric, thus more spread in the direction of philosophical relation to the reality of the life, and mainly the problems of arts. In one of his works Schlegel reminds: “Philosophy – it is a real home of irony”. [10,39] It is easy to agree with it, if you admit that Socrates’ irony has not only utilitarian nature, that it is not only a device of rhetoric, but also a factor that can play a heuristic role, that is to be a factor of cognitive process. A famous Canadian scientist Northrop Frye states: “The structure of a literature is ironical to the core, because what it says differs essentially more or less from what it signifies”. [3] As much as the essence of irony is a simulation, so it is an essence of the literature.

The basis of Schlegel’s understanding of irony was and remained a Plato-Socrates’ model. In the following development of this notion the essential role is played by Fichte. The main model of Fichte’s dialectics is an interchange of affirmation and negation. His model turned to be especially effective in working out the theory of irony. Fichte’s dialectics exactly corresponded to dialectic’s of creative process that is to dynamics of inspiration that alternates with skepticism (to the complete denial). This dialectics became a new period in understanding of creative process and of an irony properly as a self-realization of a creative “I”, but also and his self-destruction. A radical

form of this dynamics is a so called romantic irony that was practice in English literature by such authors as Laurence Sterne (“Tristram Shendi”) and by Byron.

Their philosophy gave an impact to an appearance of new worldviews and new outlook. In the sphere of culture it is romanticism. Romanticism has a lot of sources and national varieties. Idealism is his philosophical basement without doubt. Here the philosophy of absolute that is creative “I” plays an important role in comprehension of the art’s nature. Because this absolute “I” embodies representatively in art activity. An artist is ascribed an ability and capacity to create his own reality that does not depend on the laws of “external world” that is objective reality. On this doctrine is developing the doctrine of absolute independence of an artist, and this concept gives an impulse to developing of the so called romantic irony the essence of which is in showing of unlimited independence of an artistic “I” that is in revealing of his ability not only create secondary reality but also to deny it destroying an illusion that has been just created by poet. It denoted disharmony of ideal and real life, relativity of real values. Exactly in the period of romanticism the survey of irony as a meaningful category connected with a worldview and esthetic of an author began. In their esthetic the romantics led down the irony to the level of philosophical life position, equaled with the reflection generally. They specially underlined that the irony is able to generate not only comical but also tragic effect. The freedom from imperfection of reality was the highest value of romantic consciousness. This principle required “a universal irony” – directive to that the author doubts not only real things and phenomena but also his own thoughts about them. The desire to go through the boundaries of set rules and views freely without being connected with any truth was fixed in categorical concept “play” by romantics. [9,7]

The works and life position of a poet appeared in its turn to be a high ironical play as any other “plays of the world”: “All the sacred plays of an art it is a phenomenon of a separate reproduction of unfinished play of a universe”. All ironical machinations serve to the confirmation of an independence of artistic spirit. An artist uses all means in order to imagine the distance between him and artistic world that he creates with all his creative forces, creates artistic reality only to express his god-like strength in destroying of this illusion.

This type of irony differs from rhetoric first of all by appearing only in the works of literature. The aim of this irony is literature, the creative process. When we talk about “romantic irony” first of all we mean its unexpected form that predicts author’s destruction of fiction illusion.

“Realism” is ill-disposed towards an ironical modality. Its aim is representation of sociopolitical reality and its criticism. This is a politics that hates courage and ambiguity. “Realism” suggests rhetorical irony, satire and sarcasm. However nevertheless they are related with an irony they never doubt fiction reality, don’t make it as an object of reflection. Any ambiguity, any skepticism or comic game of imagination is not appreciated here.

Theorists of post-romantic art directed their searches in order not to give a chance to the universal irony to prevent understanding of inner essence of an object that is represented, to make this object as a helpless toy in the

artist's hands, to covert an ironical play into an end in itself.

Instead of romantic subjective theory XX century gave a row of concepts of an objective irony. The most well-known among them is "an epic irony" of Thomas Mann who claimed that an irony is necessary for art as the widest and free from any moralizing view on the reality. This is a "mightiness that feels tenderness to small", it helps represent a complete image of a human in art, "because in everything that concerns a person we should avoid extremes and final decisions". [2]

We should briefly look at "tragic irony". Most frequently we meet it in a drama. Maybe the most important difference between literary and dramatic or tragic irony is that the first one is first of all a creation of a poetic imagination, and the last one is has a direct relation with real irrelevances that dominate in life and in social consciousness. Often in the same context they say about "an irony of fate" that is a part of everyday discourse. The essence of a tragic irony is in contrast between a human with all her desires, plans, ideas and dark crucial forces, fate which laws ruin it. A classical tragic hero is one who opposes these forces and in such a way he saves his human dignity. A spectator becomes a witness of not only this struggle and defeat but also of a victory of a human dignity.

Although there are a lot of common features between all these types of irony we should also mention their considerable difference. Socrates' irony or rhetoric irony is first of all an educative means, an element of discourse or heuristic tool. An irony in literature is much more complicated phenomenon. It appears in the confrontation of a human spirit with life's paradoxes which have not any solution, and it is here an ironical distance, understanding of fixed uncertainty of human life and knowledge becomes an alternative that lets a person live with a consciousness of paradox of existential problems.

It was always difficult to define the belonging of this or that work to the comic literature. But in the second half

of the XX century it became more difficult to do this as in the contemporary literary process we can notice tendencies of diffusion, penetration of comic elements into non-comic literature, concrescence of comic and dramatic with tragic, appearance of such genres where a comic principle does not carry traditional loading. Laughing loses its gaiety and optimism. And also there is a whole layer of post-modern literature, wider – culture with its fuzziness of genre canons and conscious attitude to play, to irony. Literary critics who study the problems of structuralism, semiotics, and postmodernism (Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco) consider that one of the main features of post-modern culture and philosophy is ironical reconsideration, parody of plots, metal-linguistic game. Here the laughing neither affirms nor denies, it demonstrate the relativity of everything that is real, creates necessary distance between contemporary author and his predecessor – classic.

At the end of the XX century people had to come to the understanding of necessity, priority of subjective factor in the history, they realized that society consists not of homogeneous mass, anonymous crowd, but of individuals who bears in them the whole worlds unique and value in themselves. But having realized himself a person also realized uncertainty, helplessness of his position among historical whirlpool. And he put on a mask of an ironic.

We can come to a conclusion that an irony is a device of implicit meaning of the text, it is constructed on the basis of difference between an objectively naïve meaning and a meaning as a conception. It acts as a hidden joke and in this way it differs from satire and parody with their explicitly identified status. Irony as a stylistic device is semantically ambivalent: on the one hand it is a caricature and in this regard profanation of some reality based on hesitation in its essence, on the other hand – irony is a trial of the strength of this reality that leaves the hope for its potentiality.

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Костенко А.П. Понятие “ирония” в литературоведении

Аннотация. Со временем, как понимание иронии, так и сама ее техника значительно изменилась и усложнилась. Более того, ирония – это не только стилистический прием, но и способ мышления, состояние души, который возник, как общая тенденция нашего времени. Ирония как скрытая насмешка, которая выражена прямо противоположным текстом, позволяет увидеть то, что автор хочет сказать на самом деле. Существующий подход к иронии привел и литературоведов, и лингвистов к необходимости разделения двух понятий: ирония как средство, стилистический прием и ирония, как результат – иронический смысл, который создан разными средствами языка.

Ключевые слова: *ирония, стилистический прием, интерпретация, подтекст, фикция, троп*