

## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

### **Life as It Is and Life as It Could Have Been Functions of Christian Motifs in Chekhov's Late Short Stories**

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The aim of this doctoral thesis is to show how Christian motifs are used in Chekhov's late short stories. A Christian motif is seen as a unit carrying both form and content presented on the surface (the mimetic level) by its activators - biblical quotations, references and church realia - and creating an added significance on the sign level (the semiotic level) of the text.

The study focuses on the analysis of the following short stories, selected as paradigmatic from a corpus of 52 stories collected in a database: "Dreams", "The Cossack", "Frost", "The Student", "The Head Gardener's Story", and "The Bishop". The analysis is performed in two stages, using tools provided by Freedman and Riffaterre: firstly, the Christian motifs are traced and identified by their activators on the mimetic level of the texts. Secondly, the functions of the motifs are investigated on the semiotic level.

By use of Christian motifs the possibility of a different way of life as an alternative to the life described on the mimetic level is activated on the semiotic level. This possibility is often expressed by the themes of mercy and compassion as complements to human weakness and suffering. The alternative is manifested in the following four ways: by its absence from the reality of the fiction; by the description of the preconditions required for its existence; as an appeal to live in a different way, expressed by the characters; as a problematic issue. The alternative is thus created by the maieutic function of the Christian motif, not by direct didacticism.

A heightened interest of Chekhov in *tears* as an expression of compassion and solidarity with our fellow beings in suffering and pain is revealed. These *tears* are combined with *sobornost'* and sometimes with *epiphany* and *enlightenment*. *Tears* and *sobornost'* evoke hope and optimism.

The investigation shows that the Christian motif in Chekhov's late short stories works as "a point-of-view technique" which limits the author's presence in the text and simultaneously involves the subject of the character and the reader. With these functions, the Christian motif participates in the representation of the phenomenological perception of the world which is part of the impressionistic features of Chekhov's prose. It is shown that the Christian motif in these stories has a "poetic function" in Jakobson's terms. By involving the perception of the reader in the process of text building, the Christian motif turns Chekhov's short stories into spatial-form narratives.

The study concludes that the Christian motif is a significant device in Chekhov's artistic method which makes the Chekhovian short story a prototype of the XX century short story.

Key words: Chekhov, short story, Christian motif, mimesis, semiosis, poetic function, maieutics, *sobornost'*, epiphany, impressionism.