

# **Semantics of Suicidal Contexts in Historical and Social reality and Russian literature. Approaches to the topic<sup>1</sup>**

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Nikolay Erdman's play "The Suicide" is closely interrelated to the iconic pieces of "suicide tragedy" because of its genre specific traits. Traditionally, West European literature represents suicide theme in coherence to the theme of impasse/honor/love. Russian drama of XIX century gave the suicide theme a new meaning, since "suicide texts" are turn into tragifarce or "suicide comedy" which introduce fake death pattern along with motiveless suicide of protagonist. Namely this aspect affects traditional perception of "suicide texts" concurrently remodeling the genre itself. Erdman's "The Suicide" represents an example of the text which integrates all traditional traits of the "suicide text" along with introducing of the very new perception which resulted in a completely new genre, travesty of tragedy.

*Key words: tragedy, impasse, concept, honor, tragifarce, parody, genre variation, duty*

The complex genre nature of N. Erdman's play "Suicide" is analyzed in the context of classical examples of suicide tragedy. The traditional motives of suicide in Western European dramaturgy are redemption of guilt, hopeless situation, honor, love, the search for death as a form of "hidden suicide". The Russian drama of the XIX century transfers the motive of suicide from tragedy to tragifars, or into a "comedy with suicide", introducing motives of imaginary death and "unmotivated" suicide, which complicates the genre and deforms the mechanism of genre expectation. The mixing of classical models and their reinterpretation take place in Erdman's "Suicide", who created a rare genre – a parody of tragedy.

The concept of death and funeral rite has a genre-forming significance for tragedy – it is not by chance that in the popular view of the "simple-minded" viewer, comedy is associated with a wedding, and tragedy is associated with the death of the hero, most often with murder. Less often the tragedy ends with suicide, but the more significant is such a finale: the dramatic hero, as is known, is distinguished by a strong will aimed at changing the world. Suicide is an act that completes fate, and therefore it requires the concentration of the entire will of a person. The climax, as a rule, is preceded by a great shock, putting (putting?) a hero in a desperate situation. The meaning of the tragedy is not so much the fact of suicide, as showing how the hero goes to death and accepts it. The first tragedy of rock –

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"Oedipus the King" by Sophocles – is unique not only in that it formed the structure of the classical genre, but also in its finale, which presents two types of suicide: Jocasta hangs herself, Oedipus pokes out his eyes. In other words, the ending is determined by direct suicide and metaphorical: punishing himself with blindness, Oedipus plunges into darkness, which in the mythological representation is equivalent to death. Thus, in the first tragedy of fate, those forms of suicide are presented that will vary in the tragedy over the centuries – this is the acceptance of death in the name of cleansing from the filth of what they have done. And shows funerals, tombstones.

The Greek tragedy also shows the situation of forced suicide, which became the plot of Sophocles' "Antigone". Immured, she commits suicide from hopelessness in the literal sense: not wanting a slow and painful death, Antigone decides to leave of her own free will – quickly. Finally, another version of the tragic passing away is represented by Euripides' Hippolytus, the finale of which – the catastrophic epiphany of Theseus – was prepared by Phaedra's suicide, and it is important both for understanding the meanings of this psychologically complex tragedy and for the "typology" of suicides. The denouement is determined by suicide for the sake of honor and saved life, which is more terrible than death. In fact, it is in the ancient Greek tragedy that those situations develop that can become the plot motivation for the ultimate manifestation of the hero's will to die. And only one "suicidal" discovery takes place in the Renaissance theater – this is suicide for love, a story that is sadder than "there is no ... in the world", the story of Romeo and Juliet.

The love motive is obvious: the death of a beloved turns the world of the dead into a desirable paradise: there is no point in remaining in this world without a beloved, because he becomes "dead". But there is another concept that is significant for the subsequent metamorphoses of the classical genre – this is the situation of imaginary death. In this very "bright tragedy", directed by Father Lorenzo, everything is thought out by a sharp human mind to the smallest detail, but games with death are fraught, and the hero who dared to cheat death is punished: Romeo dies because he thinks Juliet is dead, and she – because she sees Romeo dead. The "director" of death remains alive, but like Theseus, Lorenzo is destined for a sad existence with a taste of guilt for "marriage with death". The tragedy of classicism remains within the already found variants of the hero's last rendezvous with fate, although this era also found one very specific variant of suicide – "shameful" or hidden suicide. So, in P. Corneille's tragedy "Sid", the hero in search of death goes to battle with the Moors, where instead of death he finds glory, then to Jimena, no longer Rodrigo, but Sid, consumed, despite the victory, by the thirst for love defeat. But, as R. writes Barth, exploring Racine's work, "the paradox is that defeat

is the organizing idea of tragedy, and yet the highest form of defeat – death – is never taken seriously by the participants of the tragedy. Death here is just a name, a part of speech, an argument in a dispute.

Tragic death is not terrible, most often it is an empty grammatical category... There is, firstly, the death that is being sought. It's like a shameful self-destruction, the responsibility for which is shifted to chance, to an external threat, to heavenly forces. Such a death combines the attractive features of a military feat and a delayed suicide" [1, pp. 175-176]. The justice of such an unexpected view of tragedy as a desire for death, which is more talked about than accepted, is most openly demonstrated by the tragedies of both Corneille and Racine. Romantic tragedy develops in line with already well-known models, although she also managed to contribute to the classic genre with suicide - this is "Emilia Galotti" by G. Lessing. The finale of the tragedy is based on a "game" with a dagger: Emilia wants to avoid shame by stabbing herself, but physical weakness does not correspond to spiritual strength, and a special, dual suicide-murder situation develops: the father who stabbed his daughter is not a murderer, but a savior who fulfilled the will of his strong-minded and proud daughter. The Russian tragedy of the XVIII century . it remains within the framework of the genre canon, and therefore the suicide of the main character appears as expected and quite appropriate to the current situation – at least, this is what happens both in A. Sumarokov and Ya. Princess. All the more striking is the genre breakdown that Russian dramaturgy experienced in the XIX century, a vivid indicator of which was the "wandering" concept of suicide.

Let's consider several dramaturgical texts "involved" in suicide. It is curious that the beginning of the century was marked by tragic murders ("Boris Godunov", "Little Tragedies" by Pushkin, "Masquerade" by Lermontov).

Dramatic heroes come to the idea of suicide only in the second half of the century, and – very significantly – the first "suicide" starts his games with Death in a tragifarse is A. Sukhovo-Kobylin's "Death of Tarelkin" (1869), the last, third, part of his "Paintings of the Past". The traditional solution of a dramatic hero is to change the world or abandon / retire from life, but Tarelkin is absolutely not a tragic or even dramatic hero, he is the hero of a grotesque or "black comedy", therefore death is a natural continuation of his lifestyle. The farce of life turns into a farce of death: Tarelkin is the one who organized an "immortal death" for himself and became the only mortal who could taste immortality. This comedy-joke, in fact, is nothing more than an expanded epitaph.

The dramatic plot as the hero's path to suicide is also defined by Chekhov's plays, which prepare the poetics of the "new drama", in particular, the drama "Ivanov" (1899). The peculiarity of the plot of this transitional play is also in the concept of suicide, which is not prepared in a plot, and compositionally built in an unusual way.

So, in the classical drama, suicide is inscribed only in the genre of tragedy – as the maximum possible manifestation of the human will outside, because the will to die is stronger than the instinct of life. Being the most significant act in the life of the hero and the strongest position in the work, suicide is carefully prepared – both with a rich plot and special rhetoric. The paradox of "Ivanov" is in the divergence of the plot and the plot: events develop as the hero would like, but – quite in the logic of tragic irony – at the moment when Ivanov comes to triumph, he is forced to admit himself defeated: "He died irrevocably! Oh, how my pride is outraged in me, what rage suffocates me!" [2, p. 74] Having stated his spiritual death, the hero chooses physical death at the last minute, refusing to be tempted by love. Suicide, committed almost at the wedding, unwittingly revives the ancient symbol of betrothal with death. But the hero's suicide does not fit into the tragic model: there is no redemption of hamartia, as in Oedipus and Jocasta; there is no suicide in the name of honor, as in Phaedra; there is no acceptance of death in the name of love. In other words, there are none of the classic conditions that provoke the hero to voluntarily leave his life.

What could have prompted the dramatic hero to commit suicide at the end of the XIX century? The feeling of catastrophe from the outside world moves into the inner world of the hero, and no apparent well-being is able to muffle the feeling of personal collapse - disappointment in himself turns out to be stronger than the desire to live. "Ivanov" begins a special meta-plot with suicide in Chekhov's dramaturgy. The suicide comedy "The Seagull" became very important for understanding the new drama. For the concept of voluntary death, this play turns out to be paradoxical in many ways: there is a potential suicide, an attempted murder and an accomplished suicide almost on stage. Treplev shoots himself twice – he only wounded himself first and made Masha unhappy: "... if he had seriously wounded, then I would not have lived a single minute" [3, p. 33]. Ivanov makes a fatal shot after a big monologue in front of his loved ones, and the publicity itself recreates the atmosphere of classic tragic finales. Treplev is restrained in expressing his feelings; he lives alone and misunderstood and also dies alone and incomprehensibly. Moreover, his death is not only not mourned, but also not "made public" – at least on stage. The last phrase of the comedy is "Take Irina Nikolaevna away from here somewhere.

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The fact is that Konstantin Gavrilovich shot himself..." [3, p. 60] – structurally dark: attention is directed at Arkadina, and the suicide was not awarded even the briefest epitaph. The tragedy is reduced, firstly, by the expressed desire of the hero himself to commit suicide ("I had the meanness to kill this seagull today. Soon I will kill myself in the same way" [3, p. 27]), secondly, by the attitude of Dorn, who generally sympathized with the young writer, to his death as a "cause". Thus, the author's will, which assessed the world he created as a "comedy", corresponds to a structure that deprived of any signs of significance the most serious event in the life of another hypostasis of the title image of Treplev.

The following plays consistently reduce the concept of suicide: in "Uncle Vanya" there is one unsuccessful attempt by Voinitsky to murder and he also conceived, but not executed suicide. Familiar attitudes – disappointment in the past, emptiness in the present and longing in the future – did not lead to the expected suicide, but returned to everyday life, although it is "hard" to accept this life. And already in "Three Sisters", Voynitsky's "syndrome" acquires a parody character: about Vershinin's off-stage wife, it is only known that she "with a long girlish braid, philosophizes and often attempts suicide, obviously to annoy her husband" [3, p. 122]. The threat of death as a reason for a family quarrel is a completely different situation, impossible either in tragedy or even in drama. In this context, the mention of suicide becomes a touch to the portrait of a pretentious lady with an unstable psyche. And suicide in Ranevskaya's memoirs is already completely devoid of a romantic halo: "...I tried poisoning myself... So stupid, so shameful..." [3, p. 220].

This is how the centuries-old tradition of leading a hero to suicide only in tragedy is being outlived. For Chekhov, who worked on the eve of an impending

catastrophe, the halo of sacrifice is not colored by a person's will to die, but his courage to accept life and live as long as you are supposed to, with dignity. Thus, the changing concept of death clarifies not so much life as a person in his attitude to death and life. "The Living Corpse" by L. Tolstoy, by the oxymoron of its name, breaks the mechanism of genre expectation and makes it impossible to receptively anticipate the plot. The play is not only psychologically accurately written, but also provocative in its plot: the hero is, as it were, between worlds, committing suicide three times. The first was conceived, but interrupted by Masha and became a metaphor for Protasov's status; the second was a dramatization, the idea of which was borrowed by a gypsy from N. Chernyshevsky's novel "What to Do"; and only the third led the hero to a real death. The hero did not show the will to die – he was pushed to suicide by those who considered their lives broken through his fault.

In the mildest form, the idea of Protasov's departure from life was verbalized by Ivan Petrovich: "You will kill yourself with a revolver, but with their generosity" [4, p. 136]. The views expressed by him ("I die in life and live in death" [4, p. 136]) correspond to the title, but in this situation the fact of the unfree choice of the hero is important ("... I will do what they want..." [4, p. 133]), to whom suicide is prescribed, as it were, and the desire for his death consistently comes from his wife, friend and "society". In other words, there is a situation of "shameful" murder masquerading as suicide. The composition of the drama is built very clearly: there are two women next to Protasov, while one, his wife, pushes him to death, and the second, beloved, saves him from real death by organizing an imaginary one. The ambiguity of death is manifested not only in the forced suicide, but also in the very attitude of Lisa to both the "living" and the "corpse". Protasov's "self-destruction" causes in his wife an attack of love for him, the "deceased", and the "living" husband is hateful to her - suicide, thus, is perceived as the only way to resolve the situation, but from the point of view of not Protasov, but his relatives.

Lisa's attitude to the situation is finally clarified in the fifth act: the terrible thing is not the fact that the first husband died, but the fact that he is alive. The refrain of the finale of the fourth act becomes a spell in love ("I love him alone, I love him" [4, p. 144]), and the refrain of the finale of the next act was the outpouring of the opposite feeling ("Oh, how I hate him" [4, p. 152]). Thus, there is a curious connection between the motives of love and imaginary death, but organic in "Romeo and Juliet" in Tolstoy's drama, it takes an inverted character: even imaginary death is preferable to life.

Further development follows the path of rethinking, most often ironic and/or parodic, classical models with suicide. The rejection of the classical tradition is most openly presented in the play by F. Sologub "Hostages of Life", which reproduces the ancient, biblical love triangle – Lilith, Adam and Eve, shown through the fate of modern Sologub heroes.

Lovers Misha and Katya are evaluated by other characters as Romeo and Julia – the comparison is quite legitimate, given that the parents of young people are ideological opponents, and they do not give consent to marriage. Misha, passionately in love with Katya, offers to die together, which is preferable to living apart for him. Having brought poison on a date, he was disappointed by Katya's refusal to commit double suicide – her motivation clarifies the title of the play: Mikhail. Katya, is it scary to die together? How this day died, and we will die. Are you afraid to die with me? Katya. I want to live. I want happiness and victory over life. We are young and strong, and we will win. Aren't we the masters of life? Doesn't tomorrow belong to us, when we will be strong and free? I'm not a coward. It's not scary to die. No bravery is needed. It takes more courage to live [5]. The play is strange, but important in this aspect precisely by comparison with the classical model and rejection of it.

In this context, N. Erdman's tragicomedy "Suicide" (1928) acquires special significance, which completes the semantic movement of the concept that initially defines the genre of tragedy: Erdman uses all known plot models in one form or another, creating – at the junction of irony and parody – a special plot code that transforms the classical genre into a rare genre form. First of all, the title attracts attention: it is not nominal, as in a classic tragedy, but also not situational, as most often happens in comedy. The subject of the action included in the title actualizes the action itself, aimed at death. Thus, morality is embedded in the mechanism of receptive expectation, and not the designated name of the subject of action creates the possibility of a theater game rich in semantic possibilities. The playful nature of the play is primarily due to the parody beginning that permeates all the main levels – speech, plot and genre. At the lexical level, the plot begins to develop as a result of giving a specific meaning to the phraseological turn: "What am I going to die, or what? Are you harassing my last breath?" [7, p. 86] – "What if he does something to himself" [7, p. 88]. Further events resemble a rapidly expanding snowball: Kalabushkin, summoned to the aid of Margarita Lukyanovna, zealously undertakes the search for a potential suicide, during which a significant collision of two worlds – domestic and mortal - takes place: Podsekalnikov finally got to the coveted liver sausage, but the Kalabushkin piece of sausage that overtook him takes it for a revolver, ready to shoot directly into the victim's mouth. Thus, death appears as liberation from suffering, but this is only if there is a God. God himself, even in the case of a generous attitude to the present, is an ant, i.e. a hardworking being, but without impulses of inspiration. This existential question, on which life after death depends, the question of the existence of God, the "suicide" addresses the deaf-mute, which makes the situation hopeless - the answer is impossible by definition.

The main compositional principle of "Suicide" is the conjugation of a reduced–everyday beginning and a mortal-philosophical one. As a sign of a broken life,

Podsekalnikov breaks dishes, and the broken cup turned out to be the last step towards a collision with the Universe: "Life is broken, and there is no one to cry. The world... the universe... humanity... A coffin... and two people behind the coffin, that's all of humanity" [7, p. 109]. So, for Podsekalnikov, as for Lizhetarelkin, the assessment of life is the number of mourners at the coffin. But the hero of Erdman did not guess his fate – the procession of those wishing to see him off on his last journey begins during his lifetime. Instead, strangers come with the message that Podsekalnikov is dead; they take measurements for the funeral toilets of ladies, discuss styles, etc. Against the background of these everyday worries, the body of Podsekalnikov is brought in, thanks to which, firstly, the first "resurrection" of the suicide occurs, secondly, the complete displacement of domestic and sacred spaces: being in the room, the hero thinks that he is in heaven, his wife – virgin Mary, Seraphim – cherub, etc. Returning from "heaven" to earth also brings back a situation that the wife and mother-in-law already see as a "farce".

But for Podsekalnikov, this "comedy of death" is almost a Chekhov drama, hence the famous refrain of the finale of the Three Sisters, "We must live..." with the non-Chekhov ending of the phrase: "in order to shoot ourselves" [7, p. 153]. Many significant events take place at the coffin of the "suicide": Alexander Petrovich demands to pay him "for the deceased", turning death into a commercial enterprise like Tarelkin; at the coffin of the "real" Podsekalnikov, Viktor Viktorovich tells about the image he "composed" for Fedya Pitunin; finally, at the funeral service, the "suicide" "resurrects" for the second time, almost killing the deaf-mute with this vision. The last change of space – the cemetery – is already, in fact, a metonymy of death, but this topos is also a game character. The cemetery situation actualizes Hamlet's allusions, and not connected with Hamlet, but with the state ("Not everything is calm in the Kingdom of Denmark" [7, p. 167]. Against the background of farewell poems and quarrels of ladies for the right to be the subject of fatal love, the third "resurrection" of the deceased takes place. A very characteristic roll call of the first step to suicide and the first step away from it: liver sausage became the cause of suicide, and kutya became the cause of resurrection. Thus, "a demoted person to the masses" begins to loudly defend his right to "a quiet life and a decent salary" [7, p. 173].

The genre level is clarified against the background of more or less obvious pretexts, of which the most significant, in my opinion, is the unmarked "Living Corpse" of L. Tolstoy. In "Suicide" there is a situation that parodically "quotes" Tolstoy's play: willy or unwittingly, Protasov is pushed to suicide by an old friend – here is a "new friend", his wife is here Cleopatra, and finally, society in the person of the old prince is here a "new man", the Marxist Egorushka, who is quickly turning into Yegor Timofeevich. So, both heroes had three "guides", but in Russia of the late 20s. (1928) there is a massive complicity in "bringing" a person



to suicide, which, precisely because of such a broad discussion of suicide, from a deeply intimate event becomes a social and even ideological act.

Death, presented in a domestic context, defines a specific, ideological-everyday level. Kalabushkin acts as a death dealer, arranging a fifteen-ruble lottery with the raffle of special "tickets" – suicide notes: "I am dying as a victim of nationality, the Jews were hunted down", "I cannot live because of the meanness of the financial inspector"; finally, the apotheosis of the genre of the suicide message - "I ask you not to blame anyone for death, except our beloved Soviet power" [7, p. 122]. These "messages" as a system are curious: in three "insert" texts, statehood as a system is touched upon in one form or another – the national idea, the economy and, finally, power as such. Death as an act in the name of the state is a truly tragic situation, but in this case this connection acquires a specific character: it is not the hero who dies for the motherland, but the motherland that destroys the hero. This clarifies the time, which needs not so much heroes as "ideological dead" [7, p. 123].

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