

Power-Hungry Characters in Serbian Comedy

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Abstract: Every literary work is a complex work of art that aspires to originality, authenticity and individuality. As a subtype of drama, comedy affects the process of shaping its actants with its attributes and conventions. Our research is based on a review of the comedies written by the Serbian writers and the unification of literary-theoretical hypothesis about power-hungry characters. The common theme of the analyzed comedies is power as the key to the transformation of comic characters and the reason for their abandonment of normal life. Power and authority lead characters to act immorally and unreasonably, and unsuccessful attempts to achieve their goal at any cost often bring their lives to the brink of meaninglessness, and make their actions tragicomic. As an outspoken opponent of bureaucrats and people who hide behind the authority and power for the sake of personal gain, Serbian writers found inspiration in the generally present human deformations. Therefore, it is completely normal and natural for the police to be corrupt and semi-literate in their comedies, just as it is completely natural and normal for voters to be bribed before the parliamentary elections, and for private and personal life to become an arena of political struggle for the sake of small goals. The reason for choosing their comedies was affected by the fact that the humor is alive, present, and popular even today as it was during their lifetime. Healthy and eternally young laughter, colorful characters, comic portrayal of human and social flaws (petty-bourgeois mentality, selfishness, love of power, false morals, flattery, snobbery) are the features of their literary works that make them contemporary at any time.

Keywords: *Drama; comedy; power-hungry characters; laughter; Serbian comedy.*

How to cite: Trifunović, N.J. (2022). Power-Hungry Characters in Serbian Comedy. *Moldavian Journal for Education and Social Psychology*, 5(1), 55-61. <https://doi.org/10.18662/mjesp/5.1/32>

Introduction

As a subtype of drama, comedy affects the process of shaping its actants with its attributes and conventions. The characterization of dramatic characters is seen as breaking down a character into constructive elements in order to reveal his structure, i.e., external and internal features. This includes enabling readers to experience the character, see his structural elements and level of its complexity (main/supporting character), assess the relationship to other characters and evaluate his actions. In R. Cicmil's opinion (1999, 58–72) characterization is an analytical-synthetic process aimed at perceiving and explaining the character traits of a character, while at the same time observing the processes by which the character is shaped in the work. Since the characters usually express themselves in multiple ways, they should be observed from all aspects at the same time: follow what the hero is doing, what he looks like, how emotions are accumulating in him. From all of the above, the subject of this research arises - the interpretation of power-hungry characters in the comedies written by Serbian writers.

Power-hungry characters - definition

With an insight into the comedy opus of Serbian literature, one comes to the conclusion that almost all writers created typified characters who, throughout history, have continuously appeared in comedies. As in the comedy *dell'arte* (improvised *comedy*), their comedies too contained several standard heroes who, without changing their character traits, go through varying life situations.

By studying the strategies use by playwrights, Solomon Marcus determined their status according to the following criteria:

- „1. presence or absence of a replica;
2. human or non-human;
3. living or non-living;
4. presence or absence of an actor;
5. participation or non-participation in the story;
6. accepting the viewer's point of view or the point of view of the character himself;
7. permanence or variability of the character's status;
8. dramatic significance;
9. perception;
10. way of understanding the stage;

11. accepting individual personality traits of the character or collective characters as well” (Marcus, 1981, 201).

Unlike Marcus, Northrop Frye classified characters of comedy differently by distinguishing between four basic types:

1. *alazon* (impostor);
2. *eirone* (self-deprecator);
3. *bomoloches* (buffoon);
4. *agroikos* (churlish) (Frye, 1979, v186).

In line with the theme of this paper, we will focus only on the first group of Frye's comic masks, at the center of which is *senex iratus* (strict father), one of the representatives of power and money. It is characteristic of this typical character that he regularly encounters obstacles in achieving his ambitions and obsessions, but that he himself is his own obstacle in relation to the aspirations and actions of other characters in comedy. What connects all the recognized characters is the fact that they all belong to the merchant class, i.e., they participate in various monetary affairs and manipulations, or are officials within the state administration, most often the police.

The trademark of this mask are ethical and moral deviations from the past, which are the driving force for igniting ambitions in the present. More specifically, “representatives of money would want power, prestige and more money; and representatives of the government want money, reputation and more power” (Leši, 1981, 99). All these ambitions are disproportionate to their actual possibilities and values, and it is due to this discrepancy between desires and possibilities that almost all comic effects occur.

Characters who strive towards achieving power are amoral, vicious and advocate for negative principles. In the analyzed Serbian comedies, all representatives of power and money rely on negative principles (theft, bribery, political manipulations) very favorably and with understanding, giving the comedy a satirical dimension. When criticizing each other, the power-hungry characters never question the negative principles themselves, but rather the inability of a person to derive maximum benefit from those principles.

Moreover, the representatives of power and money are, on the one hand, frustrated by the patriarchal mentality, and, on the other hand, by snobbish ambitions. Taught by experience that money rules everything and that everything can be bought with money, they are obsessed with the desire to have a certain title attached to their name (MP, doctor, shareholder, rich heir), because “nowadays, the title opens all doors, not the wit” (Javanović, 2005, 10).

What still needs to be pointed out is the fact that all the characters of power and money are fixed, that is, they do not evolve over time, but only gradually illuminate, coming to paradoxical situations through which their negative characteristics are most comically shown.

Characterology of power in Serbian comedy

The French philosopher Michel Foucault understood power as a complex phenomenon, as something that is acquired, stolen or shared, that can be held or handed over. Power is not the embodiment of the state or any individual institution, but is generally manifested through a *network-like organization*, while individuals *circle between its threads* (Foucault, 2012). In Foucault's opinion, power comes from social life itself, circulates through society and acts through a network that encompasses everyone.

The reason why the struggle for power is the main source and initiator of the analyzed comedies should be sought in the five-century subordination to Turkish force and violence. Namely, the Serbian people, devalued for centuries by slavery, defended their identity with various forms of resistance, ranging from hidden and covert fight, to desperate and rebellious conflicts. "Through the increasingly won freedom, Serbian mentality began to express more and more overtly what it had been denied until then: its aspiration for public and political life" (Misailović, 1983, 201). The newly acquired and established power, without proper self-control and responsibility, was perceived as a natural right and compensation for centuries of unjust denial of it. However, in that infatuation with this power, which was gaining more and more pronounced forms of passion, it was easy to forget that the new freedom could become a form of violence, even against oneself.

Power that once belonged to enslavers and enemies, was now in the hands of vain, ostentatious, narcissistic and egocentric people, who "tried to make up for what was not possible in the past, and that was, above all, richness and power: the desire to be rich turned into uncontrolled greed and the accumulation of property, and in the race for power - even what common sense considers impossible - reckless power was now not only a possibility, but also an absurd reality" (Misailović, 1983, 202).

Such selfish government singled out individuals from the mass who, besotted by the sudden appointment to high positions of power, quickly forgot who they were and where they came from, because they were even more besotted by the great power of privileges and the right to isolation and excellence. "Traditionally, power is visible, ostentatious, noticeable; its strength, paradoxically, comes precisely from the act of manifesting strength

and power” (Foucault, 1997, 182). For that reason, both the holders of power and authority easily go beyond their limits, believing that they are the ones who prescribe the rules of conduct to everything and everyone.

Apart from the passionate aspiration towards power and authority, *politics as a representative of the government* also entered the Serbian comedy. Serbian comedian Branislav Nušić vividly wrote about this, as well as about the social turmoil and general conditions under which he created his characters, in the preface to his comedy *A Suspicious Person*:

“We could say that there was a final and most desperate battle between two eras during 1870s and 1880s, a battle between an era at its end and the other at its beginning. The battle took place in all spheres and on all fronts, including politics, literature and everyday life. It was a time of conflict, tension, turmoil and all other things that characterize such an epoch in the development of a nation and of a society. The past was on the defensive; without any concern, a new way of life, new kind of people, new opinions and new directions have been aggressive and victorious and quite temperamental in their effort; thus, in the period of a whole decade, the temperature of our public life has not been normal, quite often it has been up to forty-one degree, sometimes even higher. Politics, especially, was characteristic for its epidemic nature, it was such an epidemic that infected the whole nation, therefore it is no wonder that politics often trespassed into the sphere of literature or, vice versa, the writers trespassed into the sphere of politics” (Nušić, 1998, 5–6).

In their comedies, the writers presented power as a *hierarchical structure*, making a distinction between the power that dominates the place where the action takes place (*central power*) and the *peripheral power*. Every central power hides behind legal regulations, while peripheral power does not abide by the law, but acts arbitrarily. This deformation of power from the center to the periphery further increases the degree of comedy, because it is on the periphery that power is in the closest contact with its opposite: common sense and people’s judgment. “And it is here, on the periphery of power, that *the absurdities of power and the common sense logic of those who depend on power collide, and from that collision arises the phenomenology of comedy and laughter in general*” (Misailović, 1983, 203). By depicting the periphery of power and authority, comedians avoided the loss of the comic because, otherwise, the central power would take on elements of tragedy.

Representatives of power in the analyzed comedies are obsessed with what they do and because of that they quickly forget who they are and what they are, and what they really should be. In order to conceal their limitations and short-sightedness, they create a myth about their position

and their power, all with the aim of abusing the high position assigned to them as much as possible. Their only defence is to create a *pseudo-image of themselves*. As a specific example, the above-mentioned writer Branislav Nušić did not write about the “real” Member of the Parliament in his comedy *A Member of the Parliament*, but with an individual who had the desire to become an MP, but who was not able to fulfil his wish. In his comedy *Mrs. Cabinet Minister's Wife*, he did not write about the “real” cabinet minister’s wife, but with the housewife Zivka, who suddenly found herself in the world of politics and power, trying in vain to become an actual cabinet minister’s wife.

Also, all the characters depicting district and police clerks and chiefs are presented as caricatures. They subconsciously show how incapable they are of controlling the power given to them; their consistency is to flatter those who are more powerful than them, and to ignore those who have less power than themselves.

The common bad character traits of all the characters who symbolize power and authority are arrogance, greed, vanity and excessive self-confidence, and they are the core of Serbian comedy.

Conclusion

The genre features of comedy require a recipient with more developed reading skills, presuppose the ability for independent research reading, and perseverance of the reader in a process consisting of several time-discontinuous phases - from motivation to find and read comedies to their actual interpretation.

The theoretical interpretation of power-hungry characters in comedy begins with a conceptual definition, where these characters appear as a *generic term* which, since it is the most general, can include other determinants, such as hero, character, individual, protagonist. If the broader meaning of each of these terminological determinants is taken into account, they can be used instead of each other, but their narrower meaning has its own distinctive features. Literary theorists define this concept in accordance with their own literary theory concept, and research on power-hungry characters within this paper shows that it is not possible to analyze these characters unless the established correlation between them and genre frameworks is considered, which inevitably asks for specific steps and outcomes in the characterization process.

By exploring the process of constructing power-hungry characters in a humorous text in which laughter is associated with a healthy, constructive joke and good mood, it is noticed that the plot is coupled with the

characterological portrayal of the heroes. A significant share of dialogue in the characterization of heroes also connects comedy text with humor, so the negative characteristics of drama heroes, who symbolize power, do not have a fatal outcome.

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