



## ЛИТЕРАТУРОВЕДЕНИЕ

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**THE ROADS ROUND PISA BY KAREN BLIXEN —**

**A PLAY WITH A PLOT AND A FORM**

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The article focuses on specific structural features of tales written by Karen Blixen, now considered to be the main Danish writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her first book, *Seven Gothic Tales*, was published in English in 1934. *The Roads Round Pisa* and other tales from this book are not only full of symbols and metaphors, but also have complex structures at the level of composition and of plot. The narration in Blixen's writings contains intense action; it is a dramatization of the text. The concept of "theatricality" constantly exists in many her tales and it is important for the interpretation of ideas in *The Roads Round Pisa*: but this concept generally determines a form of the text and its composition, which has some similarity to the composition of 5-acts drama. The motive of a play becomes the important structural component in this text; it is also connected to the plot and to images. Personages in this tale play different roles and change many masks. There are two types of heroes: heroes — actors on the stage and heroes — members of audience in the tale. The motive of a play creates also a particular subtext — required for understanding hidden matters, which a plot is built on. Theatricality of a text, on the one hand, brings more complicity, diversity; clarity of perception often is lost, because there is a certain coded meaning in the narration. On the other hand, it forces a reader to search for ways to comprehend the text. It looks like a reader is involved in a play, and only if he accepts rules of this play, he can understand hidden meaning of all circumstances. Karen Blixen uses the concept of theatricality to create absolutely original narratives inherent only in her poetic manner.

**Keywords:** Karen Blixen, Danish literature, theatricality, play, novella, drama.

Karen Blixen (1885–1962) is one of the most famous Danish writers and her popularity started to grow up when her first book *Seven Gothic Tales* was published in English in 1934 in New York. Under the pseudonym Isak Dinesen, she wrote a collection of surprising, often complicated, texts for which she invented the name “Gothic tales” in her American first edition. *Seven Gothic Tales* was a great success, being published the same year in England and Sweden. On the basis of this, she started to conquer the Danish literary world in 1935 with the *Syv fantastiske fortaellinger*, her own translation of published in English tales. Unfortunately, that Danish version did not achieve great success, which she could scarcely have expected given her consciously un-modern stories in a literature that was predominantly in the realm of social realism and psychoanalytical fiction.

The Danish version of this collection has some differences from the English edition. Elias Bredsdorff wrote: “Superficially the seven tales in the English and Danish versions are identical in the sense that the plot and the main structure correspond to one another in each of the seven tales. But the manner of telling the story, the language, the style, the artistic subtleties, differ in any respects” [Bredsdorff, 1985, p. 292]. To English speaking readers, the foreign accent in the language of Blixen was very fascinating and charming: it refers to the colonial literature of that time. The author of Introduction to the first American edition of *Seven Gothic Tales*, Dorothy Canfield, wrote about the writer’s style: “But there is a great deal more to an author than the spirit that animates him, let that be as curious and rare as it will. There is his style. And I don’t know how to tell you what the style of the book is, any more definitely than what the spirit of it is, because the style too is very new to me, and will be to you, I think” [Canfield, 1934, p. II]. To Danes the language of the tales was too pretentious and partly archaic. It was opposed to realistic tendencies dominating Danish literature at that time. Actually, Blixen was creating new forms and a new literary style, which blossomed after World War II. Her writing manner undoubtedly can be considered modernism; she aspires to revive romantic style of narration, themes and images. Anastasia Lomagina wrote: “As a component of the writer’s creativity is a group of themes and artistic techniques that date back to the tradition of romanticism. She names Andersen, Oehlenschlaeger, Ewald, Hoffmann, Kierkegaard, Byron and Shelley among the romantic authors close to her in spirit. The literature of modernism often appeals to the ideology of romanticism” [Lomagina, 1999, p. 174].

Blixen's individual writing manner has a strong connection to genre specifics of her texts. She mostly developed one of short-prose genres, which can be named in Danish "novelle"; this word could be simply translated into English as "short story," but it is not absolutely equivalent name for this genre. In the English title of her first book, she used the word "tales" (*Seven Gothic Tales*), but in Danish edition we see the word "fortælling" (*Syv fantastiske fortællinger*). Probably in both cases, it is not an indication of a genre, but only an indication of the narrative character of texts. The strong narrative component together with fantastic element, unexpected ending, unusual plot are features of the genre "novelle" (novella), which was developing from the epoch of Renaissance and was very popular in the epoch of Romanticism. Elizar Meletinsky wrote: "Novella is distinguished from novel and story by its brevity, and from short story and story by more complex structure. The brevity of novella intensifies the degree of concentration and symbolism used in it. Novella cannot incorporate a comprehensive model of the world, and thus there is tendency to combine novellas in a single frame which they complement each other" [Meletinsky, 1990, p. 272].

The English short story has another genesis. The Norwegian writer Johan Borgen mentioned difference between "story" and common in Scandinavia genres "novelle" and "fortælling": "The Anglo-Saxon pattern for the short story (novellen) is the fixed "story", as a core. Is it "fortælling" also? No. "Fortælling" is something else. It comes tumbling, a little after little. It is not an inferior form, it requires at its best separation fine calculation. But by the untranslatable "story" we understand something fixed, intriguing, construction" [Borgen, 1977, s. 288].

To specify the genre of Blixen's tales is important for understanding the text structures and hidden matters. Novella as a genre has a strong emphasis on action and results of this action, and this feature is related to drama. Novella should appeal to feelings of the reader, but not just give the information. And drama should too appeal to feelings, first of all. Novellas and dramas are to a certain extent very pretentious. The narration in Blixen's tales contains intense action; it is some kind of dramatization of the text. Often the structure of conflict in them is very similar to conflict in drama, it is not only a talk about events but real events as they are, heroes act and reveal themselves in actions. These actions take places in specific space as a drama where we can see a stage and decorations.

In *Seven Gothic Tales* the writer applies to the form of novella, but actually she creates a new type of modernist novella and demonstrates complicity of text, coming from Andersen's romantic tradition: his fairy tales (eventyr) and stories (historier) display also different levels of perception. As well as for Andersen for Blixen one of the most important components of poetics is a principle of allusion and reminiscence. She uses fantastic, decorative elements to create very complex text, where theatricality plays the important role. Victoria Peshkova wrote: "The theme of "theatricality" permeates the entire collection, becomes not only a leitmotif, but an important compositional element that helps to expand the semantic boundaries of the work. Blixen assigns a special role to the motive of the play" [Peshkova, 2020, p. 130].

Blixen's tales have a very complex structure, both on the level of composition and on the level of ideas. To understand these ideas is not possible for readers if they are not involved in the play. It looks like the audience should act in the performance; it was inherent to the romantic theater (e. g. Ludwig Tieck's comedies) as well as to the modernist theater (e. g. Bertolt Brecht's epic theater). There is a sort of the author's game with audience in a theater. In Blixen's tales we can see two types of play: one play, which the plot based on, and another play where readers and the author have parts too, a reader should solve specific intellectual code to understand the first play. "Her 'story' is a series of events that the reader will have to put together and recreate the links that are left missing in the narrative to discover the hidden motives and patterns" [Lomagina, 2020, p. 326]. Therefore, the motive of play is one of the most important motives of her tales and the concept of theatricality becomes the necessary attribute of Blixen's narrative manner. This effect is possible to find in other Blixen's texts: Ieva Steponavičiūtė motioned the intersexuality of the tale *The Tempest (Storme)* from the collection *Anecdotes of Destiny (Skæbne-Anekdoter, 1953)* in the connection to Shakespeare's play [Steponavičiūtė, 2016, p. 105].

The first story from the book *Seven Gothic Tales* according to Isak Dinesen's original intention is "The Roads Round Pisa," which is like other tales from this collection not only full of symbols and metaphors, but it has a very original chronotope in Michail Bakhtin's terminology. The space as a very important structural component determines the composition of this text. There are two worlds: the real space with the center in Pisa (a city) and the territory of individual memory (a fantastic castle)

in this tale. This opposition creates a particular subtext — required for understanding hidden matters. It looks like there are two separated of each other spaces: the space of stage (theater) — Pisa and surroundings and the auditorium — the space of imaginations. That interesting: the heroes play roles and change masks in the real places and they can be they self just in the fantastic world but this world turns to reality in the end of the story. There is an opposition: reality is a theater but fantasy is a certain life.

The image of theatre is constantly inherent in many Blixen's tales. Her heroes play different roles like actors in a theater. The main characters in "The Roads Round Pisa" are divided for two types and belong to different spaces; because the inner world of her tales looks very much like a theater: there is a stage and an auditorium. The first type of heroes — the actors on the stage, the plot is based on their stories, and other type of heroes — the members of audience, who watch the show, but they play some roles too and very often they do not understand that they are involved in the performance as actors. The author implicitly exists in this theater too; author's role is unclear for readers, who have to understand it, to figure out the matter of narration.

The first type of heroes plays different roles and has many different masks, but heroes-audiences do not understand it, for readers it is not clear. Only one person knows all circumstances — the author who is a director for actors and a partner in a game for readers. There are two stages and two realities in "The Roads Round Pisa": the first stage exists for heroes-audience and it is opposed to their reality, another stage exists for readers, where actors are all heroes, and it is opposed to the reality of the author and readers. And both heroes-audience and readers often do not understand hidden matters of a play. For heroes to find answers means to erased borders between their reality and a play, for readers it means to be involved in an atmosphere of play, lose touch with a reality, like an audience lose touch with reality in a theater. Johan Huizinga wrote about it in his book *Homo Ludens*: "Comedy and tragedy alike come under the heading of competition, which, as we have seen, is in all circumstances to be called play. The Greek dramatists composed their works competitively for the feast of Dionysus. Though the state did not organize the competition in had a hand in the running of it. There was always a large crowd of second and third rate poets competing for the laurels. Comparisons, if odious, were habitual among the audience and

criticism was extremely pointed. The whole public understood all the allusions and reacted to the subtleties of style and expression, sharing the tension of contest like a crowd at football match. Eagerly they awaited the new chorus, for which the citizens taking part in it had rehearse a whole year” [Huizinga, 1955, pp. 144–145].

It is remarkable that Karen Blixen reaches this effect in a narrative text, but a genre of novella is very convenient for it. Theatricality of this tale displays on the different levels as a permanent motive and as an element of a structure. The composition of this tale very much looks like the composition of a classical drama with five acts. Donald Riechel wrote about “The Roads Round Pisa”: “The story is an exegetical play with concepts, play in the scene of theater as well as of game” [Riechel, 1991, p. 326].

In the exposition, we can see the main hero of the tale — the young Danish nobleman Count Augustus von Schimmelmann, he is sitting in osteria nearby Pisa and writing to his university friend a letter, actually he is telling his story: we know about his unsuccessful marriage and the voyage to Italy. He discusses the question: what is truth? The question is very important for understanding of the tale’s plot, but neither Count Augustus nor readers know that yet.

How difficult it is to know the truth. I wonder if it is really possible to be absolutely truthful when you are alone. Truth, like time, is an idea arising from, and dependent upon, human intercourse. What is the truth about a mountain in Africa that has no name and not even a footpath across it? The truth about this road is that it leads to Pisa, and the truth about Pisa can be found within books written and read by human beings. What is the truth about a man on a desert island? And I, I am like a man on a desert island. When I was a student, my friends used to laugh at me because I was in the habit of looking at myself in the looking-glasses, and had my own rooms decorated with mirrors. They attributed this to personal vanity. But it was not really so. I looked into the glasses to see what I was like. A glass tells you the truth about yourself. [Dinesen, 1934, p. 165]

He wanted very much to visit to this country because he has some fantasies, coming from his childhood. His beloved great aunt in her youth was traveling to Italy and brought a souvenir — the small smelling-bottle with a picture of the wonderful castle, which was a talisman for her. She had died and now the Count Augustus is the owner of this

bottle. He is trying to find this castle but clearly understands that probably this castle does not exist at all. He is an adult, married person but he continues to play a role of child, escaping the reality for the imagined, fantastic world, this castle is a symbol of this world. Count Augustus is a hero of the second type — he has taken a seat in the auditorium, a performance is starting.

**Act one.** Sitting in osteria the Count Augustus watches an accident: horses of one of carriages have rushed and it overturns. This is the first event on the stage. Augustus tries to help a person from the carriage, in the beginning he decides that this is an old man, but this person is a woman — Countess di Gampocorta, who has lost her large bonnet. There are elements of theater: misunderstandings and changes of masks on a stage. The old Countess has broken her hand and she is thinking that she is going to die, she asks Augustus to find her granddaughter — Rosina. The Danish Count has to reconcile the grandmother with her granddaughter before the old woman's death. The Countess tells to Augustus her story, it is a type of monologues, which describes the main conflict, and the plot starts to develop. She tells about the scandalous marriage of Rosina and the Prince Pozentiani. The old Countess was afraid that her granddaughter could die having a child, so she tried to organize her marriage to a person who physically could not be a father. But Rosina felt in love with her cousin Mario, the girl tried to escape wedding with the assistance of her friend Agnese della Gherardesci. The old Countess prevented this escape and Rosina was married to the Prince. Anywhere three months later Rosina applied to the Pope to divorce her with the prince because their marriage was not consummed. After that she married to her beloved. There are all main heroes in this tale. The Count Augustus and readers have known for first time names the Prince Pozentiani and Angesse. Actually, this story about Rosina but she is not hero of the play, which Augustus has started to watch, neither he nor readers expect further circumstances. In the first act, we can see two conflicts: explicit — the old Countess and Rosina and the main — implicit, still hidden for understanding.

**Act two.** Decorations were changed. The Count Augustus stops in an inn on the way to Pisa, where he meets the well educated young Italian man, but this person is a mask too because this is a girl dressed up as a young man to travel incognito. Augustus as a one from audience just watches the change of masks, which hide real faces of personages.

The next scene — the Prince Pozentiani and his young friend Prince Giovanni Gastone (his name Giovanni is the clear allusion to Don Giovanni as well as a name Rosina is an allusion to *The Barber of Seville*) enter to the stage. Augustus becomes a witness a very strange conflict between two Italian aristocrats, but he cannot understand the matter of it. The old Prince tells a story about one nobleman who has decided to find a killer for his enemy. When this killer came to get money for murder, he talked for a long time about a mortal sin, but not longer later, this nobleman knew that his enemy is alive and healthy, and he has got only one question: what was a price to sell him? The old prince asks the friend what is his opinion, but Giovanni tosses the glass across the table into Pozentiani's face instead of the answer. Augustus and readers know the story of the old Prince but they still cannot understand the implicit conflict, which is the real conflict in the tale. Augustus gets a chance to become one of the actors in this play, to enter to the stage. Giovanni asks him to be a second of the old Prince and the dressed up girl should be a second of Giovanni. Augustus wants to be a participant of action, but he does not understand his role because he cannot understand the roles of other actors in this play, everybody has masks except him. He should leave the auditorium, but he does not belong to this reality (Pisa and surroundings).

**Act three.** The Count Augustus at night before the duel visits a marionette performance entitled *The Revenge of Truth*, which is named “classical,” but only an experienced reader can understand that is a form of the author's game with a reader, the Danish Count could not watch this comedy in Italy year 1823. Blixen inserts *The Revenge of Truth* (*Sandhedens Hævn*) into the text as an “Old Italian play,” but she wrote a marionette comedy with the same name in 1926, actually she wrote that comedy, which Count Augustus sees in Pisa. In the letter to Ellen Dahl from 16<sup>th</sup> May, 1926 she motioned: “It can not be too strongly pointed out that it is a marionette comedy, and written under rules and order. There should therefore be no unity between the costumes or scenery, and all staging rather primitive” [Blixen, 1978, s. 39].

In the reality, Blixen transformed canons of a genre of marionette comedy: there are well-developed characters, each personage is not a type but individual image, and she brings details of scenery and decorations, which is alien element for this type of performances. As a fact, she created a new form of marionette comedy, and ten years later she cre-



ated a new type of novella — “The Roads Round Pisa” is a good example, where the narration is built on the dramatic elements and heroes are very similar to typical characters in dramas.

The plot device in this comedy is the witch’s damnation, when any lie turns to the truth. In the end, the witch gives the answer to the question: what is truth?

The truth, my children, is that we are, all of us, acting in marionette comedy. What is important more than anything else in a marionette comedy, is keeping the ideas of the author clear. This is the real happiness of life, and now that I have at least come into a marionette play, I will never go out of it again. But you, my fellow actors, keep the ideas of the author clear. Aye, drive them to their utmost consequences. [Dinesen, 1934, p. 199]

According to her words, truth is a play in a marionette comedy, and the main philosophy is to follow the idea of the author. It is one of the most important episodes, because all events in this tale look like scenes from this marionette comedy, but heroes know their parts not well and all personages try to play their own roles, but they make mistakes all the time, because they do not follow the will of fate. Only one hero, Count Augustus, acts well because he follows his fantasies; he is like a marionette in the hands of fate and only he can restore the broken harmony. Augustus is one of the audiences and he makes a connection between the stage, where actors are acting, and the world of readers, involved in the great play, which is directed by fate.

**Act four.** The morning before the duel. All questions find answers. The dressed up girl turns out to be Agnesse della Gherardesci, a friend of Rosina. She tells her story: once Rosina asked her to stay in her bedroom when Rosina went to meet her beloved. It was that night when the old Prince Pozentiani asked to Prince Giovanni to fulfill a matrimonial duty instead of him. All heroes changed their masks, they tried to play other roles, they wanted to correct plans of the fate and as a result — the final tragedy. When the old Prince knows the truth, he dies. This state of affairs is very similar to the principle of retrospection in dramas, when unknown circumstances determine the denouement. The drama on the stage (in the reality in Pisa) is over. All unknown matters now are clear, but the Count Augustus is not done with his part, because the game of the author and readers is still continuing.

**Act five.** Finale. A few months later, Count Augustus receives an invitation from the old Countess to visit her castle. The good ending: she has already recovered after the accident, and Rosina has given birth to a child. Augustus realizes that this castle is a castle from her fantasies, a castle from a picture on the bottle. The old Countess gives him a present — a smelling bottle with a picture of a manor house and it is his house. Now Augustus figures out what is the real role of the Countess de Gempachorta; she is a friend of his grand aunt. It is the last mask in this drama. Only she and Augustus belong to the space of fantasy. But Augustus decides not to tell about his discovery, now he gets a mask too and he can play his role, which is more important than other roles, because it is connected to plans of the fate. The old Countess and her granddaughter belong to the wonderful world, which Augustus was searching for. The fantasy becomes reality.

He could feel his own little bottle in his waistcoat pocket, and came near to taking it out and showing it to the old lady. He felt that this would have made a tale which she would forever have cherished and repeated; that it might even come to be her last thought on her deathbed. But he was held back by the feeling that there was, in this decision of fate, something which was meant for him only — a value, a depth, a resort even, in life which belonged to him alone, and which he could not share with anybody else any more than he would be able to share his dreams. [Dinesen, 1934, p. 216]

One from the audience (Augustus) becomes an actor on the stage. He feels himself as a marionette in the theater of fate, but he is just a marionette in the play written by the author: real marionettes in the theater of fate are we, readers. The theatricality in this tale is a reflection of theatricality of a real life. Blixen involves readers in specific performance where no borders between actors and audience, reality and fantasy, in this system of being — the life is a part of art, but the art is not part of life.

There are two worlds: the real space with the center in Pisa (city) and the territory of individual memory (fantastic castle) in this tale. The space of Pisa is the existent city, where everybody plays roles and uses different masks, turns to a place of a false life and relations. Pisa loses its quality of existent place and becomes a phantasmagoric theater in opposition to the fantastic castle, which turns to the reality. The first type

of heroes (heroes — the actors on the stage) is connected to Pisa and the second type (heroes — the members of audience) belongs to the world of fantasy, which in the end turns to the reality as a replacement for Pisa, which appears to be just a stage of play.

The narrative strategy in this tale is very original: all hidden matters of conflicts and circumstances are brought to the light in dialogues and monologues of heroes; it looks very much like a principle of retrospection in Henrik Ibsen's dramas and later in the modernist theater as well as in plays by Luigi Pirandello which are was very influential for the collection *Seven Gothic Tales*. Maya Merkulova wrote: "Retrospection is a reference to the past, an insert scene (episode) from the past, a narrative device" [Merkulova, 2006, p. 53].

The motive of play is an important structural element in "The Roads Round Pisa." Blixen uses the concept of theatricality to create absolutely original texts inherent only in her poetic manner, indicating a dramatization of the narrative on different levels: at the level of genre she developed the novella as a literary form that as a is closely connected to drama; on the level of images all heroes play their own roles and have masks; on the level of plot there is a specific form of game with a reader, who has to take a part in play to understand all hidden matters; and on the level of form the composition of the tale looks like a composition of drama.

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**«ДОРОГИ ВОКРУГ ПИЗЫ» КАРЕН БЛИКСЕН — ИГРА С СЮЖЕТОМ И ФОРМОЙ**

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Статья посвящена особенностям новеллистики крупнейшей датской писательницы XX в. Карен Бликсен. Ее первая книга «Семь готических историй» вышла на английском языке в 1934 г. Текст новеллы «Дороги вокруг Пизы», как и других произведений из этого сборника, не только изобилует метафорами и символами, но и имеет очень сложную структуру, как на композиционном, так и на идейно-содержательном уровне. Тема «театральности» в ее новеллах звучит постоянно, не только принимая формы устойчивого мотива, но и становясь важным структурным компонентом, влияющим на композицию произведения, имеющую некоторое сходство со структурой драмы, создавая специфический подтекст, позволяющий постичь скрытые смыслы, определяющие развитие сюжета. Повествование в произведениях Бликсен основывается на напряженном действии, подчеркивает сценичность текста. Мотив игры в новелле «Дороги вокруг Пизы» фактически определяет ее композицию, строящуюся по принципу пятиактной драмы. Герои в этой новелле играют разные роли и меняют множество масок, образуя две группы персонажей: герои — актеры на сцене, принимающие непосредственное участие в развитии действия, и герои — зрители в зале, наблюдающие за этим действием. Мотив игры также нужен для создания особого подтекста, необходимого для понимания скрытых смыслов, на которых и строится сюжет. Театральность текста, с одной стороны, способствует его усложнению, многоплановости, утрачивается ясность понимания, возникает некая кодировка содержания, что заставляет читателя, с другой стороны, искать пути осмысления повествования, и он сам оказывается вовлеченным в игру, и, только приняв правила этой игры, возможно постичь суть происходящего. Ка-

рен Бликсен виртуозно использует этот прием, создавая оригинальные по форме и содержанию новеллы, присущие только ее поэтической манере.

**Ключевые слова:** Карен Бликсен, датская литература, театральность, игра, новелла, драма.

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