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*Instances of the little official in Romanian short prose of the first half
of the twentieth century*

Summary of the doctoral thesis

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction – 5

Chapter I. The little official - a pawn or an opinion maker in the twentieth century? – 13

I.1 Short description of the first half of the twentieth century – 13

I.1.1 The twentieth century - the century of transformations – 13

I.1.2 The role of the clerk on the social scene – 17

I.2 Types of clerks (officials) – 23

I.3 The little official - literary character – 24

Chapter II. The little official in universal literature – 30

II.1. The little official in French literature – 30

II.1.1 Honoré de Balzac, promoter of social research type in literature – 31

II.1.2 Gustave Flaubert – *About the lack of method in science* – 36

II.1.3 Guy de Maupassant – pages of life . – 39

II.2. The little official in Russian literature – 41

II.2.1 N.V. Gogol - the Nevski Prospect parade – 41

II.2.2 Feodor Mihailovich Dostoevski – the daily life in the eyes of the servant – 43

II.2.3 A world of ridicule in Anton Chekhov's short fiction – 45

Chapter III. The little official in the society's mechanisms – 47

III.1 Moments in formation of Romanian mentality – 47

III.2 The mentality of the 20th century. The way in which the official is perceived – 51

III.3 "The official mentality" – 56

III.4 Little official in the capital vs. Small provincial official – 59

III.5 The foreign official type – 63

Chapter IV. "The little man" in Romanian literature – 65

IV.1 The landscape of Romanian literature at the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The influence of universal literature on the Romanian short prose literature in the first half of the twentieth century – 65

IV.1.1 Literary currents and trends during the time – 71

IV.1.2 Short fiction in the first half of the 20th century. Types of short fiction works – 74

IV.2 Transfiguration of the little official in Romanian literature of all literary genres – 79

IV.3 Starting points of the nineteenth-century literature – Alexander Macedonski, *Nicu Dereanu* – 82

IV.3.1 Transylvanian Literature at the end of the nineteenth century, early twentieth century – 84

IV.3.1.1 Ion Slavici – 85

IV.3.1.2 Ion Agarbiceanu – 88

IV.3.1.3 Liviu Rebreanu – 93

IV.3.2 I.L. Caragiale, creator of a typology – mirror of society – 107

IV.3.2.1 The conductor – 112

IV.3.2.2 The official – 113

IV.3.2.3 The copyist – 116

IV.3.2.4 The ticket controller – 118

IV.3.2.5 The head of the office/ station – 121

IV.3.2.6 The Mayor – 123

IV.3.2.7 The lawyer – 125

Chapter V. The little official in the Romanian short prose in the first half of the twentieth Century – 127

V.1 Aspects of the official's life – 128

V.1.1. Life at the office/ at work – 128

V.1.2. Meanders of the family life – 145

V.1.3 The fight for survival – 162

V.1.4 The little official in "the world" – 167

Chapter VI. Features of the little official – 172

VI.1 The name in short fiction – 172

VI.2 Human typology in short prose. Classification criteria – 185

VI.2.1 Aesthetical – 186

VI.2.1.1 The tormented character: the humble, the resigned – 186

VI.2.1.2 The sentimental character: the lover, the cheated – 189

VI.2.2 Psychological – 198

VI.2.2.1 The unsatisfied – 198

VI.2.2.2 The auto-exiled – 204

VI.2.3 Socio-economical – 207

VI.2.3.1 The thruster – 207

VI.2.3.2 The corrupt – 210

VI.3 The little official - a modern Hermes – 211

Conclusions – 217

Attachments – 228

Bibliography – 238

SUMMARY

The intention of writing the doctoral thesis entitled “*Instances of the little official in Romanian short prose of the first half of the twentieth century*” was the desire to bring light to the works of the writers of the background of our literature in the first half of the already mentioned century and to discover a little official with expectations and big ideas.

By developing the doctoral thesis, we aim at achieving some objectives such as: the literary work inventory in the first half of the twentieth century, which has the little official for character, the emphasis on the diversity which this social type that became literary character entails, the analysis of the little official using the modern perspectives, as well – by employing the resources of Freudian psychoanalysis –, the achievement of a behavioural typology, the whole purpose of the thesis being the emphasis of some complex characters living their ordinary lives.

As working instruments, we have used resources of history, sociology, history of mentalities, psychology, psychoanalysis, mythology, aesthetics, poetics, literature, literary criticism and literary history.

The novelty of the work resides in the fact that it is a particular study of the small official in Romanian literature as a character of short stories. One single work approaches the official character, which is Paul Magheru's book, *The literature of the insignificant*, but it focuses on the small official of the universal literature, the author devoting a single chapter to Romanian literature, in which few writers are included. We limited the space of analysis to a certain period of time – half a century – listing the works of the writers of the time, such as Alexandru Macedonski, Ion Agârbiceanu, I. L. Caragiale, I. A. Bassarabescu, Liviu Rebreanu, Mihail Sadoveanu (from the work of the last two we selected some relevant novels according to the analyzed issue), Ion Adam, Ion Gorun, D. D. Patrascanu, Al. O. Teodoreanu, Alexandru Vlahuță, N. N. Beldiceanu, Gala Galaction, Emil Gârleanu, Ion Alexandru Brătescu-Voinești. Some of them are not read today anymore, this being the reason why we try a reevaluation of these works, especially because the text becomes a new text every time we read it, being compared by Hans-Robert Jauss to a score that takes on a new resonance with each reading.¹

It is an original work due to the way in which the selected issue is approached, choosing for the study to be conducted from history toward literature, noting the stages of formation of the official in the social hierarchy, subsequently his becoming a literary character.

We structured the doctoral thesis in six chapters entitled as following: Chapter I – *The little official – a pawn or an opinion maker in the reality of the twentieth century ?*, Chapter II – *The little official in the universal literature*, Chapter III – *The little official inside the society's mechanisms*, Chapter IV – *"The little man" in the Romanian literature*, Chapter V – *The little*

¹ Cf. Andrei Corbea, *Prefață* la Hans-Robert Jauss, *Estetica receptării*, traducere de Andrei Corbea, Editura Univers, București, 1983, p. 11.

official in the Romanian short prose in the first half of the twentieth century, Chapter VI – *Features of the little official*.

We found it necessary to begin by presenting the socio-economic and political context of the studied period, in order to understand which was the officials' status at that time, the hierarchy functions. Thus, in **Chapter I** of the doctoral thesis, it was highlighted the impact of the two world wars upon the society of the twentieth century, the charm of the period between the two wars. It was observed how hard the statutes which gave the hierarchy functions were established, the beginning of the twentieth century being extremely important for the analyzed issue.

After examining the sources of the administrative and historical literature, noting the starting point of the organization of functions, we continued with **the second chapter** where it was identified the starting point in the universal literature, channeling on the French and Russian literature.

Honoré de Balzac even creates a physiology of the official in *La Physiologie de l'employé*, where he establishes and highlightens the office hierarchy. The principles mentioned in physiology are to be found in the work, outlining the official as an intelligent individual (*Les Employés* – Rabourdin), capable of entering the mentality fight, but not of winning it (*L'Illustre Gaudissart* – Gaudissart), but he does not give up, no matter how difficult it may be to rise (Honoré de Balzac, *Histoire de la grandeur et de la décadence de César Birotteau* – César Birotteau).

Gustave Flaubert captures the ridicule of the unmeasured initiatives of the officials who turn into rich people overnight, who ultimately finds out that the copyists' occupation suits them – *Bouvard et Pécuchet* and Guy de Maupassant develops the existential vacuum (*Plimbarea*), the resignation in platitude (*În familie*) and necessary tricks for the escalation of the hierarchical ladder of the office, including the out of interest marriage (*Moștenirea*).

In Russian literature, the authorial attitude is different, highlighting the life pains of the small official. N. V. Gogol brings to the fore the negative effects of some disillusionment that produce madness: *Mantaua* – Akaki Akakievici, *Nasul* – Ivan Iak, *Însemnările unui nebun* – Poprișcin. F. M. Dostoevsky creates tormented existences on the border of the eternal humiliation and the struggle to have a decent living – *Oameni sărmani*, which can derive in madness because of certain disappointments – *Dublul*. Anton Chekhov outlines small aspects from the life of officials.

In **Chapter III** we returned to our area, channeling on the steps to configure the Romanian mentality. In this context, the official was perceived differently from one period to another. If at first he was the individual representing an important mechanism of the society, he gradually becomes a slave, a parasite of society that cannot sustain the exaggerated dimension of this social class.

One can also talk about an “official mentality”, phrase by Jan Szczepanski, who knows dominants such as: exquisiteness, self-esteem, authoritarian attitude (or rather charged with humiliation).

The provincial official pursues the capital, perceived as a “promised land”. In this landscape a new category appears, the foreign official, appreciated at work, punctual, dedicated, with a solid training, serious.

In **Chapter IV**, we began the literary analysis taking into account that the early twentieth century literature is closely related to the end of the century.

Fixing our starting point in Romanian literature of the nineteenth century, the first writer who defined even the official species is Nicolae Filimon. He captures in the *Nenorocirile unui slujnicar* the corrupted world in which the official is forced to resort to tricks in order to survive.

The official is transfigured in all literary genres, but prose gives it the greatest attention. In the prose of the end of the century, we identify an official full of dreams, aspiring to a better condition, in which the freedom of expression is a natural thing. It is Nicu Dereanu the protagonist of the same name writing of Alexandru Macedonski. Following, we captured the specific in Transylvanian literature from the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, noting that, at that time, Transylvania was facing problems such as the use of Hungarian language in public, administrative spaces, Hungarian officials.

The writer whose work expresses these ideas in the most powerful way is Liviu Rebreanu, analyzed with Ion Slavici and Ion Agârbiceanu. So, Ion Slavici brings to surface a passionate official, a winner. It is a man who fights for his ideas, to which he abandons himself completely. Whether we refer to Father Trandafir, the protagonist of *Popa Tanda*, or to Pinte, the officer tormented by the idea of revenge in *Moara cu noroc*, we notice the same official who is ready to bet everything on one card, willing to fight an entire mentality for his own ideas.

Ion Agârbiceanu offers a new vision of officials. We stopped only upon three texts, *Morala publică, Într-un picur de apă* and *Pustiul* which have different themes.

Liviu Rebreanu creates a real universe of officials. Both unimportant officials and important officials populate the scene of his work. As long as we identify more transfigured little officials within the short prose, for most times, in standstill moments for them, such as Ion Popescu (*Ghinionul*), Ignat Pascu (*La urma urmelor...*), Jean Vasilescu (*Strănutarea*), Ion Mititelu (*Ocrotitorul*), the workers from *Proștii*, inside the novel, in *Ion* and *Răscoala*, we noticed an impressive number of officials, especially little officials submissive *volens nolens* to their superiors.

After the brief analysis of the Transylvanian universe we enter another register, that of Caragiale's irony. His work represents a very important point for our study due to the rich number of identified officials, in the huge suggestive power of the characters and events in which they appear and due to the fingerprint which the author leaves on the whole Romanian literature, because there are many writers who cannot get rid of the dominants of Caragiale's style – D. D. Pătrășcanu, Al. Vlahuță, Al. O. Teodoreanu, Gala Galaction etc. The importance of Caragiale's short prose made us continuously use his different characteristics inside the chapters of this study, in chapter IV identifying a typology of the officials from Caragiale's short prose, created from the perspective of the characters' jobs, as follows: the conductor, the official, the copyist, the ticket controller, the head of the office/ station, the Mayor, the lawyer inside the author's work.

In **Chapter V** we pointed out the way in which the little official appears in our period of interest. We concentrated the discourse around four thematical areas: life at the office/ at work, the meanders of the family life, the fight for survival, the little official in the world.

For each of the four areas we framed thematically works of the authors who settle the official in these positions.

We noticed Mihail Sadoveanu's predilection for the family life of the officials', for pointing out the dramas generated by the hard life and moreover the dramas of the officials' wives who are tortured by their trivial lives – in novels. D. D. Pătrășcanu focuses on the hilarious aspects of the officials' lives – *Condica doamnei Pompiliu, Inspecție, Decorația lui Vartolomei*

etc. All these hypostases are emphasized by the author's bantering attitude, who predestinates to failure his characters, dressing them with the coat of ridiculous. The officials of Al. O. Teodoreanu are situated at the same level, being characterized by a comic note – Bercu Leibovici, Bayard, Păltineanu etc.

Full of dramatism are Ioan Alexandru Brătescu-Voinești's officials, the people damned to suffering, declaring themselves against adapting to their lives in the texts: *În lumea dreptății*, *Blana lui Isaia*, *Microbul*. The same dramatism which goes towards melodrama also characterizes the writings of the minors Ioan Adam, Ion Gorun (*Salcâmul*, *Inimi nobile*, *Un vis neîmplinit*). The officials created by them are people who live a terrible life, marked by profound missing.

In **Chapter VI** we made some notices referring to the way in which the official character is being built, insisting on the power of suggestion of the name, on the behavioural types found in the read books and, identifying in this character the valences of a Hermes, we tried to make a mitocritic of it.

The name is a very important mean of characterization. Beginning with Caragiale's name we focused especially on the officials' characters, in particular on their wives. The success formula used by Caragiale was also taken by its descendants, with the obvious differences. Thus, the names are formed by a common name and a derived or euphemistic name. Obviously, the lectors had fun, at least once, with the famous Lache Diaconescu and Mache Preotescu, Lefter Popescu, Mitică.

The I. L. Caragiale's followers bet, generally speaking, on the same formula. I. A. Basarabescu offers a comic meaning for the created names, guiding the readers towards the characters' features, like Emil Gârleanu, D. D. Pătrășcanu or Al. O. Teodoreanu, Ion Gorun. Mihail Sadoveanu, Liviu Rebreanu exploit the side of the features towards which characters guides us. Some examples of the characters with very suggestive name are: Jean Vasilescu, the young Don Juan from the neighbourhood in the Rebreanu's work *Strănutarea*, the main character of *O stea prin fereastra lui Manolaș* by Gala Galaction is a diminutive Manole, whose abandoned wall is the faculty unfinished in due time. Napoleon Manolescu-Pletea from *Pe drezină* by I. A. Bassarabescu – ironic name which guide our thoughts to the French leader, the character having nothing from his courage etc.

In the last chapter we emphasized the typology of characters grouped according to some behavioural types, classified by different criteria. The first criterion is the aesthetic one where I followed two aspects: the tortured character: the humble, the resigned and the sentimental character: the lover, the cheated.

The second criterion is a psychological one with the types: the unsatisfied and the auto-exiled and the last one is socio-economical criterion, the characters being the truster and the corrupt.

This way, we discovered a diversity of hypostases in which the officials are presented. Each of the authors mentioned before puts the officials in important moments for them and for establishing the dominant parts of this social category, marking their creation way. I arranged the characters according to their main feature, naming them only at one category, although we could have integrated them in more than one category.

Hermes has a huge number of avatars in the studied short prose, being one of the dominant mythological figures of the century, together with Dionysos. We identified him as

intermediate, defender of brave acts, his own attributes, uncovering his features in the official character.

Being a mediator between a solicitor and power, we considered that we could see in the official a modern Hermes. The authors developed these features of the created officials, being both unimportant or important officials. The little officials who behave before their solicitors like fears are interesting, they create the image of masters, but in reality they are nothing but workers with an inferior place in hierarchy, who can be criticized by their superiors any time. During the work with the public they behave ceremoniously so that they give the impression of transforming their own program in a passing time rite (in the extended acceptance of the term).

Caragiale brings the officials in the most diverse hypostases. Memorable is the official from *Petițiune* – without having a name he becomes the symbol of a type, he is the Hermes to whom we refer to, being a master at his office, an intermediate in solving peoples' problems, in spite of his minor position.

Remarkable destiny makers are also the characters created by Al. O. Teodoreanu, D. D. Pătrășcanu, Ioan Alexandru Brătescu-Voinești, the first two using a lot of irony in their construction, while Ioan Alexandru Brătescu-Voinești is very severe in narration.

In the same idea of character who functions like a protector, like an intermediate, we noticed the feminine atypical variant of Hermes. The authors created the image of the protective woman who uses her different weapons in order to get something, sketching her profile a few times.

That is why we consider that by this doctoral thesis we succeeded to point out some of the interesting aspects that short prose of half a century revealed, focusing our attention on the official character, a social type that is not to be ignored.

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