

CUSTOMS OF DEATH AND THE PROSE LITERATURE

In this presentation we will concentrate on the role that death-related customs play on prose literature. At this point we should stress that we shall not study this role with regard to all Greek literature, but we will limit ourselves in a single piece of work, the short story: “Young Man’s Death” which seems to serve as an example regarding the analysis of our topic.

We should confine ourselves in one and only piece of literary work since we do not have more pages in order to be able to prolong our study. Maybe this study will constitute the base of a more profound future one.

We have chosen Kostis Palamas’ short story because of its folklore context. Thanks to this short story we will be able to see how customs, actions and symbols, become obvious in a literary text.

Having realized that the customs are found in the base of some kind of literary creation, even an oral one like laments, we have wondered whether customs have also played a role on prose.

1. “Young Man’s Death” = synopsis

The short story “Young Man’s Death” was first published in the “Estia” magazine in 1891. Kostis Palamas, who mainly wrote poetry, describes in this text a young man’s death. This man is Mitros, the son of Dimena. He is well-known among the villagers of the Thalassochori (= village by the sea). Everyone admires him, and his mother, Dimena, who is a widow, is proud of him. One year on Good Friday, though, when many people go to the church for the Mass and the vigil of the Epitaph, others, mainly young ones, prepare the fireworks. Mitros also goes to get the fireworks that his company had forgotten in a coffee-shop, he trips, falls and cries out: «σκοτώθηκα» “I’ve killed myself”.

From that moment on begins for Mitros a period of pain, patience, hope and despair which will lead him to death. His mother, the relatives and his friends will do everything possible to save Mitros’ leg so that he will not be left lame. They call the doctors, the “charlatans”, who cripple his leg, the fortunetellers with their herbs and charms. However, no one manages to save the leg. On the contrary, they aggravate his condition and Mitros, who had simply fallen and hurt his leg, ends up with gangrene mortifying his whole body.

¹ Kostis Palamas , “Young Man’s Death”, Athens Edition Pella, page 12.

The young man, who didn't want to be left scarred and who had made a god of his beauty, dies slowly and in pain, still hoping for a whole year. He is hoping that he will be saved and that he will be able to marry Frossini, Sevda's daughter, who is his fiancée. The fake doctors, the fake surgeons and their potions have caused disaster and Mitros eventually dies on Good Friday, exactly one year after his tragic fall.

2. How customs are presented and what is their role

As we have already mentioned, the context of this short story is folklore. Mitros' story takes place in Thallasochori, a village which, as its name suggests, is situated by the sea. The nearest town is Patras where Palamas lived during his childhood.

Every short story happens in a place, which at this case is Thallasochori, a rural village where the villagers make their living by farming or fishing.

Mitros is an only child and fatherless. His mother, Dimena, is a widow who has raised him on her own.

The basic characteristic of Mitros is his bravery. Everyone in the village says so and everyone admits it. He is also engaged to a girl from the nearby village, Melissi, who is called Frossini.

Like all of his friends, Mitros is also a fisherman and he has his own fishing boat.

This is the background of the story and these are the main characters. Everything seems peaceful until Good Friday, during the Holy Week, when Mitros falls and hurts his leg.

The detail of Good Friday places the story in the time period before Easter when Jesus Christ's Passion is commemorated. This time context gives the story a festive and at the same time fatal atmosphere, since at Easter the death of Christ as well as his resurrection are commemorated.

Making use of a single detail concerning the time context, the story is written in an atmosphere of death in addition to that of rituals and customs.

We have seen in our study on customs that the ceremonial vocabulary is uttered and applied so that the villagers, who are the members of a community, will be able to face the change. Here the change is not death, or at least in the beginning it is not. The change here is the fall and its consequences on Mitros and by extension on his family.

The topic then of this story is not the simple death of a simple person and the confrontation of this death through the established ritual. Here, although the gradual death is directed, the death consists of a medium for the writer to show the meaning that a brave young man has in the Greeks' subconscious mind. The main topic of the story is bravery and its relation to death.

Nevertheless, this topic is presented in a double time context: the time context of the Holy Week, which evokes a ritual related to death (that of Christ), and the time context of change and of gradual death which also evokes actions and customs.

In this way we can place the story in the ceremonial scale putting it in the beginning of the ritual. When Mitros falls he hurts his right leg and lies in bed as if he were sick. For a whole year he will remain lying in bed. During this year we will follow his psychological and physical reaction and at the same time the reaction and behaviour of his folks.

The story is then placed in the period before a person's death and later on in the case of a moribund person.

The first reaction of his folks is to call the doctor of the village although Dimena would prefer to call a woman well-known among the villagers to be able to exorcise the evil eye. Through the mother's preference we see a first characteristic of the villagers, who don't trust doctors and whom they only call when they know that no one else can do anything. The doctor examines him and tells him that he has to be patient and remain still for three months.

Mitros is patient and the months pass by. However, the leg is not healed but gets twisted and as a result Mitros walks with a limp. Seeing the results of the doctor's advice he decides not to trust doctors anymore.

All his relatives care for him and support him. His friends come and visit him in the house where he remains withdrawn as if he were mourning. As he remains isolated this way, he slowly dies and symbolically he mourns for his beauty that has been crippled and scarred.

Through his window Mitros sees Thallasochori, the summer nature and the fishing boats and he is wasting away because he cannot enjoy this beauty. Everything outside is heavenly beautiful. The wild flowers in the plain give off a sweet smell and the air also brings the scent of the sea. Since the doctor of Thallasochori was not able to cure him, his relatives call for other doctors who are well-known in the villages and are supposed to be able to cure everything. These are empirical doctors, who know everything and cure everything, so why not curing Mitros' leg too?

Everything has to be done so that Mitros will not be left crippled and scarred.

Through this story Palamas explains what the ideal of a brave young man means to Mitros, to his fellow-villagers and to the Greek people in general.

A truly fearless young man, like Mitros himself, should have the «λόγια, την ορμή, το φιλότιμο, την ομορσία, την ομοριότητα, και την περιφάνεια, την αγάπη της ξωής, και την καταφρόνια του θανάτου» "words, the urge, the dignity, the beauty and the pride, the love for life and the contempt for death" ².

Mitros has all these characteristics. He is afraid neither of danger nor of death. He used to enjoy every moment of his life. Mitros worships beauty, manliness and health as his gods. And these gods have the human body as their temple.

Mitros is presented as an ancient hero who sets beauty, manliness and fearlessness as his ideals. Beauty, however, cannot compromise with a spot. So Mitros, who has hurt his leg, is marked. He remains inside the house like mourners do, and who are also marked by wearing black clothes.

Up to this point in the story the customs do not play an active role. Nevertheless, the context and Mitros' behaviour reveal the general ceremonial vocabulary.

The first empirical doctor comes then; he gives two or three potions, takes money from Dimena and disappears. Mitros' condition, on the other hand, despite all the medicines and attention, deteriorates instead of improving. The months pass by and it is winter again. Another empirical doctor comes but Mitros will not rise from bed. The renowned empirical surgeons operate on his leg and infect it and as a result the leg is mortified. The doctor of Thalassochori, who had examined him first, examines him again after the charlatans and ascertains the fact that Mitros suffers from gangrene. He warns his relatives that the leg's amputation is the only way for Mitros to be saved.

However, Mitros - as it has already been mentioned - is a courageous young man who used to run, dance and fight. Without a leg he would be left crippled and would be unable to enjoy living his life according to his ideals.

Since humans have not been able to cure him, his relatives assume that somebody has cursed him.

A search begins then in order to find answers to questions such as who and why could have done it and also how can the relatives mediate in order to save Mitros from the curse and spells. Dimena along with other women suspects a girl who wanted to marry Mitros and got jealous when she heard that Mitros got engaged to Frossini.

The fall and injury of Mitros are interpreted as a message of death caused by somebody's spells. Facing this message of death, like we have already seen, people do not remain inactive but they react to it. Because they don't know how to deal with the spells the relatives ask for experts' help, that is people who possess magical powers and can mediate so that a solution can be found.

Mitros believes in charms because he finds them beautiful and he loves beauty. Dimena goes then to Patras in order to find a fortune-teller, who tells her that there is no chance for Mitros to be cured because an Armenian woman has cast a spell over him. In this story Armenian women possess very strong magical powers which no one can defeat. Since they do not seem to be coming to any result, the relatives find a second fortune-teller, who agrees with the first one. She also says that Mitros has been bewitched by fairies. The third seer, who can read cryptic talk and exorcise the demons, confirms the relatives and villagers' suspicions about the jealous girl, Morfo, and her mother, who have put a spell on Mitros. This spell cannot be broken by anyone.

A year has passed and the Holly week comes along with spring and hope.

At this point the ceremonial vocabulary reaches a peak with Mitros' death-rattle. For a whole year his relatives have tried to understand why such a lad should be tormented, who could have wanted to harm him. Since the fall has been interpreted as a message of death, sent by Morfo who had cast a spell over Mitros, the relatives have tried to mediate without any success. The hope of a complete recovery has evaporated and the ceremonial vocabulary functions so that everything can be put in order.

For a whole year customs are presented through several actions such as the message of death, Dimena's and Mitros' vigils hoping for something to happen, symbolic actions, practical medicines, Morfo's memorial services held in order to bewitch Mitros and include him among the dead and finally through the symbolic mourning. All the main characters in the story do not remain idle, they act, nurse and try to understand.

«Ο Μήτρος δένεχει πλιτωμό»³ "There is no way to save Mitros anymore". The gangrene has affected his whole body and he is slowly dying.

On Good Thursday they send for the priest who will administer communion to him, forgive his sins and give him his blessing.

Mitros' last day is Good Friday, the day of the vigil of the Epitaph. While on this day Christ's Passion is commemorated in church, in Dimena's house another epitaph is being prepared. Mitros is at his last gasp. He is facing death and is ready to give up everything that connected him with this world for the sake of his ideal. He shows great love to the objects he knows and this helps him to pass to the next world. One of these objects is the mirror which used to reflect his ideal, beauty, and which will now help him take care of himself for the last time before death comes. At the same time the sun shines through the open window over the path that his soul is to follow.

³ Kostis Palamas, "Young Man's Death", Athens Edition Pella, page 38.

² Kostis Palamas, "Young Man's Death", Athens Edition Pella, page 19.

Mitros also asks his mother to lament and sing dirges for him. We have seen in our study of customs that lament and dirges begin after a person has died and rarely before that. The dirge seldom begins before dying and in these exceptional cases it is the dying person that laments himself. One of Mitros' phrases could be considered as self-lamentation: "Ah! Beautiful youth that will go the way of all flesh!"⁴. The house turns into a church and all the fellow- villagers listening to the lament come to offer their condolences thinking that Mitros has died. However, Mitros is dying and he wants dirges to be sung for him. His mother laments along with the rest of the women who support her.

The first preparations begin. Clothes and a shroud are brought for the dead, while other women bring flowers and a wreath for Mitros who is at the death's door and who, when breathing his last, utters: «Παραδόθηκα» «I have surrendered».

The customs we have encountered throughout the story, like Dimena's vigil and Morfo's memorial services for Mitros reach a peak at the end when Mitros dies. The customs are used by Palamas as a context in order to present the death of a young man who chooses to remain brave till his death. Furthermore, the beliefs and the rituals of the village community are presented, giving this community a mythical value. The directive role the customs play makes possible the narration of a paradigmatic and fearless life that ends in death. Through this narration Palamas presents the human fears and the ancient values of the Greek society.

The customs related to death and further than that the Greek rural community serve as a source of inspiration for the authentic presentation of a belief.

Epilogue

This study has presented death-related customs and their role in prose literature. The ceremonial vocabulary has presented death as a break, as a passing from this world to another unknown one. Death terminates life and human activity. Through death the human being has to leave a world and a society so to enter a second intermediate world, that of the grave, and afterwards a third and final one, the Next World.

The experience of death becomes the focal point of an intermediational expression. Through the rituals and the symbols that constitute this expression the survivors face death. Ritual is a kind of intermediation having as its target the effacement of contradiction between life and death. This way the survivors confirm that death is just a step in life. Life and death obtain a meaning

through rituals. Catharsis, vigil, funeral, memorial services and mourning signal the ritual of death and underline the continuation of life of the community as well as of the dead person, who lives in a different way in a different world.

All rituals are linked to separation, departure, change and embodiment in a final and irreversible situation.

Customs of death that are rooted in ancient Greece continue their course through time and are preserved to the current day especially in Greek areas where the traditions are followed; that is, in the provinces and villages.

The main keystones and symbolisms of ceremonial vocabulary which translate the Greek beliefs regarding death remain intact even in big cities. Of course, some formulations are altered, but customs stay the same and defy death. Ceremonial vocabulary stresses the community's longing for permanence against time.

We find the same characteristics and the same longing in lamentation, which is the crossroad of ceremonial and literary vocabulary and which translates the protest against death. Death and customs related to it bring about an oral kind of literature (lamentation) and become the source of inspiration for prose literature. These two literary creations present a community and the relations in it and underline a people's unshakeable values and beliefs.

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⁴ Kostis Palamas, "Young Man's Death", Athens Edition Pella, page 40.