The Function Of Humour In Postmodernist Literature (On Works Of Samuel Beckett And Kurt Vonnegut)

Humor is considered to be as one of the best and most effective ways to tackle difficult topics and to educate people. People like to laugh at themselves, at artists, from all over the art world and keep distance from reality. They are not emotionally involved, and they don't take anything seriously anymore. Art also ceases to be treated with deadly seriousness. Everything is marked by irony. Artists no longer mind being openly participating in the art market. Grotesque and dark humor are an important part of postmodern culture. Laughter distinguishes postmodernists today as much as it once did with Dadaists. Some of the works of Samuel Beckett or Kurt Vonnegut were written in this style, which brought them success and publicity.

Postmodernism is said to be something like a 'bag-concept'. This is because it includes many minor trends and styles that, however, have some common features. It rejects the so-called great narratives: belief in the existence of objective values, belief in progress or the existence of God. Postmodernism assumes that there is no objective truth, that morality is relative, and that reality can be interpreted in an infinite number of ways, with no interpretation having a privileged position. Postmodern art is characterized by a conscious mixing of different genres, references to itself (characters in postmodern books or films often 'know' they are fictional characters), and an irony designed to show that nothing is what it appears to be: ‘postmodern irony seems to negate the possibility of ingenuous expression, critical engagement, and change.’

Waiting for Godot is a play written by Samuel Beckett, representing the so-called theater of the absurd. The work was written in French between October 1948 and January 1949. It was first published in October 1952 by the Paris publishing house Minuit. Beckett translated it into English in 1955, however the English version differs slightly from the original. The world premiere took place on January 5, 1953 at the Théâtre de Babylone in Paris, directed by Roger Blin.

The main characters of the play are two homeless bums, Estragon and Vladimir, who alternately warmly and sarcastically disposed towards each other, find themselves in the evening on a country road, under a tree. It is unknown where they came from or what is the purpose of their further journey. They conduct conversations, recall past affairs and wait for Godot to save them and give them hope. Estragon is not as full of faith as Vladimir, but he does not want to leave him. Vladimir's knowledge is full of gaps, he does not really know who Godot is or what he asked him to do. Vladimir is restless, neat, smart, he has something of a doctrinaire and a hypocrite about him. Estragon is a fool, but quite clever, lazy, simple. They meet Pozzo and Lucky every day, but they always act as if they were seeing them for the first time. Vladimir and Estragon await their lives, while Pozzo and Lucky wander, but their purpose and meaning are unclear.

Gogo and Didi struggle between ambition and hope, faith in a miracle, if it comes, it will change their lives. Although a miracle does not come, there is a chance, a spark of hope that gives play an optimistic expression. The moods of the characters get worse during the play. Even an attempted suicide ends in a comic way. The last sentences clearly express the entire powerlessness and tragedy of the characters: 'Well, shall we go?'2 one asks, the other replies

'Yes, let's go'. And they don't move from the spot.

Samuel Beckett revolutionized all concepts of drama - he deprived it of the logic of events, factual dialogue, place and time of action. The character and situation remained from the stage categories, the latter usually becoming the ultimate and stripped of everything, a pure existential situation. The characters are grotesque, being almost like a clown. The extremely original work of Beckett is full of lyricism that occurs in the most unexpected moments, as well as specific humor, brutal irony, acting as an antidote to a huge dose of pessimism.

The popular evolutionist theory of humor states that amusement is a response to cognitive biases that are detrimental to our survival. According to this concept, nature motivates us to detect any inconsistencies, rewarding it with a pleasant sensation - laughter. In this context, telling jokes is an exercise in the art of detecting falsehood, which is, after all, a condition of cognition. So, humor as the driving force of the mind is a serious matter, it is a question of truth.

Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death is a novel written by the American author Kurt Vonnegut, that combines a description of authentic events from World War II (e.g. the bombing of Dresden) with elements of absurdity, satire and science fiction. First published in 1969, it is considered Vonnegut's most significant work and was ranked 18th in the Best English-language Novels of the 20th Century (according to Modern Library).5 Slaughterhouse-Five is not only a classic of anti-war literature, but also an excellent example of the use of dark humor.

The hero (or rather anit-hero) of the book, Billy Pilgrim, is a quiet inhabitant of a small town in the eastern United States. At the end of 1944, he was sent to the front, where he was almost immediately taken prisoner by the Germans. Together with other prisoners, he is transported to Dresden, where on March 9, 1945, an American bombing raid literally flattens the city to the ground. The novel is a testimony to the personal experiences of a man whose culture and upbringing could not prepare him for the experience of a soldier. The piece is a kind of threnody, a mourning for the dead whose suffering and death did not make any sense, did not bring anyone anything. It doesn't matter if they were civilians, soldiers, or child pilgrims from the Crusades. Despite the specific humor, the author left us a text that treats the events described very seriously.

However, unpretentiousness in talking about death, war crime and genocide is inappropriate. Vonnegut uses the grotesque, which by its nature consists in combining elements that do not match each other. Dark humor adds a humanitarian meaning to this work. The writer uses irony and deliberate contrasts in character descriptions. Sometimes the humor of this work borders on cruelty. Professor Rumford says about Pilgrim (they are hospital neighbors) that doctors should not take care of Billy - doctors should take care of people, and Pilgrim should, according to the professor, be handled by a vet or gardener.

Supposedly, comedy comes from great sadness. A burst of laughter, when nothing else reasonable can be done, is a form of defense against the absurdity of the world. Vonnegut finds every death absurd. He uses irony to oppose a sharp disregard for victims and crimes. It shows that anesthesia often affects us. People do not want to remember and accept the nonchalance with which our species treats life.

‘Laughter, i.e. a pleasant reaction to humor, does not result from the ridiculousness hidden in

the joke, but is a reward for identifying some contradiction in the presented state of affairs. The ability to identify contradictions is beneficial to our being in the world, hence the need for laughter. On the other hand, what is pleasant is most often consumed in excess.’ The creators must therefore know moderation, because if the comedy moments outweigh the dramatic ones, it makes their work less serious and can lose its message. The greatest disgrace that participants of postmodern culture fear is misunderstanding a joke, that is, a sincere and naive reaction to irony. In this context, publicly proclaiming values, emotions, and weaknesses is exposure to a laughingstock. However, using humor in a thoughtful and balanced way can bring a great benefit to society.