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## Peculiarities of Responses to Pushkin in Works by the Satyrikonists

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**Abstract.** The aim of the study is describing the character of responses to A. S. Pushkin's personality and works by Satyrikon writers (A. Averchenko, Sasha Cherny, N. Teffi, Don-Aminado, A. Bukhov, V. Knyazev, O. Dymov) – participants of the famous journals *Satyrikon* (1908–1914) and *Noviy Satyrikon* (1913–1918). It is argued that the character of allusions to Pushkin by Satyrikonists is primarily comic, due to the demands of humorous discourse. Mentioning the name of the Russian classic, the authors use the techniques of farcical comedy and “nonsense comedy”, escalating numerous absurdities; sometimes they use the means of black humor. At the same time, the personality of the creator of *Eugene Onegin* and *The Captain's Daughter* turns out to be a secondary fact for these authors. Pushkin for them is rather a symbol manifesting high achievements of Russian culture and literature. In this regard, an appeal to Pushkin can introduce serious meanings into the text, and their major function is to highlight the vulgarity of everyday routine, the stupidity and mediocrity of the modern “every” man. The following conclusions were made as a result of the study: the reception of the figure of Pushkin and Pushkin's literary legacy by satirical writers was multifaceted; pursuing humorous goals, representatives of the famous journal include Pushkin's name in the circle of “the comic nonsense”; at the same time, references to Pushkin help them to highlight the mediocrity and wretchedness of modern life and man; a special function of allusions to Pushkin's work is revealed in these writers' political satire.

**Keywords:** Pushkin, “Satyrikon”, humor, satire, comic, intertextuality

**Conflicts of interest.** The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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## Особенности рецепции Пушкина в творчестве сатириконцев

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**Аннотация.** Цель исследования – комплексное описание особенностей рецепции личности и творческого наследия А.С. Пушкина писателями-сатириконцами (А. Аверченко, Сашей Чёрным, Н. Тэффи, Дон-Аминадо, А. Буховым, В. Князевым, О. Дымовым) – участниками знаменитых журналов «Сатирикон» (1908–1914) и «Новый Сатирикон» (1913–1918). Выдвигается тезис о преимущественном осмыслении Пушкина сатириконцами в комической плоскости, что обусловлено свойствами юмористического дискурса. Упоминая имя русского классика, авторы используют приемы фарсового комизма и «комизма бессмыслицы», нагнетая многочисленные нелепости; используют средства черного юмора. При этом сама личность создателя «Евгения Онегина» и «Капитанской дочки» по сути оказывается для представителей «Сатирикона» вторичной: Пушкин превращается в знак, манифестирующий высшие достижения российской культуры и литературы. В этом плане обращение к Пушкину может вводить в текст и серьезные смыслы, основной функцией которых становится высвечивание пошлости обывательской жизни, глупости и бездарности современного «среднего» человека. В результате сделаны следующие выводы: рецепция фигуры Пушкина и пушкинского литературного наследия писателями-сатириконцами носила многогранный характер; преследуя смеховые задачи, представители знаменитого журнала включают имя Пушкина в круг «комизма бессмыслицы»; отсылки к Пушкину помогают резче высветить посредственность и убогость современной жизни, человека; особая функция аллюзий на пушкинское творчество обнаруживается в политической сатире этих писателей.

**Ключевые слова:** Пушкин, «Сатирикон», юмор, сатира, комическое, интертекстуальность

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## Introduction

Alexander Pushkin's life and legacy often came into focus of a group of writers who became known as the Satirikonists. *Satirikon* and *Noviy Satirikon* were weekly humor and satirical magazines published in Saint Petersburg in 1908–1918. The list of their regular authors included Arkady Averchenko, Sasha Cherny, Nadezhda Teffi, Don-Aminado, Arkady Bukhov, Vasily Knyazev, Osip Dymov. The image of Pushkin from the *Satirikon* perspectives is a promising topic that remains largely understudied. Some aspects, however, were covered in Levitsky (1999), Fetisenko (1999), Zhirkova (2008; 2023; 2024a; 2024b), Zhdanov (2016), Karpov (2018), Belonogova (2024), ect.

Unlike Nikolai Gogol, Alexander Pushkin never deserved a special issue of *Satirikon*. Yet, the Satirikonists would often address his biography and writing. The number of diverse references to Pushkin in the pre-revolutionary period alone approximates one hundred. Generally speaking, the appropriation of Pushkin's legacy by the *Satirikon* authors was either purely humorous or entirely serious. These two opposite tendencies would often overlap, but the humorous pathos persisted right until the Russian Revolution of 1917.

Humorous texts seek laughter as their ultimate goal. *Satirikon* magazines had their roots in the traditions of pristine humor: its authors were *the first to laugh out loud ingenuously, wholeheartedly, and joyfully, like only children can laugh* (Kuprin, 1925, p. 10). Intertextuality came to them quite naturally. In humorous discourse, all intertextual references, regardless of the presentation method, work to create or enhance the comic effect (Karpov, 2018, p. 199). So was it with the numerous Pushkin allusions in Averchenko's *Visitor Seldyaev* (1915), *Seryozha's Ruble* (1915), *A Woman's Tail* (1917), *Volod'ka* (1920), and *The Joke of the Maecenas* (1924), or in Don-Aminado's *On Seashore Far a Green Oak Towers* (1926), *The Knight's Move* (1926), etc. However, Pushkin being a very special figure in Russian culture, various Pushkin and near-Pushkin motifs would often elevate far above the original, purely comic goals when incorporated into a humorous narrative.

## Results and Discussion

The Satirikonists preferred the methods of farcical, buffoonish, and absurd comedy. Surprisingly, Pushkin's biography and lifestyle seemed to

render countless funny associations. For instance, the *Satirikonists* owed a lot to Pushkin's famous nanny.

The very mentioning that a grown-up could have a nanny possesses a certain comic potential, based on the oppositions of juvenile vs. adult, maternal vs. masculine, etc. *Then Funya befriended Anton Kobyla, a local cooper, and this streetwise Kobyla, with his experience and advice, was to Funya like Pushkin's nanny, directing his inquisitive young energy onto a new path*<sup>1</sup>. In 1914, after Arkady Averchenko left *Satirikon*, it published an essay entitled *Youth is Good Because It Has a Future* and signed with a pseudonym of *The Green Integral*. It was a collection of truisms about youth and old age: *The great Russian poet Pushkin his old nanny on behalf of youth addresses (...) Pushkin wrote this dedication to his nanny when he was 32. Thus, Pushkin represented the youth and was all right because he had a future. He could live in the capital and enjoy all the benefits of metropolitan life (...) Did his decrepit nanny had a future? Certainly not because she could die any day! His old nanny was not all right in terms of future, which could not be said of Pushkin, who was mostly all right because he had a future*<sup>2</sup>.

Humorous discourse, where the general prevails over the particular, destroys the differences between the phenomena it depicts (Karpov, 2018, p. 192). For the *Satirikonists*, Pushkin's personality was secondary to his role as a cultural symbol, which they integrated, along with other cultural symbols, into the general comic logic of their narrative to escalate all kinds of absurdities:

*A public meeting of the Academy of Sciences was held under the chairmanship of Pyotr Zudoteshin, at which meeting Academician Poprishchin reported on the 19th awarding of the Pushkin Awards*<sup>3</sup>.

*... Orangutans, like the moon, are produced in Hamburg, as Poprishchin rightly noted, and in The House of the Dead by the brother of the famous chamberlain Pushkin, who was killed by Martynov in a duel, about whom a report will be made in due time by the poet N. M. Minsky, to whom Pushkin gave his notebook on his deathbed...*<sup>4</sup>

Pushkin's lines are eagerly embraced by the absurd. His *Ballad of the Drowned Man* (1828) is a profoundly dark and mystical text, but its motifs

<sup>1</sup> Lersky, I. (1910, September 11). Monologue. *Satirikon*, (37), 5. (In Russ.)

<sup>2</sup> (1914, March 15). *Satirikon*, (10), 3. (In Russ.)

<sup>3</sup> Cherny, S. (1909, November 14). Awarding the Pushkin Awards in 1911. *Satirikon*, (46), 5. (In Russ.)

<sup>4</sup> Gejogievich, N. (1914, April 26). Theater. *Satirikon*, (13), 8. (In Russ.)

penetrated the comic language quite easily to create black humor: *Dybin sang The Drown Man's Ballad to the joyful Winter Road tune. The climax coincided with the lines that described the hideous bloated corpse, which made us roar with laughter. At the moment when the black crayfish were dragging behind the swollen shape, I got hysterical and performed a somersault, to our ladies' delight*<sup>5</sup>.

Black humor makes the horrible funny by juxtaposing the tragic events to their comic interpretation. Contrast is the key tool of comedy<sup>6</sup>. The *Satirikon* writers mentioned Pushkin to stress the gap between the grandeur of this national genius and the obvious mundaneness and absurd of a particular situation:

*August 31. Was visited by the butcher, the greengrocer, and the milkman. They shouted and demanding something, couldn't figure out what. Just in case, purchased some luxurious editions of Pushkin, Schiller, and Shakespeare. September 3. Had to give the Schiller to the butcher while the Pushkin and the Shakespeare went to the greengrocer and the milkman, respectively. All were very happy*<sup>7</sup>.

However, a seemingly comic episode would often acquire a tinge of seriousness. For example, an anonymous cartoon captioned as *A Sad Surprise* showed a man reading a theater poster of *Pushkin's Death*. The man was saying to himself: *So he's died, God rest his soul! Just imagine: I bought his book only a few days ago!*<sup>8</sup>. The *Satirikon*ists saw an average Russian as uneducated and illiterate. In this respect, the name of the national genius Pushkin was a key to profound meanings: it helped the *Satirikon* authors to expose the omnipresent mediocrity, stupidity, and poor education. The masses were frivolous and superficial readers, if any. They lowered Pushkin down to their own level, simplified his sophisticated ideas, and misquoted his brilliant lines. For instance, the line *with thee an unseen guard doth go*<sup>9</sup> from *The Song of Oleg the Wise* (1822) turned into pure but modernized gibberish in Dymov's *Patron*<sup>10</sup>. Lines by other

<sup>5</sup> Averchenko, A. (1909, March 15). Tough Guys. *Satirikon*, (11), 7. (In Russ.)

<sup>6</sup> Laughter comes naturally only when the mind suddenly turns from the great to the small. See: Spenser, G. (1881). *Physiology of Laughter*. Saint Petersburg: A.S. Suvorov Publ. (In Russ.); Stepanova, N.Yu. (2009). *Contrast as a Means of Creating a Comic Effect: Linguostylistic Aspect* [Doctoral dissertation, Moscow State Pedagogical University]. Moscow. (In Russ.)

<sup>7</sup> Knyazev, V. (1913, September 20). Human life. From the Diary of a St. Petersburg Resident. *Satirikon*, (38), 8. (In Russ.)

<sup>8</sup> (1908, August 23). *Satirikon*, (20), 3. (In Russ.)

<sup>9</sup> Pushkin, A.S. (1977). *Complete Set of Works* (Vol. 2, p. 101). Moscow: Nauka Publ. (In Russ.)

<sup>10</sup> (1911, March 5). *Satirikon*, (10), 10. (In Russ.)



poets were attributed to Pushkin, or Pushkin's lines were attributed to other authors, while ignorance was camouflaged as erudition:

*As the poet said, the Truth is more important to us than mundane topics, but we are not poets, we are prose writers...* "The poet said no such thing!" a young feuilletonist yelled from the crowd. It made me feel stupid. "Which poet would that be?" I asked. "Pushkin. In fact, Pushkin said: The mundane truths are important to us." I faked a laugh: "My dear fellow! How can you succeed as a feuilletonist if your erudition is that meager? Indeed, you were right in quoting Pushkin, but what I quoted was from the American poet Walt Whitman!"<sup>11</sup>.

The *Satirikon* authors also appealed to contrast to ridicule the aesthetic mediocrity of amateur poets. A. Averchenko ran a column called *Mailbox*, where he feedbacked readers' letters and ridiculed the works they submitted for publication: *You ask us: How should I write to get my poems published in Satirikon? Well, try writing with a quill. Pushkin wrote with a quill, and it came out very smoothly*<sup>12</sup>; *You say your love poem was published in Kyiv Press? So why are you submitting it to Satirikon? I wish you'd mailed us something by Pushkin instead*<sup>13</sup>.

For the *Satirikon*sts, Pushkin's glorious poetry stood in stark contrast to the routine vulgarity and inertia of mundane life. Sasha Cherny, being one of the most talented *Satirikon*ists, would often refer to this device. His poem *Province* was published in 1909 and later reprinted as *Early in the Morning* in his *Provincial Poems* (Ivanov 2007, p. 421): *It's early in the morning that the cuckoo starts singing in the park. The kiosk with seltzer water is not open yet. A drunkard is vast asleep at the foot of a tiny monument to Pushkin*<sup>14</sup>.

The monument to the great national poet may be tiny, but Pushkin was Sasha Cherny's own spiritual guide: *There is the bright sun, there are innocent children; there is the precious joy of music and books. If there are none, there must have been some in the past: just think of Beethoven, Pushkin, Heine, and Grieg...*<sup>15</sup>

The sad irony that *Satirikon* tried to render to its readers was that it was not just the average joe or a hack writer who failed to understand Pushkin's poetry. All Russian society became deaf to Pushkin, including literary

<sup>11</sup> Averchenko, A. (1909, June 27). Pieces of life, Rough and Pale. *Satirikon*, (26), 2. (In Russ.)

<sup>12</sup> (1909 April 11). *Satirikon*, (15), 9. (In Russ.)

<sup>13</sup> (1913, July 26). *Satirikon*, (30), 11. (In Russ.)

<sup>14</sup> Cherny, S. (1909, August 15). Province. *Satirikon*, (33), 2. (In Russ.)

<sup>15</sup> Cherny, S. (1910, May 29). Patient. *Satirikon*, (22), 3. (In Russ.)

critics and philologists. The living Pushkin disappeared behind dry facts and scholarly interpretations. This parody to a “Pushkin’s edition with notes” was dedicated to the 75th anniversary of his death:

*No more Pushkin, only notes. Here are some notes to Pushkin’s famous poem I Wander Along the Bustling City Streets published in Volume III of his most recent and expanded edition. Note 1. This strange word “brozhu” (I wander) has always puzzled us<sup>16</sup>. It obviously comes from the noun “ford” meaning a shallow river crossing. Thus, one can only wander in water, but the poem is about streets! Clearly, there must be a mistake. So, we didn’t rest until we found a new manuscript by Pushkin under the ruins of Pompeii. And it was not “brozhu” (I wander) but “brezhu” (I am delirious), which is perfectly reasonable. Therefore, it should read as “(I am) delirious along the bustling city streets”. We had to take (I am) in parentheses as another obvious irregularity of Pushkin’s language<sup>17</sup>.*

This episode is full of comic gibberish (Slonimsky, 1923, p. 33), which the *Satirikon*ists excelled at. However, the seeming buffoonery often concealed a sad attitude. The abovementioned *Notes* being pure fiction, Russian literature does know a case when the brilliant critic Rozanov accidentally misquoted *The Scenes from Faust* (1825) in his essay *Back to Pushkin* (1912). It provoked genuine indignation on the part of A. Averchenko: *While he misquoted Pushkin’s “you thought at such a time, when no one else could think” as “you think when no one else thinks”, Rozanov demands that others know their Pushkin, but he himself probably never ventured beyond the book titles<sup>18</sup>. Of course, the reproach was unfair, but the founder of *Satirikon* clearly saw himself as the guardian of Pushkin’s legacy.*

Although *Satirikon* positioned itself as a humorous magazine rather than a satirical one, political satire on contemporary issues never left its pages (Evstigneeva, 1968, pp. 26–83). *Satirikon*ists occasionally used Pushkin motifs in a political context. Thus, the fairy tale *A Broken Trough* written by E. Vensky (Pyatkin) and published in 1913 in a special issue used Pushkin’s *Tale of the Fisherman and the Fish* (1833) to speculate

<sup>16</sup> Apparently, this refers to the publication: Pushkin, A.S. (1907–1915). *Collected Works* (S.A. Vengerov, Ed.). St. Petersburg: Brockhaus-Efron Publishing House (In Russ.). The poem “Do I Wander along noisy streets...” (1829) was published in the third volume.

<sup>17</sup> Vengerov, S.A. (1912, February 3). Pushkin with Notes. *Satirikon*, (6), 5. (In Russ.)

<sup>18</sup> Averchenko, A. (1912, February 17). Feathers from the Tail. *Satirikon*, (8), 5. (In Russ.)

upon the way the first Russian revolution failed to bring about social changes and disappointed the Russian intelligentsia. E. Vensky demands with mock indignance that Pushkin's books should be banned: *And why is it that the works by Peter the Great's Moor and Jew Pushkin are still published? They contradict what the Church Fathers preach us about! Hey, you, ministers! Come and take them away from me!*<sup>19</sup>

Pushkin's name also appeared in the articles by the most implacable Satirikonist K. M. Antipov aka Krasny. His poem boldly references the opening line and meter of Pushkin's short poem *In front of a Noble Spanish Woman...* (1830):

*In front of a mysterious prime minister*<sup>20</sup> *swarm noisy patriots. All lackeys in manners, they are pursuing their own ideological games. They are all leaders of masses and promise him the support of these masses; they all shamelessly speak on behalf of the people...*<sup>21</sup>

Pushkin's intertext allows the readers to draw an obvious comparison: just as the knights in the original text fight for the attention of a charming Spanish beauty, so modern patriots strive to be liked by the new Prime Minister. An earlier piece of *Political Lyrics* by K.M. Antipov opens with a pastiche to Pushkin's *Demon* (1823). The poem is addressed to a certain Socialist Revolutionary lady:

*Back when all the impressions were new to me – the freedoms, the noisy meetings, the crimson banners, and the proudly joyful plebs – I met you at a rally, and you were breathing of faith and war and armed with dreams of freedom*<sup>22</sup>.

The disillusionment with former lofty ideals is the only theme this text shares with the original. In this case, Pushkin is not a goal but a cultural game and a means to attract the reader's attention.

## Conclusion

The *Satirikon* authors interpreted Alexander Pushkin and his legacy in very different ways. Humor being their main goal, they used allusions to Pushkin as part of comic gibberish and black humor. However, the laughter

<sup>19</sup> (1913, April 8). *Satirikon*, (10), 3. (In Russ.)

<sup>20</sup> This refers to Prime Minister V.N. Kokovtsov, who replaced P.A. Stolypin after his assassination in September 1911.

<sup>21</sup> Krasny. (1911, September 30). *In front of a mysterious prime minister...* *Satirikon*, (40), 3. (In Russ.)

<sup>22</sup> Krasny. (1908). *Political Lyrics. Satyricon*, (9), 7. (In Russ.)



often gave way to sadness as references to Pushkin highlighted the mediocrity and wretchedness of modern life, in which *a genius shared the drab persona with horses*<sup>23</sup>. The structure and functions of intertextual references to Pushkin's works in the parodies and pastiches by the Satirikonists deserve independent research.

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<sup>23</sup> Chernyi, S. (2007). *Collected Works* (Vol. 1, p. 51). Moscow: Ellis Lak Publ. (In Russ.)

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