

THE 1920S IN HRISTO KARASTOYANOV'S NOVEL "THE SAME NIGHT AWAITS US ALL" – LIGHT AND DARKNESS

Trayana Lateva

Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski"

Abstract. The paper aims to comment on the representation of the 1920s, seen through the last few years of the lives of the poet Geo Milev and the anarchist Georgi Sheytanov, as shown in one of the most famous contemporary Bulgarian novels, written by Hristo Karastoyanov, "The Same Night Awaits Us All". In order for this to be achieved a few key scenes are analyzed, since they introduce main themes and narrative strategies, followed throughout the novel, as well as point out the allegorical contrast between light and darkness, good and evil. Subject to interpretation are also the characters' motifs, actions, emotional states and reactions, particularly to the presence of death, which seems to be impossible to overlook and plays an important part in setting the overall tone of the novel.

Keywords: Contemporary Bulgarian prose; 1920s; Geo Milev; Georgi Sheytanov; death; light and darkness

The third decade of the XX century is undoubtedly one of the most problematic and controversial periods in Bulgarian history. The disadvantaged situation in which Bulgaria found itself after the end of the First World War and the signing of the Treaty of Neuilly-sur-Seine in 1919 led to the destabilization of the state system and diplomatic isolation, overcoming of which became a major priority in order to prevent the danger of a national crisis. However, the already intensified process of disintegration of national unity turned out to be irreversible, as a result of which the 1920s were marked by a number of political confrontations and bloody events – assassinations, rebellions and murders¹⁾. And if the socio-political life bends under the weight of the impossible unification, then in the cultural one the feeling of change and the accompanying sharpened sensitivity of the artist serve as a prerequisite for activating the creative impulses and entering new artistic fields, whose inhabiting requires specific aesthetic tools, characteristic of the modernist type of worldview. Thus, on the territory of the 1920s, works with different genre definitions, which reflected the main developmental tendencies of Bulgarian literature during this period, were born and coexisted.

The hectic events of the 1920s were taken into focus and received their artistic reflection from writers who lived and worked at the time. All of the works, that recreated the real horror of the atrocities that took place, and were later classified as the so-called “September Literature” – Anton Strashimirov's expressionist novel “Horo”, the poem “September”, the poetry collections “Zhertveni kladi” by Asen Raztsvetnikov and “Proleten vyatar” by Nikola Furnadzhiev, the series of short stories “Razh” by Angel Karaliychev, have similar characteristics – strong emotional and psychological charge, fragmentary episodes, a sense of chaos, lost social and moral orientations, broken interpersonal relationships, aesthetic orientation towards the dreadful and terrible. The atmosphere of one of the darkest decades of the twentieth century was captured and sealed by its contemporaries, but the view of it can be fully comprehensive only when it intercepts modern texts that fictionalize the 1920s and strive to make sense of the events of the period through the distance of time.

Such is the novel of the contemporary Bulgarian writer Hristo Karastoyanov – “The Same Night Awaits Us All”, published in 2014 and testifying to the relentless interest in historicism, which has been a tendency in Bulgarian literature in recent years²⁾, and in the period and its long-silenced and hidden specifics. Curiosity about a question of a medical nature underlies of the birth of the idea of writing the novel. In an interview with the “Standard” newspaper, Hristo Karastoyanov says that he had consulted with various surgeons in order to obtain a professional opinion on the severe head wound that Geo Milev received during a battle with the British during the First World War³⁾. The observation by experts that such a trauma leads to constant and extremely painful sensations helped Karastoyanov look at the figure of the poet beyond its iconic outlines and give it the status of “a completely normal person with horrible suffering”. The other main character in the novel – Georgi Sheytanov, “just as normal” (in the words of the author), turns out to be the perfect ideological partner of Milev not only in real life, but also in the pages of the novel. The narrative covers events that happened in the span of two years – between 1923 and 1925. The chosen period, apart from being very tense due to the escalation of public unrest, is also significant because it was then that the first meeting between the two publicists took place, which marked the beginning of their joint work on a magazine called “Plamuk” (“Flame”).

The present study aims to highlight the main thematic cores that drive Karastoyanov's story through analyzing a few key scenes, what structure was chosen to house the narrative in and if the overall tone of the author's interpretation approaches or differs from the already known models of representation of the 1920s by contemporaries of the decade.

The narrative is structured in six parts, with only the last one entitled – “The Hour of Death”. The story of the events is presented in fragments (a characteristic technique, used in the so-called “September literature” as well), and immersion

in the atmosphere of the 1920s is carried out through the accumulation of various episodes from the life of Milev and Sheytanov, which unfold against the backdrop of important historical events that took place at that time – each of the characters is presented in his intimate world, woven from personal thoughts, tremors and agitations, but also through communication with the other. The description of the characters is not straightforward, but contains understandable contradictions – Milev is hot-tempered, impatient, irritable, but also gentle and loving to his wife and children, while Sheytanov is quieter and immersed in his own thoughts, but can also be decisive, fearless and ruthless when the situation requires it. The dimensions of the fictional are blurred, in cases where the figure of its author appears, whose clarifying notes, presenting details of what is happening in reality and often synchronized with the fictional world, justify the chosen subtitle, dictating the genre definition of the work – “a diary of a novel”.

The opening lines of the work stray from introducing the reader smoothly and timidly into the action, and without a prior warning put him in a situation, signifying the presence of a crisis – the capture of Sheytanov, from which, whether from the darkness that engulfs everything around, or from the expectation to be adhered to historical reality, the outcome seems predictable, and thus impossible. The scenes depicting the last moments of Sheytanov's life, spent in a quiet and dark room in Gorna Dzhumaya as he awaits the announcement of his sentence, alternate with episodes from Milev's equally tense final days, culminating in the naturalistic description of his murder – *“That's right: the others were just strangled - they first broke his head. In the first blow, his skull cracked from his left temple to the back of his head, and then they continued and did not stop until they broke it. In the end, they threw a black rag on his face and only then did they strangle him like everyone else with that rope prepared early for this work.”* (Karastoyanov 2014, 16 – 17). A retrospective reading proves that the constant shifting of the focus (first to the anarchist, then to the poet) early on in this first part of the novel actually suggests the presence of basic thematic lines and plot-building and narrative approaches (which obliges the reader to follow in the footsteps of Sheytanov during his anarchist exploits with the Kilifarevo detachment⁴), then to return to the familiar commonplaces, chosen for the construction of the image of Milev – his home, his editorial office, and finally to observe the activities and conversations between the two comrades), which will be followed throughout the end of the novel. At the same time, there is a preliminary allusion to the inevitable connection between the fates of the two characters, whose first meeting and the subsequent joint work occupy a central place in the plot, and the intersection point, which simultaneously appears as a culmination and provides interpretation of the chosen title, appears to be the unwanted, unexpected and unsuspected “meeting” of the two friends – at the hour when the captured Sheytanov has his head cut off, the body of the murdered Milev, wrapped in sacks, is thrown at the Ilien Fort and buried under *“some garbage and*

five dead dogs, so that if someone accidentally takes a dig in these places - to see that these are just some dead dogs and not delve down." (Karastoyanov 2014, 19). In this sense, the story does not follow a chronological order, as it draws on the final events that took place in the lives of the main characters in the beginning of its course. The last two parts of the novel take us back to the "hour of death", where Milev's murder is detailed, and Sheytanov's experiences after his capture replicate what has already been said in the opening scenes. They also trace the desperate attempts of Milev's wife to find her husband in one of Sofia's police stations in order to receive an explanation for his disappearance. Thus the circle is closed – the novel begins and ends with the two tragic events of the spring of 1925.

What the opening scenes also do is integrate in the narrative one of the central themes of the novel – the theme of death, the interpretation of which is realized through the personal experiences of Sheytanov and Milev, later – of the women in their lives (Mariola and Mila) and the antagonist in the work (Nikola Geshev). Faced with the "meaningful killers", as he calls them, Sheytanov refuses to succumb to fear – *"The two men standing in front of him were probably thinking they were scaring him to death but he was thinking wearily that there was nothing to be scared about"* (Karastoyanov 2014, 17). The silence that had settled in the room is torn apart only by his mocking questions, directed at his captors. A wave of creativity has taken over his mind and paradoxically, just moments before the inevitable end, new verses are born, which the anarchist feverishly begins to repeat in his mind, so as not to forget and pass them on to the poet to use for his next magazine, because *"there is no way that there isn't going to be another magazine"* (Karastoyanov 2014, 296). The creative power of man, expressed here by the urge to create and remember a new poem, is a counterpoint to the ugly face of death, which he has seen many times when killing, and its messengers, and a refusal to give up hope not only for his fate, but also for the future days of the mankind. For Geo Milev, death is a constant guest and he welcomes it with contempt and annoyance. It has left its scar on his face, as if to remind him that he had never been able to free himself completely from its dangerous embrace, and that their reunion is inevitable. His image in the mirror reveals not only his own features, but also those of death, protruding from under his forelocks and glasses. Accustomed to its quiet presence, the poet omits the definite signs of the fatal doom destined for him. Like Sheytanov, Milev turns his back on fear. In his final moments, his soul holds only an undercurrent of concern for his wife Mila, his brother Boris and his children, who he had not seen since the moment of his capture. However, if there is a character who does not ignore the indications that point out to the upcoming bloody fiasco, organized by Death, but on the contrary – even constantly looks around for them and analyzes them, then this is Mila. She is as if trapped in a borderline state of mind – between the world of the dead and the living, sometimes pulled in by the dark shades and angels, other times – by the innocence of her children and her

husband's inspiring strive for change. On the date of Milev's surgery in Germany (August 21st, 1918) she faces death up close and from that day on its prints are indelible – she sees them in her husband's porcelain eye, in the bluish veins that keep beating under the skin of his temple, in his clumsiness when he goes through a doorstep. As she walks after the *"closed car with the big red cross and the two sad horses like angels in front"* (Karastoyanov 2014, 239) on the day of the medical interference her mind evokes associations with a funeral ritual and transforms the car into a hearse. Paradoxically, Mila will be denied the right to send off her husband on his final path, as his body will be mercilessly discarded and will only be discovered years later. In this sense, this memory symbolically illustrates Milev's only funeral, which Mila attends, although it happens way before his murder.

Death is also interpreted through the eyes of the ruthless police chief, the last person Milev speaks to before the bloody hand of the law is undeservedly dropped on him – Nikola Geshev. For the policeman, it is *"something completely unnecessary and harmful to his work"* (Karastoyanov 2014, 279). His predatory nature is greedy and insatiable – it wants its victims alive but death often intervenes with a tempting offer and takes them far away, to a place much quieter and peaceful than the arrests and prisons. In death, Geshev sees a chance for an escape that defendants do not deserve. It is the one who strips him off from the role of a sinless judge and makes his cruel plans meaningless. As for the anarchist Mariola, her confrontation with death convinces her that there is nothing sublime in it, but that it is *"ugly, disgusting, and smelling of sweaty and grunting men"* (Karastoyanov 2014, 105). It makes her confront her own weaknesses – fear and helplessness, because it never completely engulfs her, but only reminds her how cruel life can be.

The theme of death is also strongly connected with the predominant tone in the color spectrum used in the novel, namely black, loaded mainly with negative connotations. Its manifestations unfold through the material world, the emotional saturation and the situation of most of the scenes in the dark hours of the day: the capture and killing of Sheytanov happens at night, when there is nothing but darkness around; the visit of the two agents to Milev's home takes place at midnight, seven days after the attack on the "St. Nedelya" church; late in the evening, empty black vans take *"the next numb unfortunates"* (Karastoyanov 2014, 291) on their unknown path; Mila's anxiety and fear, when she hears her husband recite verses from the poem "September" once again, make her face darken. The darkness in "The Same Night Awaits Us All" functions with its traditional symbolic load – it is a prerequisite for secret plans, for cruel deeds, for mysterious events, for unlocking the demonic in man, for the absence of light, hence for salvation and the way out. In one of the key scenes in the novel, however, this interpretation is reversed and the indicated suggestions are replaced by their opposites. This is the first meeting of Sheytanov and Milev in 1923, which takes place in the poet's home. It is no coincidence that the scene is preceded by perhaps the most cheerful and optimistic

description in the novel – of the festive spirit that hovers over Sofia in the autumn of 1923 after the deadlock of martial law. Here Karastoyanov leads the reader in the footsteps of Sheytanov and Krastev and draws an imaginary detailed map of the streets of the capital – the young people pass through “Shipka”, past the still unlit “Alexander Nevsky” Cathedral, “Moskovska” and “Dondukov”, through the noisy “Targovska” to the “Sveta Nedelya” church, onto the “Banski” square until a bustling avenue, on which Milev resides, is reached. The scene, showing the birth of the acquaintance between the poet and the anarchist, is important, because it also shows how the idea of them working together comes to be. What matters is not only where it happens – home here, and in the further course of the story, is relied on as a sacred space, which pulls the poet out of the dark times in which he lives, provides him with the necessary security and comfort, transports him to a bright world in which he is among his loved ones (Mila and the children) and practices his favorite activity (writing), but also when it happens, namely at night. Sheytanov's initial proposal to create a new magazine does not trigger Milev's expected enthusiasm, on the contrary – the idea is defined as a hoax and madness. Explaining the concept and providing more details about its implementation ultimately leads to the desired result and Milev declares his consent. The offer to name the new edition “Plamak” (“Flame”) is also accepted. The contrast between the name of the magazine and the time of the made suggestion is implicit, but indicative enough to support the assumption that being in the dark dimensions of the day can catalyze the creative, not only the destructive forces that reside in human nature. Identical symbolic two-dimensionality characterizes fire – dangerous element that can cause pain and death, destroy and punish, but can also tear the frightening shell of darkness in order to bring out the light, to carry the hope of renewal and salvation. The idea of the need for a new beginning is promoted through Sheytanov's criticism of the “Vezni” magazine, published by Milev in the period 1919-1922, whose layout does not meet the aesthetic norms to which it calls for observance. “Plamak” fully serves the need for a name that carries the charge of change, while suggesting that the light in the lives of the two comrades is the belief in the meaning of continuing their creative and social work, which will be a guiding light for themselves and their successors, even after their inevitable absorption by the forces of darkness happens.

Mila's dream, which appears to her after the return to her home, exhausted from the long hours, spent at numerous police stations, in an attempt to find information about the disappearance of her husband, is also built on the principle of the contrasting opposition between light and dark. Immersed in the coziness of the family bedroom, Mila dreams of an “endless line of people in black” that “crawl through the snowy desert” (Karastoyanov 2014, 311). The unfortunates are forbidden to stop – the refusal leads to death, as evidenced by the hundreds of blackened corpses along the road. The long road that lays ahead of them passes through nine lands, which, according to an unidentified narrator, are inhabited only

with kind-hearted people. The journey stops when they reach the tenth land – the Promised Land, which offers all of the necessary earthly goods and it shines in the minds of the passengers like a “bright prayer”. In addition to the obvious intertextual reference to the Bible, and in particular the promise God makes to Abraham, the symbolism of the scene is inflated by the number 10, defined in the numerological cult of the Pythagoreans as a sacred and perfect number because of the ideal sum it embodies – 1 (new beginning in existence), 2 (creation), 3 (earthly), 4 (spiritual). From this interpretation comes its associative connection with the Promised Land, which has become a byword for a place that ensures the fulfillment of all dreams and desires, as used and seen in Mila's dream. However, the initial hope of the strangers and the joy of approaching the cherished goal are snatched away when an unknown “dark man on horseback” tells them that their promised salvation is simply part of a story they chose to believe in. It is no coincidence that such an omen appears to Milev's wife, whose emotional overstrain and constant uneasiness repeatedly mark the course of the narrative and send a silent warning about the final events. Mila's dream allegorically replicates what is happening in reality and erases any hope of reversing the course of events – the innocent, who set out in search of change and salvation, will be punished and sacrificed; others will follow, deceived by the same expectancy, as they pass quietly the victims before them. In this fragment also discredited is the role of creativity – the appeals and promises, read in different stories, belong only to the world of fiction, and are destined to mislead, not to justify expectations, guaranteeing truthfulness. Thus, the model set at the beginning – that the creative impulses of Milev and Sheytanov will be enough to “illuminate” the narrative, is deconstructed, so that, as Yanitsa Radeva writes in her review of “The Same Night Awaits Us All”, “the novel is closed with another death, which I will figuratively call the *future*, a little more descriptive – the *dream future*”⁵).

In his novel Karastoyanov paints a gloomy and melancholy picture of the 1920s, which does not differ drastically from the already known literary models of the past, fictionalizing the same events, as his artistic world unlocks associations, directed mainly at hopelessness, cruelty and destructiveness in human life. However, Karastoyanov's story does not move rectilinearly, but is subject to the alternation of several narrative strategies. The author jumps to the past (1920s), then moves back to the present, when the novel was written (2013 – 2014). He remains loyal to history, without claiming to be scientifically exhaustive, as he depicts some of the most famous events, which are of a crucial importance and play a significant part in the process of shaping the image of the decade, and yet doesn't hesitate to broaden his fictional spectrum in order to incorporate real people in the story and to depict them in their everyday lives. The same duality applies to the portrayal of the characters – the attention shifts between Sheytanov, Milev and other fictional figures, all of which, by the author's will, are presented through the simultaneous

confrontation with past events and the harsh face of the then reality. The approach that Karastoyanov relies on in order to differentiate the novel's suggestions is identical. The scenes of hopelessness and optimism, of fear and serenity, of sinking into the darkness and emerging into the light, run frantically one after the other. The figures of Sheytanov and Milev are a collective image of all who refuse to close their eyes to the absurdity of the time in which they live; their work and creativity is the embodiment of the need for a flame that cannot be extinguished. Without being idealized, they manage to bring the much needed illumination throughout Karastoyanov's story, as well as in their own time, until their last breath, belonging to the all-consuming darkness. The last, 25th episode of "The Same Nights Awaits Us All" is the shortest one, as all that it says is "the end". Not only does it indicate that the novel has come to its finale but it also serves as a representation of the end of the hopes of a wife, two children, a whole generation...

NOTES

1. Among the most memorable events in Bulgaria in the 1920s are: the 1923 Bulgarian coup d'état, organized to overthrow the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union headed by Aleksandar Stamboliyski and to replace with one under Aleksandar Tsankov. The September Uprising of the same year under the leadership of the Bulgarian Communist Party – the main demand was the removal of the Democratic Alliance and the then Prime Minister Alexander Tsankov from power; the "St. Nedelya" assault in Sofia on April 16th, 1925 by far-left representatives of the Bulgarian Communist Party and the Military Organization (the terrorist act aimed at eliminating the political elite, which was in the church at the time because of the funeral of General Konstantin Georgiev); the April events of 1925, which were expressed in the repression of the left and opposition forces in the country (at that time, immediately after the attack, martial law was declared, which remained in force until 24.10.1925. Hundreds of Bulgarians were tortured and killed).
2. In her review of "The Same Night Awaits Us All", published in „Literaturen vestnik“, Yulia Al-Hakim explains this emphasized interest in history as a result of "uncertainty in the present" which "is a symptom that the community is looking for compensation for its lost values and landmarks. In troubled times, the reader feels the need to negotiate the lessons of history and to restart national ideals, to find support and impetus for action in the past." <https://litvestnik.wordpress.com/%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%84%D0%BE%D0%BA%D1%83%D1%81/%D0%B4%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%B2%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%BC%D1%8A%D1%80%D1%82%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%BF%D0%BE%D1%85%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%8F/>

3. The interview, titled "Hristo Karastoyanov: I'm a professional provincial", can be read via the following link: https://www.standartnews.com/mneniya-intervyuta/hristo_karastoyanov_az_sam_profesionalen_provintsialist-310150.html#
4. Kilifarevo detachment was established on June 13, 1923, immediately after the suppression of the June uprising. It lasted until May 1925. The idea came from insurgents from the villages of Kilifarevo, Debelets, Lyaskovets and others, who remained illegal after the defeat of the uprising. The composition of the detachment varies between 10-30 people. The detachment has no elected commander, but it is believed that Georgi S. Popov had the greatest authority.
5. Yanitsa Radeva's review of the novel is published at [kultura.bg](https://kultura.bg/web/%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%B%D0%B%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%8A%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%BD%D0%B0/). <https://kultura.bg/web/%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%B%D0%B%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%8A%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%BD%D0%B0/>

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✉ **Trayana Lateva, PhD Student**
Orcid ID: 0000-0001-8194-1408
Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski"
Plovdiv, Bulgaria
E-mail: tlateva@uni-plovdiv.bg