

## GAME STRATEGIES IN VICTOR PELEVIN'S SHORT STORY "SIGMUND IN THE CAFÉ"

<sup>a</sup>YU ZHANG, <sup>b</sup>NATALIA CVETOVA, <sup>c</sup>ELIZABETH VLASOVA, <sup>d</sup>TATIANA TERNOVA

<sup>a</sup> *St. Petersburg State University,  
St. Petersburg, University emb., 7/9, Russian Federation  
email: yu.zhang92@yandex.ru*

<sup>b</sup> *St. Petersburg State University,  
St. Petersburg, University emb., 7/9, Russian Federation  
email: cvetova@mail.ru*

<sup>c</sup> *St. Petersburg State Institute of Culture,  
St. Petersburg, Dvortsovaya emb., 2, Russian Federation  
email: kealis@gmail.com*

<sup>d</sup> *Voronezh State University,  
Voronezh, University Square, 1, Russian Federation  
email: tternova-1@mail.ru*

Abstract: The purpose of the article is to demonstrate the game strategies of Viktor Pelevin, one of the most prominent representatives of modern Russian literature, using the example of the short story "Sigmund in the café". In comparison with the stories of T. Tostaya or L. Petrushevskaya, Pelevin's game poetics is more postmodern, it excludes the moral perspective of the narrative, but exposes the principles of playing with the reader, involving him in a postmodern text. The author appeals to the knowledge of modern man about the theory of Sigmund Freud and on this basis enters into a creative game. The "deception" of the reader who believes in the realization of Freudian ideas turns into a talented practical joke.

Keywords: Victor Pelevin; short story "Sigmund in the café"; postmodernism; game poetics; reader and writer.

### 1 Introduction

Victor Pelevin's short story "Sigmund in the café" (1993) is one of the early stories of the novelist. It is extremely small in volume and does not seem to offer anything unexpected to the reader. However, the analysis of the text reveals interesting perspectives on the study of the theme of love in Russian postmodernism, the consideration of a love story and its traditional motives.

Many modern Russian and foreign researchers have turned to the analysis of V. Pelevin's work, such as N. Leiderman (Leiderman 2003), M. Lipovetsky (Lipovetsky 1997), M. Epstein (Epstein 2000), I. Skoropanov (Skoropanov 2002), O. Bogdanova (Bogdanova 2004), etc. However, criticism had not previously addressed the direct analysis of the text, the story "Sigmund in the café" was usually mentioned only in the general enumeration series as a story demonstrating the principles of a postmodern worldview. It is all the more interesting and important to carry out a direct analysis of Pelevin's text.

### 2 Headline associations

First of all, the peritext of "Sigmund in the café" attracts attention, that is, those peripheral elements of the text that, by definition, J. Genette (Genette 1987, 1997), precede the main narrative block. First of all, this is undoubtedly the title.

As you know, the title of the work is semantically significant. It sets the initial perspective of the perception of plot events, forms a program of semantic perception of the depicted. The title, as a rule, reflects the epicentric sphere of the text, bringing to the fore either the problem ("Crime and Punishment" by F. Dostoevsky), or the central question ("Who is to blame" by A. Herzen), or bringing the main character to the forefront ("Eugene Onegin" by A. Pushkin).

Pelevin does exactly this — the precedent name Sigmund is brought into the title position of his story, giving rise to a chain of inevitable associations, among which the name of Sigmund Freud stands first. The title "Sigmund in the café" seems to include a marker of cultural intertextuality, the anthroponym sets the semantic code of perception, creates an additional context (Ermolovich 2001; Superanskaya 2009).

It is unlikely that today one can find a person who would not know the name of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), an Austrian psychiatrist, the founder of the theory and practice of psychoanalysis, an authoritative psychoanalytic school at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the direction in medicine, sociology, philosophy and even culture, according to which the dominant area in human behavior is determined by the unconscious (animals) impulses that contain deep sexual overtones and active vital energy. In this regard, the love plot takes on a very specific and unexpected turn in Pelevin's text.

As is known, Sigmund Freud's sphere of interest in the field of psychoanalysis was dreams, hypnosis and, most importantly, the sexual nature of man, sexual impulses and instincts, according to Freud, unconscious, but invariably dominant in human nature and its natural and social behavior. In this regard, the love story in Pelevin's text appears in an unconscious (almost) Freudian way.

Having named his titular hero Sigmund, placing him in a Viennese cafe ("in Vienna", "in a café"), defining him as an elder ("to fall into a light senile doze"), Pelevin subtly and not obsessively, but very effectively sets the context of the initial situation and actively forms the perspective of perception — the reader involuntarily obeys the author's instructions and follows him to a cozy Viennese cafe, where the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, is sitting in a corner at a small observation table. With such an exposition, every action of the participants in the events in the Austrian cafe, every movement of the characters-visitors, every subsequent remark of Sigmund acquires a significant inner subtext. The process of psychoanalysis was launched by Pelevin from the first paragraph of the text.

### 3 The character system of the story. Lady and gentleman

Three pairs of characters become the "patients" — objects — of Pelevin's psychoanalysis. The first of them is "a gentleman with sideburns and a lady with a high chignon" (Pelevin 1999, 499), dressed in the fashion of the turn of the XIX–XX centuries, emphasizing the accents of the past, former Austria, Vienna and the life realities of practicing Freud. The first pair of characters is written out in such a way that can be qualified as conditionally basic in the Freudian psychoanalysis system, that is, the characters are presented in such a way that the story about them gives rise to an idea of the courtship process, mutual sympathy that arose, and the time of falling in love. The lady and the gentleman are (conditionally) classical objects of Freud's psychoanalysis.

According to the initial setting, in Pelevin's story, each "medical" case chosen for observation by the hero Sigmund consists of a multiplicity of details conveyed with emotionless narrative objectivism. The inner narrative of the hero Sigmund (improper direct speech) is strictly organized, scientifically concise and characterologically exploratory. Freud's shadow seems to loom on the backdrop of Pelevin's narrative.

There are no unnecessary details in the Pelevin description. The actions of the characters are reproduced in short sentences that grammatically correctly reflect the sequence of actions performed by the characters, conditionally by the patients. Sigmund, who is in the cafe, seems to observe the behavior of visitors and accurately fixes them, almost "records" them, ensuring the "purity" of the practical experiment and subsequent Freudian conclusions.

Moreover, throughout the narrative, only Sigmund has the right to vote, whereas all participants in the events are voiceless, and up to the end of the narrative none of the characters utters a single word. The zone of silence, which is formed around the patient characters, further enhances the atmosphere of observation and internal Sigmund's psychoanalysis, as if

rejecting unnecessary — other people's — words and comments, allowing you to focus only on the view of the psychoanalyst.

Since events are displayed for the reader from the point of view of Sigmund (Freud), the lexical series used by Pelevin to describe the actions, movements, mannerisms of the characters (and conditionally their love stories) turns out to be mediated by erotic and sexual shades and associations. Pelevin uses such words and phrases, images and details that are stylistically and semantically ambiguous and marked with "Freudian" connotations at the level of reader perception. So, entering a cafe, a gentleman with sideburns and a lady with a high chignon do not just *take off* their coats, but *undress* (Pelevin 1999, 499). The stylistic norm of using the verb has not been violated, but the emphasis in the upcoming (possible) love story is outlined. It is no coincidence that after the words about undressing, the patients were awarded a replica of the elder Sigmund, watching them from the corner: "Aha! — Sigmund said softly and shook his head" (Pelevin 1999, 500).

The interjection "aha" is not deciphered or commented on by the author, but in the context of the "psychoanalysis session" conducted in the story, the exclamation is perceived as semantically significant. Verbal commentary is excluded, but psychological commentary is invisibly explicated.

In the development of the love story, the description of the dinner scene of the lady and the gentleman was created by Pelevin through and through sexological. Outwardly, the novelist seems to neutrally describe the dishes from the menu ordered by customers, but the choice of characters hides a certain semantic subtext. So, the lady and the gentleman chose unusual and non-random dishes in the food culture, endowed with symbolic meaning — oysters and champignons (Pelevin 1999, 501). As for oysters and other mollusks enclosed in marine or river shells, the dictionaries of symbols offer the first and clearest interpretations in this regard: "The shell is the personification of the feminine principle, vulva, the symbol of the mother's womb, giving birth to all living things <...>" (Korolev 2003, 422–423).

Even more has been written about the erotic symbolism of mushrooms than about shells, in particular, on the basis of folklore records about mushrooms and their sexual symbols, the Russian folklorist V. Dahl argued, and after him other researchers (Toporov 1979, 234–297).

In the process of reading the story, at first glance, there is nothing special about the gastronomic order of the lady and the gentleman, but for dedicated recipients — in this case, oriented to the theory of Sigmund Freud — the sexually erotic allusions of the snack order of the heroes are clearly marked. Erotic allusions appear even more openly in the scene of the characters' treatment of dessert. The word "dessert" in modern Russian includes connotations of ambiguity and stylistic shades of eroticism (such as "strawberry", etc.). In other words, the episode of the love game and sexual intercourse of the characters is conveyed by Pelevin subtly, masterfully, but at the same time correctly, at the external speech level — neutrally. Even the smoking of the gentleman at the end of the love game is modeled in the spirit of traditional erotic scenes from American bestsellers.

As part of the mini-plot "lady — gentleman", the ambiguous, ambiguous actions of the actors are expected to be accompanied by sighs and exclamations from the observer Sigmund: "Aha! — Sigmund said softly" (Pelevin 1999, 500). "Aha! — said Sigmund" (Pelevin 1999, 501). "Aha! — Sigmund exclaimed" (Pelevin 1999, 504). The increasing emotionality in Sigmund's words becomes a sign of the rapid development of the lovers' relationship, visible from the outside.

#### 4 Images of a boy and a girl

The second pair observed by Pelevin's psychoanalyst Sigmund are children — a boy and a girl, brother and sister playing in a

far corner of the cafe (Pelevin 1999, 500). The description of the appearance of the child characters and their clothes (diamonds, a cage, black and white contrasts) allows Pelevin to complement the characteristic Western Austrian (near-Freudian) flavor.

Let's pay attention, the host's children play on the floor, thereby strengthening the sexual associations of the love theme of the story (in Russian, the floor (*пол*) of the house and the sex (*пол*) of the person are homonyms).

The appearance of a child's couple in the context of Freudian psychoanalysis in Pelevin's story is not accidental. As you know, the Austrian psychologist deduced the impulses of the sexual unconscious from the childhood of a child, representing the nature of the animal principle in childhood and especially adolescence. A girl and a boy play on the floor with cubes and coins, demonstrating human behavior patterns that go far beyond their age. Pelevin's boy builds a house (later a fortification wall), the girl cunningly destroys the structure. The boy's role is creation, the girl's function is coquetry and flirtation. Pelevin's child characters, as well as Freud's, demonstrate their sexual nature, which develops in adulthood. Therefore, like the adult gentleman and lady, Pelevin's children receive an appropriate qualifying assessment: "Aha, — said Sigmund" (Pelevin 1999, 501).

#### 5 A couple of a hostess and an employee

The third pair of characters who are psychoanalyzed by Sigmund are the hostess of a Viennese cafe and her employee, a "stocky and mighty waiter" (Pelevin 1999, 501). Pelevin identifies another typological pair of patients interesting to Sigmund (Freud) — lovers, adultery. But if the "lady — master" pair was dominated by a man, then in the new pair of heroes the leading role belongs to the female hostess: she manages, she commands, she orders (Pelevin 1999, 502).

The partner-waiter is put in the position of a dependent, the active role is transferred to the (apparently lonely) female hostess. But the epithet *mighty*, used by the prose writer and expressively portraying the hero, makes it clear that the waiter is singled out by the hostess and, one can assume, is singled out in a partner-sexual way. It is no coincidence that the energetic exclamation "Aha!" (Pelevin 1999, 503) accompanies the observed interaction of a new pair of heroes.

As in the case of the description of the "gentleman — lady" couple, it would seem that the ordinary household activity of the characters of the hostess and the waiter is conveyed by the writer with erotic overtones. Sigmund observes two stages of action: first, the waiter climbs into the black basement (in Russian, "under the floor" // almost "under the hem") — then the hostess takes the initiative into her own hands (and into her mouth too) and screws in the lamp burned out under the shade (Pelevin 1999, 503).

In the above episode, Pelevin has a Freudian "slip of the tongue", more precisely, a characteristic detail in the hero's behavior: "Clutching the ladder with strong hands, the waiter spellbound watched the movements of plump palms of the hostess, from time to time passing the tip of his tongue over parched lips" (Pelevin 1999, 503). The phrases "strong hands", "plump palms", "parched lips" and the "tip of the tongue" transform an outwardly ordinary everyday scene into a deeply intimate, loving one. And at the moment when the hostess, who almost fell down the stairs, "pale with fright, jumped onto the parquet and stood exhausted in the soothing embrace of her partner" (Pelevin 1999, 503), Sigmund's loud exclamation is heard: "Aha! Aha! — Sigmund said loudly" (Pelevin 1999, 503).

Pelevin plays on his staunchly supported associations to Freud and stylistically on the reception of speech understatement. Indefinite pronouns and adverbs "something", "someone", "somehow", "somewhere" are abundantly scattered in the writer's text. Pelevin describes the things or actions of the patient characters, but also makes the reader think of *something* about them.

The attention of the narrator (author) to every little thing, to every barely perceptible gesture of characters, seems to reproduce the logic of Sigmund's research interest, forcing us to assume that the plot of the story is moving towards new discoveries by a medical scientist based on the analysis of sexual manifestations in human behavior, observed by the example of various characters in a small Viennese cafe. The accuracy and objectivity of observations in the sphere of ordinary everyday life, as in the real Freud, leads (should lead) to serious conclusions, explicated by the ambiguous Sigmund's "Aha". The different intensity of pronouncing the interjection "aha" — either *quietly*, then *loudly*, then *once*, then *twice*, then *said*, then *shouted* or even *exclaimed* — conveys the process of increasing the emotionality of the utterance and, as a result, the increase in the semantic fullness of the ambiguous interjection. There is an increase in the estimated weight of what is happening and what is being observed. The author and the hero conditionally move from observation and statement to conclusions and results: to doubt or indignation, to denial or (maybe) admiration.

The degree of emotionality of Sigmund's exclamations acquires characterological qualities, the meaningless "aha" seems to be filled with a capacious and meaningful meaning. In an atmosphere of understatement and ambiguous "aha", any gesture of the characters is perceived as non-accidental and significant in its own way. Life episodes become overgrown with interpretation, the ordinary passes into the status of the extraordinary, the Freudian unconscious grows with some additional knowledge (including knowledge and sexual experience of the recipient-reader).

## 6 Hero parrot Sigmund

The final part of the story "Sigmund in the café" is distinguished by Pelevin's deliberate postmodern chaos — a violation of logic, hierarchy, sequence, integrity, reasonableness. Overcoming the postmodern chaos is achieved only thanks to the final remark of the gentleman: it becomes clear that Sigmund is not a psychiatrist researcher, not even a human being, but a parrot.

The characterization of the character — the parrot — takes the reader by surprise. Now the recipient's entire system of images and motives for the behavior of the characters in the story, the interpretation of events, turn out to be incorrect, completed only by his own consciousness and confidence that the hero of the Viennese cafe was the psychiatrist Sigmund Freud.

In Pelevin's story, the effect of the so-called "deceived expectation" is triggered. All the serious — semi-scientific — conclusions that came to the recipient-reader's mind turned out to be debunked and ridiculed.

The essence of Sigmund's "Aha", which seemed ambivalent or even multivalent, instantly loses its semantic content when recognizing the real source of the exclamations — the author's task is decoded simultaneously. The comic comes to the fore with a swift surprise. Freud's scientific unconscious turns into a truly unconscious parrot.

The automatism of perception has been destroyed, and with it, it seems, the theory of psychoanalysis itself is being ironized. The concept of the psychoanalyst consistently built up in the story is brought to the point of absurdity and is subjected to ironic reinterpretation.

Meanwhile, it can hardly be argued that Pelevin is being ironic about Freud, as critics believe. In our opinion, Pelevin's irony is directed not so much at Freud and his theory as at us, the recipient readers, who are easily ready to succumb to someone else's (here the author's) influence and imagine themselves homegrown Freudians. Pelevin's game with the reader's expectations turns out to be focused on the reader himself, provoked not to rely on the author's text (as noted above — quite correct and restrainedly neutral), but on his own illusions and allusions, frivolous conjectures and personal sexual

experience. Pelevin's mastery of playful provocative writing is triumphant.

## 7 Results and prospects

Thus, summing up, we can conclude that, unlike the sentimental romantic stories of Tatyana Tolstaya and the harsh prose of Lyudmila Petrushevskaya, in the male prose of Viktor Pelevin, the love story, as a rule, fades into the background, and if it turns out to be directly affected by the writer, it acquires a pronounced ironic and playful shade. The gender approach allows us to differentiate the nature of the interpretation of love stories in the female prose of Russian women writers and in the male prose of Pelevin.

Pelevin wittily plays with the love theme, masterfully discrediting traditional approaches to it, offering to comprehend almost the theory of love, its unconscious, but interpreting this theory jokingly, anecdotally, postmodernly absurd. Pelevin's traditional metaphor that love is a deception, seems to be artistically realized.

In Pelevin's love world, human feelings still remain unknown, but not for those complex and deep psychological reasons that are interesting to T. Tolstaya or L. Petrushevskaya, but because a postmodern writer, a male novelist approaches this topic in a masculine and postmodern way easily, translating it from the semantic level to the stylistic, with the problematic one is in the language. In Pelevin's postmodern world, both life and love appear as categories of being incomprehensible and unknowable.

The postmodernist writer Pelevin intentionally facilitates the comprehension of the traditional "eternal problems" and "damned questions" of Russian classical literature, offering new — non-traditional — ways of interaction between the hero and the author with unreal reality, with illusory reality, with a ghostly life-mirage (dream, fog, etc.). Victor Pelevin's leading trick in the short story "Sigmund in the café" is a postmodern game.

## Literature:

1. Bogdanova, O. *Postmodernism in the context of Modern Russian Literature*. St. Petersburg: St. Petersburg State University, 2004. 716 p. ISBN 5-8465-0218-0
2. Epstein, M. *Postmodern in Russia. Literature and Theory*. Moscow: R. Elinin Publ., 2000. 367 p. ISBN 5-86280-051-4
3. Ermolovich, D. *Proper names at the junction of languages and cultures*. Moscow: R. Valent Publ., 2001. 199 p. ISBN 5-93439-046-5
4. Genette, G. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. 427 p.
5. Genette, G. *Seuils*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987. 388 p.
6. Korolev, K. *Encyclopedia of symbols, signs, emblems*. Moscow: Eksmo, St. Petersburg: Terra Fantastica, 2003. Pp. 422–423. ISBN 5-699-03531-1
7. Leiderman, N., Lipovetsky, M. *Modern Russian literature, 1950–1990*: in 2 vols. Moscow: Academia, 2003. ISBN 5-7695-0957-0
8. Lipovetsky, M. *Russian postmodernism. Essays on Historical Poetics*. Ekaterinburg: Ural'skij gos. ped. un-t, 1997. 317 p. ISBN 5-7186-0363-4
9. Pelevin, V. *Generation "P". Short stories*. Moscow: Vagrius Publ., 1999. ISBN 5-7027-0949-7
10. Skoropanova, I. *Russian Postmodern literature*. Moscow: Flinta; Nauka, 2002. 607 p. ISBN 5-89349-180-7
11. Superanskaya, A. *The general theory of proper names* / ed. by A. Reformatsky. 4th ed. Moscow: Librocom Publ., 2009. 368 p. ISBN 978-5-397-00138-0
12. Toporov, V. Semantics of mythological representations of mushrooms. In: *Balkanica: Linguistic Studies* / ed. by T. Tsivyan. Moscow: Nauka Publ., 1979. Pp. 234–297.

## Primary Paper Section: A

## Secondary Paper Section: AJ