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The Role of Empathy in Shaping Social Attitudes – Selected Images of Peasants in 19th Century Russian Literature

*Rola empatii w kształtowaniu postaw społecznych –
wybrane obrazy chłopów w XIX-wiecznej literaturze rosyjskiej*

ABSTRACT

The methodological basis in this article is the phenomenon of empathy. This concept is proving to be a useful tool for literary studies, as well as becoming an increasingly important aspect in historical sciences. On the basis of an analysis of literary texts, which are historical images of human thought and sensibility, a picture of empathetic attitudes towards the peasant stratum in 19th century Russia is outlined. The literary writers show in their texts the gradual evolution of sensitivity towards the peasants – from indicating the possibility to empathize with them, to showing exemplary attitudes of representatives of the aristocracy, to full identification with representatives of the peasant layer. The literary analysis makes it possible to see the correlation between growing social empathy and democratic changes in the state.

Key words: empathy, peasants, 19th century Russian literature, Gogol, Turgenev, Nekrasov

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STRESZCZENIE

Podstawą metodologiczną w niniejszym artykule jest zjawisko empatii. Pojęcie to okazuje się użytecznym narzędziem do badań literaturoznawczych, jak też staje się coraz ważniejszym aspektem w naukach historycznych. Na podstawie analizy tekstu literackich, które są historycznym obrazem myśli i wrażliwości ludzkiej, zostaje zarysowany obraz empatycznych postaw wobec warstwy chłopskiej w XIX-wiecznej Rosji. Literaci ukazują w swoich tekstuach stopniową ewolucję wrażliwości wobec chłopów – od wskazania możliwości do empatyzowania z nimi, przez ukazywanie wzorcowych postaw przedstawicieli arystokracji, aż do pełnej identyfikacji z przedstawicielami warstwy włościańskiej. Analiza literacka pozwala dostrzec korelację między rosnącą empatią społeczną i demokratycznymi przemianami w państwie.

Słowa kluczowe: empatia, chłopi, literatura rosyjska XIX wieku, Gogol, Turgieniew, Niekrasow

INTRODUCTION

The greatest historical change concerning the lowest stratum of Russian society – the peasants – took place in 1861, during the emancipation reform. This date divides the entire century into two distinct parts. The first part depicts millions of nameless slaves, while the second part portrays free people, whose existence sometimes significantly worsened. Writers and artists, who in various ways tried to emphasize the dignity of each individual from this multi-million mass, undoubtedly contributed to the situation of the peasants – both before and after the reform.

Before formulating the aim of the article, it is necessary to address the issue of sources. The use of literary texts in historical reflection is the subject of ongoing scholarly debate. Andrzej Radomski comments on this issue more broadly, showing, among other things, the traditional division between scientific and aesthetic discourse, which is the reason for the discrediting of artistic works – primarily fiction¹. Nevertheless, it has been repeatedly proven that due to the specific features of fictional texts, such studies are justified and can make a valuable contribution to the description of history. An important thought for this article is formulated by Ryszarda Czepulisa-Rastenis, who 'distinguishes two possibilities for the use of literary sources in the historian's research work. The first is to search for manifestations of social consciousness in them, the second is to search for knowledge about the era in its objective aspect in literary works'². Fiction

¹ A. Radomski, *O użyteczności literatury dla pisania historii*, "Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska. Sectio F" 2004, 59, pp. 101–102.

² *Ibidem*, s. 105, see: R. Czepulisa-Rastenis, *Znaczenie prozy obyczajowej XIX wieku dla badań ówczesnej świadomości i stosunków społecznych*, in: *Dzieło literackie jako źródło historyczne*, Warszawa 1978, pp. 243–244.

is thus an aesthetic document, containing numerous contexts of a given reality, processed by the creator's imagination. Generally speaking, it is a material record of evolving human thought, embedded in a given historical time and space³.

The image of social consciousness among the Russian intelligentsia was most fully expressed through literature. From Peter the Great, the process of secularization of creative activity began in Russia, which enabled the development of modern scientific, literary, and, to some extent, journalistic forms. This process was accompanied by the development of censorship. Its intensification, among other things, in the years after the French Revolution, aimed to correct opposition moods and prevent social upheavals. In the discussed 19th century, the principles of censorship were regulated several times, but their idea was based on the same foundations, as expressed in the Censorship Act of 1804:

1. Censorship is obliged to control all books and works intended for public access.

2. The main task of this control is to provide society with books and works that contribute to the true enlightenment of the mind and moral education and to remove books and works that are contrary to this intention⁴.

The initial points of the Act left no illusions – every text had to be checked before printing, while the postulate of 'enlightenment' and 'moral education' was a convenient generality, justifying any interference in works that were not an echo of the official ideology. This precluded the chances of polemical books, treatises, (popular) scientific works about the actual state of the country and its geopolitical foundations. Fiction turned out to be the remedy to this state of affairs. Jacques Derrida noted that due to its fictional nature, literature is a kind of institution that allows creators to say everything⁵. Russian thinkers, aware of this timeless truth, began to use art to speak about the greatest flaws

³ 'Literature can therefore be an exceptionally valuable source for the history of broadly understood mentality: on one hand, customs, in which cultural paradigms are most clearly manifested, to which literature is not indifferent; on the other hand, imagination, that is, collective fears and desires, hidden enough for literature to have to bring them to light, yet common enough for this literature to be understood and appreciated. Moreover, what seems obvious, the history of literature is also the history of thought'. A. Kożuchowski, „Zmyślenia i prawda”, czyli dzieło literackie jako źródło historyczne, „Pamiętnik Literacki” 2005, 96, 1, p. 168.

⁴ Устав о цензуре 1804 г., <http://museumreforms.ru/node/13659> [access: 29.08.2024].

⁵ J. Derrida, *Ta dziwna instytucja zwana literaturą. Rozmowa Dereka Attridge'a z Jaques'em Derrida*, transl. M.P. Markowski, in: *Dekonstrukcja w badaniach literackich*, ed. R. Nycz, Gdańsk 2000, p. 21.

of the state, but with the use of the entire arsenal of artistic means to 'deceive' censorship.

One of the greatest social problems at the beginning of the 19th century in Russia was the continued existence of slavery. The growing national identity of the peoples of Europe inspired the democratic ideas of Russian thinkers, who, due to censorship, avoided open political discourse, but also, interestingly, religious discourse. The correlation of autocracy and Orthodox faith, rooted in the baptism of Rus' (988 AD)⁶, systematized by Peter the Great (The Most Holy Governing Synod, 1721), in essence, negated one of the fundamental senses of Christianity:

'The Christian doctrine elevated the rank of the individual and placed the master and the slave, the aristocrat and the common man on an equal metaphysical level, making everyone equal before God and the law. Christianity was uncompromising in the view that even the king is just one of many'⁷.

Subversive slogans about the equality of the slave and the king could not be expressed directly, so only fiction remained to formulate real democratic and religious postulates about the equality of all members of society. The means to this was the aesthetic function of literature, which allowed 'to ignite people's hearts with words'⁸. One of its most important components is the ability to evoke empathy. Therefore, the aim of this article will be to present how the authors of 19th-century Russian literature used the technique of creating empathy to draw the attention of the higher social strata to the grievances of the people, which would consequently serve to shape pro-freedom civic attitudes.

The methodological basis of the research in this article is the phenomenon of empathy – in the theoretical aspect and as a tool for literary analysis. What is it? This concept, which emerged in the 19th century, gained popularity with its translation into English in 1909⁹, and although it is a psychological discovery, it is becoming an increasingly important part of other scientific fields. Simon Baron-Cohen, formulating the definition, begins with an intriguing juxtaposition: 'let's try to replace the term

⁶ See: S. Woźniak, A. Czeluskin, *Rosyjska Cerkiew Prawosławna a imperialna polityka Kremla*, "Przegląd Geopolityczny" 2023, 43, pp. 29–48.

⁷ J.B. Peterson, *12 życiowych zasad. Antidotum na chaos*, transl. K. Zuber, Wrocław 2018, pp. 224–225.

⁸ 'Глаголом жги сердца людей', А. Пушкин, *Пророк*, <https://www.culture.ru/poems/4409/prorok> [access: 20.09.2024].

⁹ D. Howe, *Empatia. Co to jest i dlaczego jest taka ważna*, transl. D. Golec, Warszawa 2013, p. 16.

‘evil’ with the concept of ‘erosion of empathy’¹⁰. From this perspective, the discussed term would gain such a strong theoretical foundation that it could be used to justify both individual interpersonal relationships, complex literary phenomena, and great historical processes¹¹. The scholar then specifies:

[...] empathy occurs when we suspend single-minded attention and adopt a double-minded perspective [...] empathy is the ability to recognize the thoughts and feelings of another person and to respond to their thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion¹².

In scientific literature, two aspects of the phenomenon are distinguished: emotional (affective) empathy, when the state of another person evokes a specific emotion, and cognitive empathy, when another person’s perspective is the subject of imagination and reflection¹³. Baron-Cohen adds that the cognitive process itself cannot be considered a complete phenomenon if it does not include the emotions of the thinking subject: ‘Partial empathy is not really empathy at all’¹⁴. This thought justifies why it is worth analyzing the function of fiction in relation to various social and historical processes – the advantage of artistic text over philosophical treatise or scientific analysis is precisely the completion of the process of understanding the Other by evoking feelings and emotions¹⁵, Pushkin’s ‘igniting hearts.’ As Frank Hakemulder argues, reader empathy enhances altruistic behavior¹⁶.

Since the end of the 20th century, empathic processes have become one of the primary objects of research in neurobiology. Evidence obtained using magnetic resonance imaging, tomography, etc., is a material confirmation of psychological research and allows us to state that humans were ‘designed’ for empathy¹⁷. A great discovery was the observation

¹⁰ S. Baron-Cohen, *Teoria zła. O empatii i genezie okrucieństwa*, transl. A. Nowak, Sopot 2015, p. 23.

¹¹ Baron-Cohen’s research is motivated, among other things, by stories of cruelty during World War II.

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 31, 32.

¹³ D. Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

¹⁴ S. Baron-Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 31, footnote 1.

¹⁵ According to George Eliot, literature expands the capacity for compassion, thereby gaining an advantage over the works of philosophers, see: S. Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, Oxford 2007, p. 54.

¹⁶ See: *ibidem*, p. 92.

¹⁷ C. Keysers, *Empatia. Jak odkrycie neuronów lustrzanych zmienia nasze rozumienie ludzkiej natury*, transl. Ł. Kwiatek, Kraków 2023, p. 22. See: ‘Our brain is shaped in such a way that we become highly social and empathetic animals’, p. 175.

of so-called mirror neurons in the brain, which are activated both when the subjects perform an action and when they only observe the same action performed by others. This would be the basic mechanism responsible for the ability to understand the Other and then, based on cognitive-emotional community, to develop positive group, social relations and the development of civilization. The initial overoptimism of researchers¹⁸, who began to see an explanation for almost every human experience in mirror neurons, quickly encountered opposition¹⁹, but disputes over the interpretation of research do not overshadow the fact that such experiments increasingly explain brain function. And on this basis, another important discovery is made. Experiments with reading have shown that the brain activates during reading in a way similar to functioning in a relationship with real people²⁰, which is scientific evidence that the influence of a book on the reader's cognitive processes is simultaneously an influence on their possible relationships with another person.

Empathy and literary studies are phenomena that naturally connect. Not only are the mental processes of the reader during reading similar to those that occur in their relationship with another person, but the reader also treats fictional entities 'as if they were people'²¹. In Polish literature, important works drawing from both phenomena include, among others, the books of Jarosław Płuciennik²² and Anna Łebkowska²³. Among English-language works, Suzanne Keen's *Empathy and the Novel* from 2007²⁴ still occupies an important place. Keen's work contains information about the history of the phenomenon, different theories of researchers about the impact of empathy on readers, analyses of narrative processes that may affect the recipient, etc. The reader's emotional response, as demonstrated in the monograph, can concern any element of the text (character, situation, or even thing) and does not necessarily have to correspond to what the author intended. Fiction, in the unanimous opinion of scholars, has enormous potential to evoke empathy.

A very important and interesting research context opens up when comparing the concept of empathy with historical sciences. It is not just

¹⁸ See for example: J. Bauer, *Empatia. Co potrafią lustrzane neurony*, transl. M. Guzowska-Dąbrowska, Warszawa 2008.

¹⁹ See: G. Hickok, *Mit neuronów lustrzanych: rzetelna neuronauka komunikacji i poznania*, transl. K. Cipora, Kraków 2016.

²⁰ C. Keysers, *op. cit.*, pp. 160–162.

²¹ M. Bortolussi, P. Dixon, *Psychonarratology*, Cambridge 2003, p. 20.

²² J. Płuciennik, *Literackie identyfikacje i oddźwięki. Poetyka a empatia*, Łódź 2002.

²³ A. Łebkowska, *Empatia. O literackich narracjach przełomu XX i XXI wieku*, Kraków 2008.

²⁴ S. Keen, *op. cit.*

about reconstructing the history of research on the term within psychology. With the above understanding of empathy as a phenomenon steering interpersonal relationships, the usefulness of this concept becomes obvious as one of the determinants of events or historical processes dependent on the will of a specific person. Researchers have discovered the potential of this phenomenon, hence terms are already appearing, e.g., defining the development of history ('the age of empathy has come to replace the age of reason'²⁵), indicating the role of the phenomenon in historical processes of civilization formation (empathy as the glue of social life²⁶). Another significant research topic becomes the global view of the historical process, taking into account factors driving living beings to cooperate. This is discussed in Frans de Waal's work *The Age of Empathy*²⁷. The author's interdisciplinary work contains descriptions of experiments involving animals, as well as theoretical considerations in which the researcher proposes another aspect of understanding history in its evolutionary aspect. According to de Waal, phenomena based on empathy influenced the development of life and cooperation in groups to a greater extent than it was previously thought, contributing to the survival of species and humanity. Such a perception of world history with its central role given to empathy constitutes a clear polemic voice with Charles Darwin's well-known theory, assuming constant competition and struggle for survival²⁸. In the context of universal history, such an understanding would even mean a paradigm shift, in Kuhn's sense²⁹.

When addressing the issue of peasant slavery in Russia, it is worth noting that the process of subjugating millions of representatives of the lowest social stratum evolved significantly over the centuries. While in the times of European Middle Ages (10th–14th centuries) peasants enjoyed relative freedom (owning land, the ability to change landowners, engage in other

²⁵ J. Rifkin, *The Empatic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in World in Crisis*, Cambridge 2009, p. 3.

²⁶ M. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development*, Cambridge 2000, pp. 3, 29–62.

²⁷ F. de Waal, *Wiek empatii: jak natura uczy nas życzliwości*, transl. Ł. Lamża, Kraków 2019.

²⁸ The author is aware of the diversity of stimuli that drive historical processes in the human world: 'Our species has its social side and its selfish side. However, since the latter is usually emphasized more, at least in the West, I will focus on the former: the nature of empathy and social unity'. F. de Waal, *op. cit.*, p. 14. However, the author notes that descriptions of evolution and society from the perspective of struggle are insufficient: 'Therefore, a complete revolution is needed in how we perceive human nature [...] It is clear that competition exists in the world, but people cannot live if they limit themselves only to it'. *Ibidem*, p. 17.

²⁹ T.S. Kuhn, *Struktura rewolucji naukowych*, transl. H. Ostromęcka, J. Nowotniak, Warszawa 2001.

activities, lack of arbitrariness of landowners, etc.), from the 15th century onwards, successive restrictions were introduced. For example, taking up work with a new master was only allowed during a short period of the year (Yuriev Day), abolished by Ivan the Terrible in 1581, and finally, the reform of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich in 1649, which introduced severe restrictions, effectively objectifying the peasant. As a result, for the next two hundred years, the peasant became a commodity whose 'quality' (health, life) depended solely on the will of the owner. Boris Kierzhentsev writes about this in his book 'Enslaved Russia. The History of Serfdom'³⁰. This monograph, which also signifies the approach proposed in this article to the analysis of historical and literary data – apart from dry facts, it allows us to see the serf peasant as a real person, affected by the tragedy of the lack of respect for their human dignity³¹. This and other works³² indicate the relevance of empathetic reflection on the past and provide an impetus for the continuation of historical research in this perspective.

Michał P. Markowski stated: 'Literature is an interesting document of humanity in action³³'. Further analysis is going to be the realization of this perspective – examining literary artifacts and the techniques used by writers to talk about the problems of peasants will allow for the verification of the hypothesis whether it is possible to notice historical stages of the development of empathy and its artistic expression in relation to the victims of slavery. The 'humanity in action' of Russian writers took on enormous proportions in the 19th century. The theme of peasantry has already been the subject of many general works³⁴, especially textbooks,

³⁰ B. Kierżenczew, *Zniewolona Rosja. Historia poddaństwa*, transl. A. Okuniewska-Stronka, Poznań 2021.

³¹ The author presents various facts, referring to moral judgment and compassion, see: 'Ruthless exploitation drove peasants not only to ruin but to utter despair'. *Ibidem*, p. 67, or 'how is it possible that Russian aristocrats combine external civilized refinement with barbaric despotism'. *Ibidem*, p. 47.

³² In a similar 'humanizing' spirit, Polish authors also write about the fate of representatives of the lowest social strata. See: K. Janicki, *Pańszczyzna. Prawdziwa historia polskiego niewolnictwa*, Poznań 2021; K. Pobłocki, *Chamstwo*, Wołowiec 2021 or J. Kucieli-Frydryszak, *Chłopki: opowieść o naszych babbach*, Warszawa 2023. The stories presented by the authors complement the context of these considerations due to the similarity of the model and the arrangement of life in Slavic culture.

³³ M.P. Markowski, *Polityka wrażliwości. Wprowadzenie do humanistyki*, Kraków 2013, s. 195.

³⁴ A classic work is a book А.Н. Войтоловский, *Крестьянин и рабочий в русской художественной литературе XIX и XX веков*, Ленинград 1926. In Polish-language sources, the topic of peasants in literature is also covered in textbooks on the history of Russian

as well as discussions of the motif in individual writers and specific works. Therefore, for the sake of clarity, the study will only cover specific textual realizations.

The first half of the 19th century in Russia was an interesting clash of two worldviews – the gradual democratization of intellectuals' views and one of the most difficult periods of enslavement of the masses. It was during this time that the voice of opposition could sound the loudest and have the greatest resonance in shaping social attitudes. The works selected for analysis belong to the 19th-century literary canon and played a major opinion-forming role during their periods of publication.

DEAD SOULS AND THE FACILITATION OF EMPATHY

The entire Russia discussed *Dead Souls* (1842) by Nikolai Gogol, dividing into supporters and opponents of the vision presented there. To this day, it is one of the most important literary works in the world. Its uniqueness also lies in the fact that it arouses interest in what has been written in it, as well as in what the author did not say. According to Gogol's intention, the first volume was to highlight what was wrong in Russian reality, while the subsequent ones, partly modeled on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, were to show the path of transformation through purgatory to the homeland's paradise. Their absence becomes an impetus for reflection on whether it was possible to find hope for change in the writer's reality.

The plot is based on Chichikov's journey through estates where he buys 'dead souls', i.e., ownership documents of peasants who died since the last census, for whom the owners still had to pay taxes (until the next census). The idea perfectly hit the weak point of state administration of slavery, as the landowners benefited by getting rid of the financial burden, and Chichikov benefited by being able to boast a significant number of subjects 'on paper'. Then, by pledging them to the Board of Trustees³⁵, he could take out a huge amount of money for the time, to create a real estate with 'living souls' before the next census. The hero's journey through idyllic landscapes becomes a panorama of models

literature. However, it is worth highlighting an exceptional work, the book by Vasily Shchukin. *Mit szlacheckiego gniazda: studium geokulturologiczne o klasycznej literaturze rosyjskiej*, transl. B. Żyłko, Kraków 2006, which is a unique study of the times of intensified slavery from the perspective of the beneficiaries of the serfdom system, namely the landed gentry.

³⁵ See: A.A. Аникеева, *Нравственые институции финансовой деятельности Н. В. Гоголя и персонажей его произведений*, "Финансы и кредит" 2009, 22 (358), p. 88.

of managing slave labor. During it, Chichikov meets several landowners, and although they are different in character (e.g., the sentimental Manilov and the adventurous Nozdryov), they are united by the comfort of being beneficiaries of the serfdom system.

In Polish literary studies, the main idea of the novel was presented – with a great deal of empathy – by Bogdan Galster: 'The writer condemned the most terrible form of moral degeneration, determined by the inhumane content of peasant serfdom: the trade in human beings³⁶'. Gogol did not attack the system as such. Even in *Revizor* (1835), when representatives of all social strata have their sins on their conscience, he did not call for revolution, but for self-improvement of the individual. The same applies to the issue of serfdom – the system itself, according to the author, corresponded to natural social inequalities³⁷, but what was wrong was the objectification of the person. *Dead Souls* is a text that reminds/teaches that peasants are also humans.

What techniques serve to activate reader empathy? Gogol is one of those writers who created such an original style that no worthy imitator was found later. The writer built his worlds not through reference to psychology or eternal themes (like the love thread), but using a satirical, folk, and moralizing layer of meaning, full of colorful expressions (often of folkloric origin), hyperbole, irony, and illogicalities. In *Dead Souls*, there is almost no love thread, but there is a picture of everyday life, known to the reader of those times, in which the writer can see various manifestations of evil. However, according to his principle of 'laughter through tears' – Gogol's works did not carry gloomy, desperate messages, but through the purifying power of laughter, they were to give an impetus for change (first in the soul of the recipient)³⁸. This cathartic state, leading to the humanization of the peasant characters, is evoked in the given work through irony.

Chichikov proposes an unusual transaction to his hosts – in those times, only living people were bought. It is significant that the momentary surprise of the owners quickly awakens their mercantile spirit, and they

³⁶ B. Galster, *Mikołaj Gogol*, in: *Literatura rosyjska w zarysie. Część I*, eds. Z. Barański, A. Semczuk, Warszawa 1975, p. 345.

³⁷ In the later 'Selected Fragments of Correspondence with Friends' (1847), in letter XXII, Gogol argued that all authority comes from God and that landowners do not rule people for the sake of power itself, but because of a divine calling. The message of the text is much more severe and conservative compared to his earlier works, for which contemporary intellectuals, led by Vissarion Belinsky, voiced criticism and disappointment. See: B. Гоголь, *Выбраннныя мысли изъ переписки съ друзьями*, Санктпетербург 1847, pp. 155–163.

³⁸ See: И.А. Виноградов, «Ревизор» Гоголя как комедия-трагедия: к проблеме жанра, «Два века русской классики» 2024, 6, 1, pp. 74–101.

begin to haggle over the dead. Chichikov even has to assure Korobochka that the graves and bones will remain with her; for him, only the record matters. The image of the owners' greed is marked by bitter satire and grotesque, while the culmination of illogicality is brought by the protagonist's visit to Sobakevich. The gruff landowner raises the price of the 'goods,' praising the virtues of his deceased slaves:

'Милушкин, кирпичник! мог поставить печь в каком угодно доме. Максим Телятников, сапожник: что шилом колнет, то и сапоги, что сапоги, то и спасибо, и хоть бы в рот хмельного. А Еремей Сорокоплёнин! да этот мужик один станет за всех, в Москве торговал, одного оброку приносил по пятисот рублей. Ведь вот какой народ!'³⁹

The greed of the landowners and their illogical behavior may evoke laughter or pity, but all these images result from the ironic juxtaposition of contradictory contexts. In essence, irony here achieves a multidimensional face when there is a haggling over dead people, considering their virtues during life, or when the owners feel reluctant to give up obligations for free in the face of tax exemption. However, the most ironic issue remains the reification, the objectification of a person, which is the mentioned 'moral degeneration'. Gogol, through irony and surprise (of the characters, and then the reader), encourages reflection. If the idea of selling dead people at a higher price – based on their no longer existing abilities – evokes bitter laughter, it means that the reader recognizes the lack of logic in the landowners. After all, these peasants are no longer people. At this point, the field for reflection opens – what is fundamentally funny about this, since during life, peasants are also treated as dead, as objects that can be sold. Dead in life and 'revived' after death mean the same to the landowner – equating life and death contradicts reason and the laws of nature. Laughter through tears is meant to awaken the understanding that not only Sobakevich's behavior is ironic, bad, and illogical, but fundamentally, the very idea of selling a person, who is not an object, is evil.

The work underwent severe trials in censorship, where it was feared, partly rightly, that it struck at the serfdom law⁴⁰. Gogol did not want its abolition but opposed the immoral consequences in the form of the dehumanization of peasants by landowners. And therefore, the largest group

³⁹ Н.В. Гоголь, *Мертвые души*, in: Н.В. Гоголь, *Сочинения в двух томах. Том второй*, Москва 1969, pp. 347–348.

⁴⁰ Ю. Манн, *В поисках живой души. «Мертвые души»: писатель – критика – читатель*, Москва 1984, p. 113.

of dissatisfied recipients of the work became the landowners themselves⁴¹. For progressive thinkers and subsequent generations of readers⁴², *Dead Souls* is, however, an expression of the struggle for human dignity, where dead are – metaphorically – really the souls of all traders in human life⁴³. Gogol, in his writer's intuition, understood the basic principle theoretically explained in the 20th century, that 'societies with large inequalities are among the least empathetic' and where 'there is a large disparity between the rich and the poor, between the strong and the weak, the capital of empathy dies'⁴⁴. Thus, the author created new conditions for empathy⁴⁵, reminding his readers that a person is not a thing but a being endowed with the same nature as representatives of higher social strata.

BEZHIN MEADOW AND AN EMPATHETIC ROLE MODEL

Another epochal step in the development of empathy towards peasants was made by Ivan Turgenev in the work *A Sportsman's Notebook* (1852). This is a cycle of stories loosely connected by the character of an aristocrat, the titular hunter, who describes his hunting adventures. In reality, the narrator's journeys are, similar to *Dead Souls*, an opportunity to observe the world. Turgenev focuses on describing peasants, but also their relations with representatives of higher strata, all from the perspective of an heir who enters the peasant world in the 'spirit of brotherhood'⁴⁶, almost on equal terms. The work is a big step forward compared to Gogol's vision – there, peasant characters were only on the margins, shown almost exclusively from the landowners' point of view, which corresponds

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 129.

⁴² *Dead Souls* is among the most recommended readings in the world, hence its presence in various rankings, including the famous list of the 100 best books by the Norwegian Book Club, *Top 100 Works in World Literature*, <https://thegreatestbooks.org/lists/28> [access: 29.09.2024].

⁴³ B. Galster, *op. cit.*, p. 346.

⁴⁴ D. Howe, *op. cit.*, pp. 210, 214.

⁴⁵ Empathy, as a psychological term, finds greater or lesser similarities in concepts from other discourses, such as brotherhood, compassion, mercy, tenderness. For example, J. Płuciennik mentions the figure of the suffering Christ: [...] it was this figure that decided that empathy is commonly associated unequivocally with Christian compassion, 'compassion with and for the suffering human being'. J. Płuciennik, *op. cit.*, p. 45. However, in this article, the focus is consistently on the definition derived from psychology, regardless of how it might have been named at the time of the publication of the analyzed texts.

⁴⁶ O. Figes, *Taniec Nataszy. Z dziejów kultury rosyjskiej*, transl. W. Jeżewski, Warszawa 2010, p. 81.

to the introduction to empathy, while Turgenev draws images already considering both aspects, i.e., emotional and cognitive empathy. This was because the prose writer, unlike his predecessor, was an opponent of the entire idea of serfdom law, and *A Sportsman's Notebook* is a great protest against social inequalities⁴⁷.

The shaping of positive civic attitudes was served by very diverse texts in the cycle, some poetic, others leaning towards naturalism, praising peasants, as well as showing their real face. Each story could serve for analysis, but due to a certain unique, epochal gesture, it is worth highlighting the sketch *Bezhin Meadow*.

The text describes the dangerous adventure of a hunter who got lost at night, returning from hunting, and almost fell into an abyss. In an unfriendly scenery, the distant light of a fire turns out to be a rescue. Upon reaching the place, it turns out that children are on the meadow, guarding the grazing animals. The arrival of the hunter makes the boys, who were previously cheerfully talking, fall silent and move away. This brief remark by the narrator contains the quintessence of centuries-old tradition – a child could not disturb an adult, let alone a peasant an aristocrat. The hunter does not want to impose his position, offer familiarity that the victims of serfdom will not understand, so he makes a wise decision to pretend to sleep. Only when the master falls asleep do the peasant children have the courage to speak. This pessimistic vision, based on centuries of hierarchy and social differences, is however erased by the image of the night conversation. The boys turn out to be good companions, laughing, joking, telling stories about ghosts and apparitions, while caring for each other and fulfilling their duties. The scene is almost poetic; the children are not yet stripped of hope, they do not experience the problems of the adult world⁴⁸. Each boy gets his name and characteristic⁴⁹, which in the literary world is a symbol of gaining identity, subjectivity.

The bravest of all is Pavel. He is not the oldest, but he ensures safety, bravely throwing himself beyond the circle of light when there is suspicion of a wolf attack. When he heard a bad omen and his friends fear

⁴⁷ See: О.Д. Тюняева, *Рецепция книги рассказов «Записки охотника» в США, или И.С. Тургенев против рабства*, “Litera” 2023, 8, p. 169. The article presents the international resonance of the writer's work – its positive impact on 19th-century American advocates of the fight against slavery.

⁴⁸ Е.М. Конышев, *Тема народа в «Записках охотника» Тургенева: философские и литературные основы*, “Вестник БГУ” 2013, 2.

⁴⁹ External and internal. Turgenev's works are characterized by exceptional psychological depth of characters (С.Е. Шаталов, *Художественный мир И.С. Тургенева*, Москва 1979, p. 238), which is a result of the author's empathetic stance.

it is a prophecy of imminent death, he accepts it with stoic calm, aware that one cannot escape their fate. The narrator is greatly impressed by such behavior, the boy's character, and his attitude towards others. Therefore, when he wakes up in the morning, he makes an extraordinary gesture: 'один Павел приподнялся до половины и пристально поглядел на меня. Я кивнул ему головой и пошел восвояси вдоль задымившейся реки'⁵⁰. The aristocrat bows to the village boy. To understand this gesture, one must pay attention to how Turgenev uses contrast in the choice of literary characters. If the aristocrat was at the top of the social ladder and the peasant at the very bottom, it still does not convey the aesthetic-conceptual scale of the 'chasm' between them. The village child as a person and as a literary character previously had no significance; they were not entities endowed with personality (nameless), worthy of attention in the common consciousness. In the story, Turgenev first gives these people identity and then points out a model of empathetic attitude – respect for the Other as a universal, cross-class principle. Thus, the author uses the therapeutic power of empathy⁵¹ and refers to the phenomenon now called cultural transmission: 'We can learn a lot simply by observing others. The concept of cultural transmission refers to this astonishing ability to acquire skills and knowledge quickly from other people'⁵². Turgenev 'encourages' his readers to respect even the smallest entity in the serfdom hierarchy, and this is the most democratic and humanistic appeal in the literature of that period. History appreciated the author for this:

Everything changed in 1852, after the publication of Turgenev's masterpiece *A Sportsman's Notebook*. For the first time in Russian literature, the figure of a peasant appeared as a rational human being, not a passive victim, as depicted by earlier, sentimental literature. *A Sportsman's Notebook* decisively influenced the change in society's attitude towards serf peasants and the issue of land reform. Turgenev later said that just after 1861, he experienced the most beautiful moment of his life. On a train from Oryol to Moscow, two peasants approached him and bowed to the ground, in Russian, to thank him on behalf of the entire people⁵³.

The bow of the people can be symbolically treated as a response to the earlier literary and empathetic bow towards Pavel.

⁵⁰ И.С. Тургенев, *Записки охотника*, Москва 1984, p. 72.

⁵¹ [...] aesthetic empathy can change our understanding of life and its meaning. Therefore, it has therapeutic potential'. D. Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

⁵² C. Keysers, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

⁵³ O. Figes, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

RED-NOSED FROST AND EMPATHETIC IDENTIFICATION

Considerations on empathy in its historical and literary aspect are complemented by the analysis of Nikolai Nekrasov's poem *Red-Nosed Frost* (1864). The writer was a representative of civic poetry, engaged in the fate of the poorest and weakest members of society. In folk works, he combined poetic language with coarse, peasant, lyrical exaltation with naturalism, all driven by 'angry condemnation of the landowners'⁵⁴. Other important works can be analyzed, such as *Who is Happy in Russia* (1863–1877) or *Korobeiniki* (1861), but the choice of the indicated poem is due to two reasons. First, it complements the context of considerations with a female character (in *Dead Souls* the deceased peasants were 'appreciated', in *Bezhin Meadow* the heroes are children). Second, it is a work dedicated to the situation just after the emancipation reform in Russia (1861). The great triumph of democracy and epochal date often turned out to be an even worse sentence for the peasants. Nekrasov's poem deals with this – before the reform, peasants in the winter period could afford more rest, while after it, they are forced to work as intensively as in summer to pay rents. One of the characters – Prokl – catches a cold and dies while working in winter, leaving his wife Daria and two children. The widow, after the funeral, goes to the forest for firewood and there, weakened by the cold, stops and freezes.

The summary of the text evokes a gloomy impression, especially in the context of the orphaning of the two children by the protagonists. However, the whole is not just a lamentation over the people's misery, but a new type of poem – the narrator is entirely on the side of the folk worldview, drawing inspiration for descriptions from reality and folklore, recreating life, the way of thinking and feeling through his characters⁵⁵. He is attentive and with 'reporter-like' zeal recreates the smallest details of existence – funeral rites (sewing the shroud, prayers, digging the grave, folk works: lament and praise, cemetery procession), details of work (haymaking, fieldwork), existence (folk medicine, wedding rites, conscription), faith (relations between Christian faith and superstitions). Compared to previous texts, there is a break with the tradition of storytelling from an outsider, noble position. Everything is maintained in the folk spirit⁵⁶, the world recreates all the worries, concerns, and emotions of the poor peasant woman, which breaks down narrative barriers

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁵ Н. Степанов, Н.А. Некрасов. *Жизнь и творчество*, 2nd edition, Москва 1971, pp. 204–215.

⁵⁶ Б.О. Корман, *Лирика Некрасова*, 2nd edition, Ижевск 1978, p. 204.

and creates a chance for her understanding. And when the reader reads that the protagonists' concern is to ensure the best possible existence for the family, the main values are love and closeness, and contact with nature provides them with happiness, they can begin to identify with them to some extent. J. Pluciennik notes: 'Identification with a literary character is one of the most important empathetic phenomena in literature'⁵⁷. As a result of such identification, positive social attitudes can develop:

The results of many experiments aimed at improving intergroup relations have shown that when members of one group think about the experiences of people belonging to another group and empathically tune into them, prejudices, criticism, distortions, and hostility weaken⁵⁸.

Thus, Nekrasov creates perhaps the most complete field for the development of cognitive, but also emotional empathy of his educated readers towards the people. The complement of empathy is also a kind of hymn he delivers about the peasant-Slavic woman. He values her for her diligence, willingness to help, religiosity, lack of vanity, love of family. These are not superhuman qualities, but real traits possessed by the poem's heroine. However, all this, in the face of centuries of misery, is something extraordinary, a kind of heroism of this woman, hence the idealization appears in the description:

Есть женщины в русских селеньях
С спокойною важностью лиц,
С красивою силой в движеньях,
С походкой, со взглядом цариц⁵⁹

Thus, it is only the writers who realize the Christian ideal of equating the king with the slave in terms of human dignity, as mentioned earlier by J.B. Peterson. The shocking – just a few years earlier – comparison of a peasant woman to a tsarina was already possible thanks to changes in the treatment of the lowest social stratum in Russia. Changes, of which a component was certainly the growing empathy thanks to literature.

⁵⁷ J. Pluciennik, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

⁵⁸ D. Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 171. Identification and the accompanying emotions further translate into an evolutionary-biological process that conditions human development: 'Human experience of pain and suffering is responsible for extraordinary creativity, focused and obsessive, responsible for inventing all kinds of tools to counteract negative feelings that initiated the creative cycle; [...] conscious well-being and pleasure are the motivation for inventing endless ways by which people ensure and improve conditions conducive to their intellectual and social life'. A. Damasio, *Odczuwanie i poznawanie. Jak powstają świat domu umysły?*, transl. A. Binder, Kraków 2022, p. 102.

⁵⁹ H.A. Некрасов, *Мороз, Красный нос*, Москва 1947, p. 7.

CONCLUSIONS

The analyses presented above demonstrate that the perception of peasant issues by progressive writers in the 19th century is based on empathy and, most importantly, through various literary techniques (irony, contrast, identification), the texts aimed to 'teach' the reader empathy and proper social attitudes. The selected works confirm the hypothesis of the development of the perception of peasant issues in 19th-century Russia – they show the evolution of artistic strategies – from indicating the possibility of 'empathizing' with peasants (liberation from reification), through shaping exemplary behaviors (the hunter's bow), to creating an environment for identification. The durability of humanistic attitudes is evidenced by the gradual permeation into every aspect of the peasant world – the development of the literary process expands the perspective of empathy not only to men but also to women and children. At the same time, the cognitive empathy of the authors ensures that the texts are not just sentimental genre scenes but take on the dimensions of documents of the era, the best example of which is *Red-Nosed Frost* and the avoidance of the trap of excessive optimism after the emancipation reform.

Thus, the conducted analyses show the correlation of state reforms with the image of human mentality – after 1861, a slave was not released into freedom, but a new person with their own problems emerged in from of society. All this was also possible thanks to the empathy of the higher social strata, whose historical traces have been immortalized in literary artifacts.

This article fits into the trend of interdisciplinary research on empathy phenomena. This context is successfully realized in literary studies but also holds much promise in historical sciences. In November 2019, at the congress of Russian history teachers in Kazan, one of the main postulates of the teaching reform was the inclusion of empathy in its process⁶⁰. The analyses presented above prove that literary texts can successfully serve as tools for such historical understanding.

Another conclusion concerns the view of social attitudes and the development of state systems from a global perspective. David Brooks argues that empathy and emotional intelligence are indispensable components in the process of forming positive models of societies⁶¹. Similarly, empathy researcher Martha C. Nussbaum believes that empathy is one of the three components (alongside critical thinking and the transition

⁶⁰ Т. Нигматуллина, *Архитектура исторического образования: вызовы времени, „Эт-нодиалоги“* 2021, 1 (63), р. 63.

⁶¹ See: D. Brooks, *Social Animal*, London 2011.

from local to global perception of challenges) of democratic processes in the contemporary world⁶². And one of the ways to become a better, altruistic citizen is, of course, reading⁶³. Then, by comparing this data with the history of the development of various models of societies, clear patterns are easy to see. Lynn Hunt, studying English literature, argued that the 18th-century novel played an important role in the concept of human rights⁶⁴, and looking even broader, Mark Edmundson linked the emergence of the novel genre with the development of democracy itself⁶⁵. Therefore, in light of the presented research, a final conclusion can be made, constituting a kind of hypothesis for further considerations: the development of 19th-century Russian literature, including the intensification of empathy phenomena, is directly related to the shaping of positive social attitudes aimed at 'humanizing' representatives of all social strata, primarily peasants.

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⁶² See: M.C. Nussbaum, *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Need The Humanities*, Princeton 2010.

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⁶⁴ S. Keen, *op. cit.*, p. XIX.

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