

The Linguacultural Aspect of Studying the Novel, *The Department* by Alexey Salnikov

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ABSTRACT

Alexei Salnikov's novel The Department is a multi-layered work that combines elements of social satire, the absurd, and psychological prose. At the heart of the narrative lies a mysterious organization – The Department – which carries out enigmatic and often irrational tasks, the meaning of which remains unclear even to its own employees. Through the characters' daily activities, the author explores themes of bureaucracy, alienation, the loss of personal identity, and the search for meaning in a world devoid of clear reference points. Particular attention is paid to the characters' inner experiences, their doubts, and their attempts to make sense of their own existence within the context of an absurd reality. The novel is distinguished by a unique style that combines irony, the grotesque, and philosophical depth.

Keywords: The Department, Alexei Salnikov, contemporary Russian literature, bureaucracy, absurdity, social satire, identity, alienation, psychological prose, philosophy of everyday life.

INTRODUCTION

The novel *The Department* by Alexei Borisovich Salnikov is one of the most unusual works of contemporary Russian prose, combining elements of dystopia, the absurdist novel and hidden science fiction. *The Department* is a novel about a secret organisation whose employees carry out mysterious tasks, most often murders, without knowing their purpose. *The Department*

is the second book to be published by the press, but it was written before the novel *The Petrovs in and Around the Flu*. The novel tells the story of a mysterious, unnamed organisation – likely under the jurisdiction of the secret services – where the protagonist, Igor, takes a job; at the very beginning of the book, he has been dismissed from the police force with a black mark against his name. Subsequently, inexplicable and eerie events begin to unfold within this very department. Literary critic Yegor Mikhailov wrote of this work: ‘Gloomy, harsh and very witty – as if “Men in Black” through Balabanov’s eyes.’

MATERIALS AND METHODS

One of the novel’s central themes is the dehumanization of individuals by the system. The employees of *The Department* follow orders without explanation, are unaware of the purpose of their work, and are deprived of moral agency: “I can’t, of course, let you in on the details – I haven’t been told everything myself,” Sergei Sergeevich continued,

but, generally speaking, it’s not a dirty job. It’s even, I’d say, an illusion of work. I’ll be honest with you, I can’t believe what I’m doing here myself. Sometimes I sit at home and go a little crazy, and that feeling will come over you too – it just doesn’t come over Molodoy here; well, under the current system, you could say his entire conscious life has already passed.

The novel depicts a satirical and fantastical transformation of reality; it creates a world in which a special unit exists that carries out murders – not out of a whim or a sense of the authorities’ unchecked power, but because it must be done. The novel attempts to make sense of these actions, to search for the existential nature of the deed; yet much is left unsaid, concealed, as if the whole world could not be saved once the truth came to light.

Galina Yuzefovich expressed the most important idea in her review:

The Department is a novel with an inventive plot, wittily written and unconventional in its ideas <...> And yet, the gap in quality between Salnikov's first and second books is particularly pleasing: it allows us to trace an extremely encouraging trajectory of his literary evolution and gives us reason to hope for an equally impressive sequel.

Alexey Salnikov weaves a myth out of reality, thereby preserving our familiar, unattractive, yet not entirely hopeless reality in the world:

But I'm hoping that not everyone up there has lost their minds; if they're keeping us here, it must mean there's some kind of logic to it, some kind of system at work. After all, they're demanding even more reporting from us than usual; there's so much paperwork here – even you, an accountant, would go crazy.

Most of the work isn't concrete action, but the illusion of work. Endless reports and formal conversations only highlight the lack of activity. Reality is obscured by "paperwork," and bureaucracy becomes an end in itself, replacing the meaning of the work.

"Department" should be lowercase and in quotation marks," Igor began changing the capital letter to a lowercase one and tried to draw quotation marks. In response to these antics, Rinat Iosifovich's face twisted; he snatched the piece of paper right out from under the ballpoint pen and shoved a new sheet at Igor: "Better rewrite it."

The artistic process of detailing fills the emptiness of the interior with contents that are impractical for a person but necessary for appearances. Everything in the room is completely unnecessary for work, yet without it, work cannot begin. The inventory of everyday life is a performance for the eyes of others, concealing the true nature of the department:

Further verification with the office revealed that Igor's office was missing a wall clock, and when it was brought in and hung in its place – namely above the door – it struck Igor as strikingly similar to the clock in Sergei Sergeevich's office. Several times Rinat Iosifovich would dart from his seat like a vulture from the desert heights, disappear, and bring something new to Igor's lair, namely:

a bucket with the letters “M. T.” painted in red oil paint on the side, a cast-iron paperweight, a decanter and a faceted glass yellowed with age, a mop, and a trash can that looked as if it were woven from plastic.

When RinatIosifovich leaned toward the window, Igor feared he would start counting the dead flies on the window frame and demand the missing ones, but RinatIosifovich found a granite ashtray there, calmed down, had Igor sign for it, and immediately lit a cigarette.

The concept of evil is redefined in the novel. The elimination of people who pose a threat to the state on a cosmic scale, as planned by the highest authorities, is considered a good thing. The most terrifying aspect of the novel is not the murders themselves, but how the characters react to these murders:

There was another half-hour of all sorts of commotion, during which RinatIosifovich handed out pistols to them, and they signed for them and, fiddling with their coveralls, each strapped on his own holster, and it looked as if each of them were a horse harnessing himself.

The heroes had long since come to terms with the idea that they were just like any ordinary people – workers doing their jobs. Even the office where the department’s team was based was disguised as a “boiler room” to avoid any unnecessary questions: “Don’t worry,” he said.

We’re not some superhumans here. We’re just a bunch of riffraff. But we still get the job done. And those people are ordinary – or maybe not quite ordinary; there’s a reason we go to them. But they give the impression of being just ordinary people. You see thousands like them on the street. Look at Molodoy – he’s a total idiot, but he’s been hanging around here for a couple of years now, getting by, hasn’t lost his mind, isn’t chasing flies off himself. And you, let’s say, have some experience, not in this field, of course, but you’re not starting completely from scratch.

The novel depicts a moral breakdown of the individual, as evidenced by the characters’ passivity and their lack of desire to

change anything in their lives. Igor's personal life is also devoid of meaning: his wife leaves, taking their son with her, and the news that the son is not biologically his completely knocks him off his feet.

The novel can be seen as an allegory for the state system, office work, or society as a whole. The metaphor for modern reality is particularly evident in the interrogative dialogues. Faced with such absurd questions for the first time, Igor first tries to get used to their unusual phrasing, then mentally answers them, but ultimately comes to the conclusion that all these questions are meaningless: "Question number ten," said Igor. "Do you remember any poems from the school curriculum?"

"The old man began reading Asadov; he said exactly that: 'Asadov. The Gypsies Sing.' After about two minutes of reading, Igor was about to stop him, but Igor Vasilyevich raised his index finger, warning him not to.

Illogical and unrelated questions foreshadow the final outcome – murder. Every assignment always ends the same way. The interrogation procedure is entrusted to Igor, for practice and to gain experience. Everything is meticulously documented and recorded on a voice recorder; the procedure is conducted in a lengthy and structured manner. The plot revolves around "carrying out orders," where the purpose of the operation is hidden or absent. None of Igor's colleagues fully understand the purpose of the murders.

The main character, Igor, comes across as a "little man" because he was fired from his government job for being honest and having a strong sense of justice. But he ends up in an even more absurd environment, where he gradually adapts and gets used to the work, which is almost as horrifying. Before hiring Igor, Sergei Sergeevich and Igor Petrovich had been watching him for a long time, checking up on him and observing his behavior in public. And once he became a hostage of the department, they began to control Igor and track his online activities through a mysterious intermediary – Oleg, who would appear out of nowhere on the phone: "It's Oleg," said the voice on the other end of the line. "Is everything okay over there? Is there a stranger in your office?"

Igor turned his head, looking for the video camera through which Oleg was watching him, not so much surprised that he was being watched as annoyed with himself for having suspected the wiretap but, for some reason, not having also considered that he might be under surveillance.

The image of “the Department” plays a central role in the novel. Formally, the department exists on paper, but in reality, it is not officially recognized anywhere. All employees, even Sergei Sergeevich, are subordinate to “the higher-ups,” whom no one has ever seen. The Department operates outside the bounds of morality and the law, symbolizing the state apparatus, inevitable fate, and even the absurdity of the world order:

But we’re talking about human lives here, Phil. Maybe this is all some kind of mistake. All this will come to light in a few years as a result of the next restructuring, and you and I – he pointed at Igor – will be like Stalin’s executioners. And you, Phil, will find yourself in even deeper shit than you were before. How do you like that prospect? And your own government will brand you – the very same people who gave you your orders.

In the characters’ conversations, whether in the smoking room or in the car on the way to a job, thoughts about the purpose of their work sometimes slip through. And no one is able to give a clear answer; everyone is either trying to justify themselves, or gathering the courage to accept the situation, or drowning their pain in alcohol.

In the novel, dark humor represents the characters’ reaction to reality. Kierkegaard believed that dark humor is, or claims to be, a cure for the “sickness unto death.” Humor is essential to the characters as a shield against life’s blows; it is precisely through sarcasm that they come to accept and make sense of the entire tragedy. The characters’ jokes and jibes directed at one another become a familiar form of communication; no one takes offense or takes it seriously. It is precisely in this way, through humor, that the situation in which all the characters find themselves can be accepted; otherwise, they would not be able to withstand the emotional oppression and uncertainty:

‘Is that what’s tormenting you?’ Igor Vasilyevich snapped at Phil. ‘You kill several people a night sometimes – and yet you’re still tormented by the fact that you’re drawn to boys. You could just as easily go mad. There’s something seriously wrong with that. Either you don’t kill anyone – and you’re a saint – or you kill – and you don’t agonize over boys. I’m just afraid this will end badly for all of us someday. You can’t have one foot in one camp and the other in another. And it would be one thing if you’d actually raped someone, but no, you got caught right away, on the very first kid. Maybe you snapped because you were lacking some vitamins, maybe it was biochemistry; someone else would’ve played the fool and even been happy about how many idiots there are around.

“He’s always going off on tangents like that,” Molodoy told Igor. “If he gets carried away, he’ll start lecturing both you and me on how to live.”

The blurring of the real and the irrational begins to seep imperceptibly into everyday life, and the line between sanity and madness becomes blurred. This is what happens in the conversation between Igor and Igor Vasilyevich, when the image of Igor’s son appears in place of the murdered child. His thoughts race ahead and paint a very real picture of his son’s death, complete with horrifying details:

“Did you imagine your son in that position?” Igor Vasilyevich guessed. Igor nodded toward the road and began to get up. He hadn’t just imagined it; it was as if it were real. He even saw what his son was wearing – his grandmother had given him socks knitted from different colored threads – and he loved to slide across the laminate floor in those colorful socks, as if on skates. At home, his son wore a T-shirt – either with pajama bottoms or with boxers featuring characters from **Cars**. It was in those boxers, in those socks that were almost like knee-highs, and in that T-shirt that his son appeared in his vision. Igor remembered how the air had escaped from the old man’s lungs, now relaxed in death, and he began to feel sick again.”

Thus, the novel *The Department* is not a story about a secret organization, but rather a philosophical model of a world where people are subservient to the system, actions lack clear meaning, and reality is absurd yet perceived as the norm.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The narrative strategy of the novel *The Department* constitutes a complex and multi-layered system that combines elements of realism, the absurd, and a postmodern interplay with the reader.

1. A blending of literary genres. One of the key techniques is the combination of everyday, almost mundane narration with the fantastical and the absurd. Reality in the novel appears recognisable, but gradually 'slips' into the irrational. This creates the effect of an unstable world where the boundaries of normality are blurred.
2. The narrative is constructed through the protagonist's subjective perception. The reader does not receive an objective picture of events, but sees the world through the prism of the character's consciousness. This heightens the sense of uncertainty and ambiguity in the plot.
3. The effect of 'normalising the absurd'. Absurd phenomena are presented as something ordinary. The characters are not surprised by strange events, which becomes a key strategy: the reader is forced to determine the boundaries between the real and the unreal for themselves.
4. Fragmented composition. The plot does not always develop linearly: there are gaps, ambiguities and episodic elements. This structure reflects the inner state of the characters and a general sense of disorientation within society.
5. Linguistic features of the author's style. The language of the novel is close to colloquial speech, rich in irony and, at times, grotesque. The simplicity of the syntax contrasts with the depth of meaning, creating a dual level of perception.

CONCLUSIONS

In the novel *The Department*, the characters, much like in a dystopia, serve as instruments of blind providence, a kind of eye that determines people's fates. Their ignorance saves them from destruction, but at the same time brings them no small amount of torment and pangs of conscience. They are merely a cog in a vast

machine that breaks the bones of others – “supposed enemies of the state.” No one in the Department, or almost no one, understands why they are killing people; there was an order, so it must be carried out. Those who remain are the most steadfast and unshakeable. The choice and method of organising the elements of cinematic language generally bring films and literature closer together; enriching one another, they allow a series of visualisations to be constructed for the reader. As with literary works, they are characterised by expressive imagery that captures the imagination and appeals to the human emotions. The inclusion of intertextual references in the literary text allows A.B. Salnikov to highlight this connection and enrich the work with internal dialogue.

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