

Magical realism in "bobok"



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In his short story Bobok, Fyodor Dostoevsky provides a perfect example of one of his favorite devices, magical realism, which paints a realist view of the modern world with the addition of magical elements. The idea that a man might lie down in a graveyard and begin to hear voices below—from the bodies buried in the earth—would be entirely implausible if not for the way in which Dostoevsky carries it out. The ridiculous premise of the story is tempered by details which seem plausible, such that the reader need only accept one magical element in order to believe the rest, as opposed to entirely fantastical stories which present so many impossibilities that one cannot take them seriously at all.

The primary characteristic of Dostoevsky's magical realism is that even the fantastical part of the story is not outlandish. With a good argument, one could be convinced (at least in Dostoevsky's age) that the human mind still functions for a time after a person has died. After all, if a chicken can live for 18 months without a head, why is it so preposterous to think that the human brain dies at a different pace than the body? Dostoevsky even lays out an explanation of the phenomenon when new bodies arrive in the graveyard and do not understand what is happening. Platon Nikolaevitch, the graveyard's resident "philosopher, scientist, and Master of Arts," theorizes that "the body revives" in the grave, where "the remains of life are concentrated, but only in consciousness," and life goes on by inertia. By his estimate, "everything is concentrated somewhere in consciousness and goes on for two or three months...sometimes even half a year," at which point the mind also begins to decompose and the "bobok" muttering period begins. This explanation ties back to reasoning Ivan Ivanych mentions after

helping to bear the coffin of his distant relation, that corpses weigh so much more than living bodies “ due to some sort of inertia,” a justification that he believes to be “ nonsense [...] in opposition to the laws of mechanics and common sense.” However, though Ivan Ivanych denounces this hypothesis as the product of inadequately-educated people who “ venture to solve the problems that require special knowledge,” he can think of no better explanation. Similarly, conscious corpses playing cards seems like a stretch, but the reader (in Dostoevsky’s age without brain scans) has no way of proving that is not the case, especially when the corpses grow silent as soon as Ivan Ivanych’s presence is known.

In Bobok, Dostoevsky also presents a critique on humanity. The characters on whom Ivan Ivanych eavesdrops discovered that there is some sort of life after death, and with this extraordinary information, they simply continue to act as they did when their bodies lived. The varied group underneath Ivan consists of individuals of different social ranks, and this is clear from the mannerisms of those at both ends of the spectrum despite the irrelevance of social status in such a situation. The sniveling lower court councilor Lebeziatnikov always addresses Major-General Pervoyedov as “ Your Excellency,” even after the observation that “ as we all know, things are different down here” regarding the equality they all share in death (to which His Excellency replies, “ But still...”). The superiors expect to be treated as such in spite of extenuating circumstances which should make it less offensive when, for example, privy councilor Tarasevitch wants to be left alone rather than introduced to General Pervoyedov. When Avdotya Ignatyevna expresses that “ it is an affliction” to be stuck next to a mere

shopkeeper, he astutely responds that she “ doesn’t seem to be able to get rid of [her] caprices here.” Dostoevsky shows the pettiness of humans, the upper-class especially, in the characters’ insistence on retaining titles and ranks in a realm without money or social institutions.

The dead pass their free time in much the same fashion as the living: they play cards, gossip, and argue, discussing their peculiar circumstances only when the new arrivals wake up and require an explanation, and even then, are rather blasé about the whole thing. One activity predictably leads to another because without bodies, they must imagine their card games and then it is only too easy to cheat, prompting name-calling and squabbles. The dead bring matters of the living world down below where they do not mean anything and sound ridiculous simply because it is what they are accustomed to talking about; life—if one may call it that—in a graveyard does not present many new conversation topics. When Avdotya Ignatyevna berates the shopkeeper, he fires back by sharing that there is a bill against her at the shop, at which point she is more than willing to drop the whole matter of past activities because “ to try and recover debts here is too stupid.” Then later, when one of the new arrivals wakes up and says he had a complication to do with his chest, Lebeziatnikov and the general get into an argument about which doctor he should have seen and why, as if it makes any difference now. Ivan Ivanych laughs at the dead because he expected them to be more dignified or perhaps enlightened and is quite mistaken, which leads him to think, “ If it has come to this down here, what can one expect on the surface?”

Another aspect of the short story which is not quite realistic and adds another source of amusement is Ivan Ivanych's reaction to the discovery of this world below him. When he hears muffled sounds, Ivan ignores them with contempt, but even when he recognizes them as voices, he remains calm and simply begins to listen attentively. He does not question his sanity or think that maybe he is dreaming, he does not call out to see if someone is hiding behind a tombstone making a joke; he makes no noise, only moving to examine the nearest grave and check if the inscription matches the title of one of the speakers, which it does. This also helps the reader to accept the possibility of such a situation because Ivan acts so reasonably.

Dostoevsky understood how to masterfully walk the line between the real world and the imagined, a skill which Bobok exemplifies as a satire with a splash of the fantastical. He shows the ridiculousness of the mundane by transplanting it into an unexpected situation, making readers laugh but also prompting an examination of social norms. Few authors could take the premise of corpses waiting for the deterioration of their consciousness to catch up to that of their bodies and make it both funny and critical, but Dostoevsky's use of magical realism and balance of realistic and implausible succeeds.