

Homoeroticism vs Homoaesthetics in the Literary Works of Oles Ulianenکو

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The article is devoted to the literary heritage of Oles Ulianenکو, who was virtually the only national author addressing LGBTQIA+ subject matter. The corporal-mimetic method was applied to analyze fiction works, which enabled us to draw a number of meaningful conclusions. On the one hand, LGBTQIA+ themes are typologically represented by a variety of images which are characterized by both an ironic dimension and dramatic pathos, interpreted not in ethical but in aesthetic terms. On the other hand, Oles Ulianenکو was the first to shift homosexuality into the visible realm, and to represent the “splendors and miseries” (H. de Balzac) of homoeroticism to Ukrainian society; who, with his sexualized, homosexualized and lesbian narrative of his literary works attempted to speak of a future when his country would overcome the lack of social and sexual freedom.

KEYWORDS: Oles Ulianenکو, corporal-mimetic method, LGBTQIA+ subject matter, homoeroticism, homoaesthetics

Introduction

Not long ago on the TV program “DROZDOV”, Bohdan Hloba, an LGBTQIA+¹ activist, declared that Ukraine was without any doubt a “homophobic country”.² Fortunately, this was not a matter of state homophobia but social or, to be more precise, a social and domestic form, which in its turn can be illustrated with the literary works of Oles Ulianenکو, one of the most talented and controversial Ukrainian authors, who represented LGBTQIA+ subject matter in his works consciously and rather regularly. This theme is depicted in novels such as *Stalinka* (*Stalinka*), *Vohnenne Oko* (*Fire Eye*), *Znak Savaofa* (*Sign of Sabaoth*), *Dofin Satany* (*Dauphin of Satan*), *Tam, de Pivden* (*There, Where the South is*), *Zhinka ioho mrii* (*The Woman of His Dreams*), *Kvity Sodomu* (*Flowers of Sodom*), and *Serafima* (*Seraphim*), and in some of the short prose namely in the novella *Vono* (*It*) or in the story *Nakaz* (*The Order*).

¹ See: <<https://gaycenter.org/community/lgbtq/>>.

² See: *Bohdan Hloba в гостях у Остапа Дроздова розповіє про ЛІГБТКІА+ в Україні*, <https://www.lgbt.org.ua/multimedia/show_406/#> [retrieved: 04.04.2020].

Historical and cultural prolegomena

Although LGBTQIA+ subject matter in historical and cultural or socio-political terms is not the main goal of this study, it would be interesting to consider the fact that besides having a hostile-aggressive attitude towards LGBTQIA+ people, marginal, mainly right- and left-wing groups and the Ukrainian power establishment, together with a large part of the Ukrainian society, as well as a number of members of the LGBTQIA+ community seem to be involved in a conspiracy of total silence, abiding by an obviously immature belief that if something is not mentioned, then it does not exist. The only difference is that representatives of the LGBTQIA+ community, as noted by Maria Maierchuk, “see a higher sense” “in a closed secret existence”, hence they “prefer patterns of hidden interaction formed under the conditions of criminalized homosexuality.”³

There are possibly two deep reasons for this social strategy. The first is related to the centuries-long struggle of the Ukrainian people for freedom and independence, the struggle which is still ongoing and for which Ukrainians, including LGBTQIA+ individuals, continue to die today, deterring the Russian armed aggression not only in the East but on the whole territory of the country. This paradox when, for some reason, the struggle for everybody’s freedom does not provide freedom for a particular minority is due to the fact that, on the one hand, according to the majority of Ukrainians, the rights of minorities are not a topical matter until the whole community is deprived of liberty.

On the other hand, the paradox is determined by a strong conviction of the vast majority of citizens that Ukraine is an extremely chaste nation. Since LGBTQIA+ themes are often regarded as contradicting the cultural and historical, national and religious, and moral and ethical traditions of Ukrainian people,⁴ there is nothing to speak about.

Furthermore, until recently, traditional interpretations of classical Ukrainian literature were not focused on sexual but on socio-historical issues, despite the literary works reflecting the theme of sex.

By way of illustration, let us take the poem *Kateryna (Cathrine)* by Taras Shevchenko, a classic of Ukrainian literature, in which the main

³ М. Маєрчук, *Вторгнення гомосексуальності*, [in:] *120 сторінок содому: Сучасна світова лесбі/гей/бі література. Квір-антологія*, упорядники І. Шувалова, А. Позднякова, О. Барліг, Київ 2009, р. XVII–XVIII.

⁴ See: О. Мостяєв, *Гомофобія: замах на особистість*, <<https://helsinki.org.ua/articles/homofobiya-zamah-na-osobystist/>> [retrieved: 05.04.2020]; І. Коломієць, *Моральне згарище*, “Критика” 2009, nos 9–10, pp. 2–3; Т. Марценюк, *Страх розмаїття: національні властивості толерантності і гомофобії*, “Критика” 2009, nos. 11–12, pp. 10–13.

character is a common peasant girl, who was not able to control her sexual desire and consequently gave birth to a bastard. This poem continues to be interpreted in terms of social and national oppression due to the fact that Kateryna's lover was a Moskal, as Russian army soldiers were called in Ukraine at that time.

One more meaningful example is the novel *The Whore (Poviiia)* by Panas Mirnyi, another classic of Ukrainian literature. A reader can easily guess from the title that this work is dedicated to the prostitute's life story. However, Ukrainian literary critics never mention this novel at all, and, when they do, they invariably condemn social and national oppression on the grounds that the main character of the novel, Khrystia Prytyka, came from a poor peasant family but her perpetrators were rich Ukrainians or Jews.

After all, such interpretations of the novel can be explained by critics' restraint and additionally the content of the work itself, which, despite its specific subject matter, paradoxically constitutes a standard of chastity and puritanism.

Thus, the attitude of Ukrainians to sexual issues outlined here is supported first by the virtuous nature of textbooks and school standards of literary education, and second, by the content of classical works themselves, in which even the literary images correlated with heterosexual motifs have been traditionally interpreted outside this discourse.

The dominance of this approach to LGBTQIA+ subjects in Ukrainian society is easily proved because one can find few or no pieces of art and literary works dedicated specifically to this subject matter. As the result, there is neither serious discussion, nor any reference to this topic in Ukrainian literary criticism, not to say in literary studies discourses.

The only exception to mention is the publisher and journal "Krytyka", which issued several articles and, in 2009, published a "queer-anthology *120 storinok sodomu (120 pages of Sodom)*, a collection of modern lesbian, gay and bisexual literature from all over the world, for the first time in Ukraine and in post-Soviet countries in general". It is emphasized in the annotation of the anthology that "the main goal of the anthology is not only to reveal new names, themes and genres of writing to Ukrainian readers and to familiarize them with achievements of queer-culture of the late 20th and early 21st century but also to promote the promulgation of modern skills of tolerant thinking, the ability to listen and understand others, appreciate otherness and manage oneself in a society where the plurality of identities, norms, and truths is legitimate, habitual and desirable".

In the afterword, highlighting the goal of the anthology, M. Maierchuk points out that the collection primarily "contributes to discourse legiti-

zation and romantic textualization of same-sex love relationships,”⁵ with the sexual revolution being vital in Ukraine too.

The public dimension of the publication is supported by several reviewers. Marta Varykasha sees *120 pages of Sodom* as “a remarkable breakthrough in strategies to break a reader’s stereotype thinking.”⁶ In her review, Viktoriia Narizhna states that “the compilers of the anthology dared to do what they had meant, namely, to provoke a political scandal as a public reaction.”⁷

Collectively, these reviews outline only social and cultural approaches to the LGBTQIA+ theme even though there is an artistic reason for its actualization.

So, it is not surprising that the works by Oles Ulianenko listed above, which reveal this theme, have been reviewed and critically analyzed using an approach that was far from an appropriate professional research based on an artistic and aesthetic determinism.

It should be noted that the first attempt to study LGBTQIA+ subject matter in the literary works of Oles Ulianenko is reported to have been made by the Czech scholar Jaroslav Sommer. Yet in his ambitiously titled article, this literary critic just identifies and catalogues all Ukrainian authors who have ever addressed homosexual themes.

The result of the study is a short list that includes the novel *Moskoviada* (*The Mosковиad*) by Yuri Andrukhovych along with the novella *Divchatka* (*Girls*) by Oksana Zabuzhko, which may have been chosen randomly. Nevertheless, J. Sommer claims that the corresponding theme “gradually has become organic for Ukrainian literature.”⁸

We cannot agree with this conclusion because a new quality is the result of transformation of a certain quantity. Consequently, under the outlined circumstances, it is extremely essential to understand the reasons why such incidents and confusions occur in research practice.

In the first place, the problem is the lack of an adequate research methodology which is objectively determined by LGBTQIA+ subject matter in general and Oles Ulianenko’s works in particular. Instead, an appropriate methodology, which was developed in the doctoral and post-doctoral studies,⁹

⁵ М. Маерчик, *Вторгнення гомосексуальності...*, р. XVI.

⁶ М. Варикаша, *Queer pro quo, или За пределами бинарной гендерной дихотомии*, “Гендерные исследования” 2009, no. 19, p. 345.

⁷ В. Нарижна, *Антология как поступок?*, “Гендерные исследования” 2009, no. 19, p. 341.

⁸ J. Sommer, *Téma homosexuality v ukrajinské literatuře*, “Slavica litteraria” 2017, no. 20/2, p. 108.

⁹ See: Ф. Штейнбук, *Засади тілесного міметизму у текстових стратегіях постмодерністської літератури кінця ХХ – початку ХХІ століття*, Київ 2007; Ф. Штейнбук, *Тілесність – мімесис – аналіз (Тілесно-міметичний метод аналізу художніх творів)*,

is seen in the corporal-mimetic method for analyzing fiction works. According to this method, literary texts are primarily researched in terms of their corporal determinism. Secondly, this method is based on a mimesis mechanism, which is understood as a way of transforming corporal being into fictional experience. Thirdly, it is believed that a fictional text harmonically combines artistic and non-artistic reality without being reduced to either of them. Finally, this method helps define constant, stable and universal senses which are generated by a corporal form of human existence and, in broader terms, a corporal human being.

That said, the corporal-mimetic method can be defined as a method to analyze the corporal-being basis of fictional discourse. Its difference from the traditional approaches, which are determined socially, morally, religiously, or according to the Czech scholar, in terms of an “inventory” is that it enables researchers to consider literary works from an artistic and aesthetic point of view.

The aim of this article is to interpret LGBTQIA+ subject matter, which is openly presented in the above-mentioned works by Oles Ulianenko for the first time, as a fact of aesthetics or an aesthetic phenomenon endowed not only and not so much with social and ethic sense but with literary and philosophical one which, at least hypothetically, should deny any homophobic intentions and subtexts.

Typology of homosexual imagery

The first most widely known novel *Stalinka*, which was awarded the highest state Shevchenko Prize for the most remarkable work of literature in 1997, Oles Ulianenko becoming the youngest laureate in the award’s history, raises the theme of homosexuality at the very beginning and develops it through the whole text. All episodes, events and characters can be typologically divided into three categories, which the writer also refers to in his later books.

The first type is the scene in a psychiatric hospital, where “Bronka, a homosexual,”¹⁰ who sometimes was “whispering something into the orderly’s ear,”¹¹ then the latter, “shaking his little doll-like head,”¹² “ushered him

Київ 2009; Ф. Штейнбук, *Українська література у контексті тілесно-міметичного методу*, Сімферополь 2013; Ф. Штейнбук, *Конвергенція тілесних мікропопсів у сучасній світовій літературі*, Київ 2014.

¹⁰ O. Ulianenko, *Stalinka*, Part One, “Ukrainian Literature” 2018, no. 5, p. 237.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 236.

¹² Ibidem, p. 238.

off to the washroom.”¹³ These episodes not only depict the highly parodic protagonist, who is the bearer of historical memory about the malfeasant deeds of Soviet power, owing to which the character of Bronka acquires rather a contradictory dimension, but these scenes are also typical of people’s interactions in close environments.

This type of interaction is determined by a feature which is similar to family relationships, when all the characters involved in one circle, first of all, perform certain roles, and also, oppose one another. As can be seen from the above-mentioned example, all hospital residents are split into medical staff and patients. Moreover, given the criminal way that Soviet institutions of such a type used to operate, the first part of this specific society, in addition to their purely medical duties, performs repressive ones too. Patients in these medical institutions are rather victims of the lawless system; therefore, they are doomed to suffer from both physical coercion and drug abuse.

Nevertheless, being a victim does not prevent Bronka from receiving a share of something else, specifically, sexual or, accurately described, homosexual attention from the representatives of the so-called “power establishment” of the psychiatric hospital. Since Bronka, unlike one of the main characters in the novel nicknamed ‘Lord’, who has managed to escape the “family” fleeing with Lopata, is not capable of such an act, he chooses perhaps the only possible way for himself to adapt to these harsh conditions of belonging to such a “family”.

Anyway, the homosexual relations between the male nurse and the patient, assuming that this affair is initiated by the subordinate, gain an additional connotation due to the fact that such relationships between men within the hospital lose their social significance and acquire almost trivial meaning or, in other words, become part of the routine of a psychiatric hospital.

The relationships of the close type are described in another novel by Oles Ulianenko *The Sign of Sabaoth*, which was anathematized by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow patriarchy, with the writer being cursed. Another closed environment is described in this novel, namely a monastery, where “...monks built the relations which in literature and in the circles where someone found themselves was called Sodom, in other words, it was when a man lay with a man...”¹⁴ staying in an environment restricted with walls and strict monastic prohibitions.

Moreover, when the abbot of the monastery, Father Lavrentii, caught those “brethren” in the act, “they were copulating with a miserable and

¹³ Ibidem, p. 239.

¹⁴ О. УЛЯНЕНКО, *Знак Саваофа*, Харків 2013, p. 27.

pimpled novice, being ebullient, with his watery grey eyes bulged, as he was on his four like a dog that wanted to shit, its fore and hind legs crossed.”¹⁵

However, in this work, as in the episode from *Stalinka*, it refers to homosexual relations, particularly those between monks, which cease to be something extravagant and impossible and become a perfectly acceptable practice of interpersonal homosexual relationships in a closed environment.

From this perspective, it is obvious that same-sex relations in such hierarchical environments, deprived of freedom of choice, are represented by the writer with irony. Primarily, Ulianenکو is willing to desecralize the so-called ‘center of spirituality’. To achieve this goal, he portrays the corporal existence of monks, the brightest manifestations of which are equally as hetero as homosexual aspirations of “guardians of piety”. By attributing a distinctly artistic dimension to the morally dubious deeds and actions, the irony in this discourse is rather to perceive human weaknesses more leniently than to ridicule the corresponding characters.

The scenes which, according to Oleksandr Mostiaev, are associated with “...criminal authorities powerfully asserting themselves”¹⁶ belong to the second type. For example, after they have fought their rival “brigade”, one of the main characters of *Stalinka*, Horik Piskariov, a crime boss, orders Botsman “squealing and begging” to be dragged over. However, all remain unmoved by this, and later another gang member “Mister Peps Mare’s Eye [...] and, screeching high-pitched shrieks (like a nail scratching glass) the whole brigade, butt-fucked him ‘for disloyalty’”.¹⁷

It is worth noting that homosexual rape is generally characteristic of one more type of closed institution, namely prisons, where there is an internal differentiation of prisoners, consequently, some of them become stronger, organized and “authoritative” people, whereas the lower class of this criminal environment are designed to meet the sexual needs of the villainous “Establishment” of penitentiaries.

Actually, the events analyzed in the novel *Stalinka* do not take place within the prison – they are taken out and, on account of being depicted in a relatively free outer world, they become part of this world, finding themselves even at its center for some time, to simultaneously acquire a character which is artistically represented and aesthetically legitimized.

A similar criminal environment in Mykolaiv, a regional center in southern Ukraine, is shown in the novel *There, Where the South is*. However, there is a significant difference between two episodes taking place in Kyiv and Mykolaiv, since the people responsible for a gang rape were “young-

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ O. Мосцяев, *Гомофобія: замах на особистість...*

¹⁷ O. Ulianenکو, *Stalinka...*, p. 263.

sters”, because the gang consisted of teenagers and even children. It actually turns out that, despite the expected drama or tragedy, these “youngsters” “had another victim in store in their surroundings, whom they would screw” as they “could not come up with any other fun rather than smoking, acetone, active and passive pederasty.”¹⁸ In addition, their leader was “Spaba, shagged by Petsia”, although, it did not matter, for “they fucked somebody in droves, then he dissipated with them, drinking. That was such a pederasty democracy.”¹⁹

As follows, this type of homosexual theme, beginning with a rape to punish the members of the defeated gang, evolves while transforming nearly into its opposite, what one might say are tragicomic relations. It should also be emphasized that the most disgusting form of sexual violence, that is, pedophilia, on the one hand, is committed by children and adolescents, and on the other hand, victims of such abuse do not consider themselves to be victims because they perceive excesses as an integral part of the world they belong to. Most importantly, in this scene, as in the previously considered ones, Oles Uliianenko reveals a certain aspect of human interaction, bringing the theme tabooed by a “social agreement” into the conventionally existential and emphatically accepted sphere, giving it an aesthetic dimension.

Remarkably, the third type of homosexually based episodes is obviously characterized by a rather complex evolution. In the novel *Stalinka*, one cannot but pay attention to the image of “Nikandrych, the last of the Stalin-era thugs,”²⁰ who “served as a mentor to the local punks”, patronized Horik, “took «protection» money”, in general, he “administered justice quickly and brutally, but fairly” in the criminal circles of his neighborhood, and besides, “it was said that the old hooligan had defiled many a boy.”²¹ After all, the problem was that while abusing teenagers, Nykandrych, being ill with syphilis, infected those 12-14-year-old boys who became his victims. Nevertheless, it did not undermine the authority of “the old thug”, which can be proved by the episode after his death when “so many people had come to the funeral, people nobody in Stalinka knew,”²² and gradually the funeral, though ironically, turned into the triumph of a criminal “emperor” or “pharaoh”, or at least the communist “boss”.

Therefore, Nikandrych’s disgusting passions are publicly legitimized by police chief Syrovatka, who would cover the crimes of “the old thug” because the latter cooperated with law enforcement agencies as a “sexist”, that

¹⁸ О. Ульяненко, *Там, де Південь: повісті*, Київ 2017, p. 43.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 45.

²⁰ О. Uliianenko, *Stalinka*, Part Two, “Ukrainian Literature” 2021, no. 6, p. 158.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 160.

²² Ibidem, p. 157.

is, an informant; and, after the death of the “snitch”, this legitimization was realized through his funeral, when Nikandrych was buried like a representative of the party nomenklatura in those times. In this context, the named vicissitudes turn into their opposite in relation to their own socio-ethical dimension and acquire an indisputable aesthetic content.

Conversely, in another of Oles Ulianenko’s novel, *Fire Eye*, one of the main protagonists, Rodyk, defends his chastity twice. If in one case, thanks to desperate resistance, the boy miraculously manages to escape two brothers, “the former sectarian preachers – Mykola and Borys,²³²⁴ in the other case he “with a single blow, accidental and sharp, under the jaw [...] knocked down a tall thin young man, with dark piercing eyes, who fell hitting his head against a cast-iron urn, the skull broken like a walnut shell.”²⁵

These events are the only episode when homosexual protagonists are portrayed clearly negatively. Be it as it may, it cannot be explained just by the social prejudices against gays, taking into account two facts: firstly, the corresponding images that are particularly related to some religious issues evolve; secondly, the context of the entire works of this writer who aimed to give an aesthetic dimension to phenomena and events that did not seem to undergo such a transformation in Ukrainian literature simply because it had been eliminated from the discourse of the national classical literature for some time.

The third type, which is much more complicated though, is represented in the novel *Flowers of Sodom*. In a macabre-sarcastic way, this work tells of a people’s deputy named Totskyi, who, having unlimited financial opportunities by abusing power, pleased himself with varied sexual whims. It is also worth mentioning that Totskyi no longer embodies the secular power in an ironic way as the “old thug” Nikandrych did; in fact, he is an authorized representative of this power as a member of the Ukrainian parliament.

This implies that this novel is another variant of the dialectical turning of the situation to its opposite when not a fabled or ironically depicted character but a true representative of the political establishment actually equals those who belong to the social margins. As a result, the social hierarchy is shattered when a deputy of the political elite does not differ from a former prisoner, hence, he cannot be distinguished; accordingly, a former prisoner claims public recognition as a political leader. Thus, the defined rotation is doomed to acquire at least aesthetic and at most existential significance, extremely distant from any political or social expediency.

²³ Here and further translated by F. Shteinbuk and Y. Gordiienko.

²⁴ О. Уляненко, *Вогненне око*, Харків 2013, p. 205.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 73.

Fanni Liechtenstein, one of the heroines of the novel, who is known to have named herself so, her true name unrevealed, did not use to be a silent concubine of Totskyi, as she stated. Although Fanni, a little “vicious bitch,”²⁶ was only “twelve years old” when she “met Totskyi,”²⁷ the girl deliberately “reached out” to Totskyi “and gripped his index finger,”²⁸ as she was convinced that they, in her words, both “heard each other a thousand miles away,”²⁹ and, most importantly, “understood each other.”³⁰

Notably, when Fanni grew up, it was she who first seduced a female murderer named One-Eyed Mother, and then she forced Mother to kill deputy Totskyi.

It should be emphasized that unlike the novels described above, the story about these unspeakably horrible events is fully imbued with poignant irony, as the result of which the formally eerie and indelibly repulsive vicissitudes acquire unsurpassed carnival style. On the one hand, this style resembles Quentin Tarantino’s style in *Pulp Fiction* and, on the other, this time it is aimed at desacralizing a representative not of a confessional but a secular power.

Ironic and non-ironic risky discourse

The irony connotations are characteristic of some other works such as the story *The Order* or the novella *It*, the protagonist of which is Nonka, “in fact [...] not Nonka at all but Mykola from Vasyilkiv, a well-known Kyiv transvestite in the late 1980s.”³¹ In this case, it is rather a matter of theatrical violence, which “ninety-kilogram” Mykola-Nonka was exposed to by “her broken heart, her hatred and love in one face, her eternity at the other end of the cheap bar”³² that was full of feigned jealousy, Pasha, “her official lover.”³³

On top of that, Pasha was responsible for “voluntary violence, not signed up but approved in their rules”, every time “giving Nonka a black eye, certainly, if nobody witnessed him”³⁴, acting meanly and evilly. The thing was that Mykola was involved in prostitution, “saving the money for surgery”

²⁶ О. Ульяненко, *Квіти Содому*, Харків 2012, р. 212.

²⁷ Ibidem, р. 210.

²⁸ Ibidem, р. 212.

²⁹ Ibidem, р. 210.

³⁰ Ibidem, р. 211.

³¹ О. Ульяненко, *Яйця динозавра*, Київ 2016, р. 28.

³² Ibidem, р. 27.

³³ Ibidem, р. 28.

³⁴ Ibidem.

on sex reassignment but as soon as he “accumulated enough, Pasha [...] beat Nona to death, taking the money away. He would beat her monthly... While Nona dreamed of surgery. It occurred in 1992...”³⁵

Obviously, this story evokes our deepest sympathy for Mykola-Nonka but still does not make a depressing impression. The end of the story being quite unexpected, the narrator met the protagonist “ten years later” when “Nonna looked like a respectful man with grey temples, wearing a suit from Valentino”. Anyhow, a few things never changed, particularly the ironic dimension of the story and the necessity for the nameless narrator “to pay for drinks.”³⁶

From the perspective of the works under consideration and the works which will be analyzed in future, it is important to raise the topic of transvestitism because, importantly, the motifs of travesty have been characteristic of Ukrainian culture since the nativity theater, which, basing on the biblical mystery, emerged no later than the second half of the sixteenth century.

In addition, classical Ukrainian literature, initiated by Ivan Kotliarevsky’s poem *Aeneid*, which was published in 1799, directly belonged to the genre of travesty. The use of travesty motifs in many other authors’ works was not uncommon, including *Recreations* by Yuri Andrukhovych, who is rightly considered to be one of the founders of modern Ukrainian literature. It was his first novel published in 1992.

However, the genre or artistic techniques used in all those works were of great significance. Instead, Oles Ulianenکو was the first and, until recently, the only one who presented this topic in its original sense, so to speak, related to the sexual sphere, the problem of gender reassignment, and other issues. So, it is not surprising that in accordance with a two-hundred-year-old tradition, the writer has no other way but to reveal it ironically, and due to this technique used by the O. Ulianenکو, transvestitism transforms or turns into travesty, acquiring a distinct aesthetic dimension.

It should be stressed that there is still room for irony in the scandalous novel *The Woman of His Dreams*. In the history of Ukrainian modern literature, it is the only novel which was declared pornographic and had a distribution ban by the National Expert Commission of Ukraine on the Protection of Public Morality in accordance with the act № 33E dated 2 February 2009.³⁷ Consequently, The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor of the US Department of State mentioned the fact of O. Ulianenکو’s novel ban in its *Annual Report on Human Rights Practices in 2009*.³⁸

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 29.

³⁶ Ibidem.

³⁷ О. Ульяненко, *Без цензури: інтерв’ю*, Київ 2011, pp. 313–317.

³⁸ See: *2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, <<https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/eur/136063.htm>> [retrieved: 11.04.2020].

One of the main characters of the book is Mykola Pavlovych's son, a gay, is sympathetically mocked. The author frequently calls him *Ruslanchyk*, ridiculing his dreams and behavior, the content of his conversations, for example, with barman Mahrib, a gay, etc. Similarly, when a stranger, nicknamed Toptun, visiting Mahrib's bar, slaps them both in the face, even then that relatively odd and troublesome episode acquires a parodic character, "a wide fragrant river of Brazilian carnival flowing on the TV screen."³⁹

And if we assume that the carnival actually involves breaking established rules by which any society operates, as well as equalizing different social strata owing to masks and costumes, it can be concluded that despite the mostly tragic circumstances, the characters of *The Woman of His Dreams* are imbued with ironical imagery, which contributes to the further aestheticization of the novel discourse.

Thus, only one of Ruslanchik's lovers, "Captain Velychko, from a Special Investigation Unit"⁴⁰ in particular, finds himself in an episode that should be referred to as the fourth type, which is not represented in *Stalinka*, for this type is characterized by portraying deliberate sexual relationships between two men without a shade of irony.⁴¹

Obviously, this type can be illustrated by other scenes from Oles Uliaenko's novel *Dauphin of Satan*, the protagonist of which, Ivan Bilozub, is a bisexual like Captain Velychko. Once, for the sake of his own safety, at least officially, Ivan happens to visit Richchi's place, "a green-eyed blond", who became his loyal and romantic lover, as well as an accomplice. Besides their criminal acts, "the couple was fascinated [...] by healthy, true male sex."⁴² Gradually, Richchi becomes completely enamored of Ivan therefore, being jealous, he slaughters his female neighbor, who was always insulting him because of his sexuality. Next, caught by the policemen, he betrays Bilozub by telling the police officers his lover's possible whereabouts.

Remarkably, in *Dauphin of Satan*, unlike any other novel, Oles Uliaenko elaborately depicts the life and behavior of Kyiv gays during the Soviet period when the Criminal Law Act made any homosexual men's relations illegal. The author vividly describes a "rendezvous of gays in a toilet on Leo Tolstoy street"⁴³ or a New Year's Eve party organized by Richchi at his place, which could be visited solely by gays with a personal invitation.

³⁹ О. Ульяненко, *Жінка його мрії*, Харків 2012, р. 139.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, р. 75.

⁴¹ Ibidem, pp. 75–83.

⁴² О. Ульяненко, *Дофін Сатани*, <<https://www.rulit.me/books/dofin-satani-read-467240-1.html>> [retrieved: 11.04.2020].

⁴³ Ibidem.

So, “this motley company moved, sneezed, buzzed like flies at small coffee tables served with all sorts of delicacies. They pushed screaming like a bunch of devils which had escaped from hell to have a walk on earth”. Nonetheless, “in this carnival of shades” and “bright colors”, Richchi still “felt out of place” because “nothing could happen without Ivan.”⁴⁴

However, it turns out that it was not worth thinking of any future together, even with Ivan, since Bilozub makes no exceptions for anyone, hence, he first “killed people on Leo Tolstoy Street... In a toilet...”, next, he “shot. Right in the chest”, then, he “cut [...] the throat” of Pakhotsky, who was responsible for giving away the “cruising” place of gays “on Leo Tolstoy Street. In Shevchenko Park.”⁴⁵ Consequently, no matter how paradoxically it may look, the inhuman Bilozub was the only one who made those fellows equal with all his other victims in their death.

Here are a few important points one cannot miss. As regards the crime scene, which was a public toilet, it is necessary to recall that funny little Bronka from *Stalinka* had a “date” with the male nurse of a psychiatric hospital in the toilet too. This specific location, the toilet, and its meaning will be discussed further below. Moreover, it is worth suggesting that it is hardly accidental that this locus was on the street named after classic Russian writer Tolstoy, in the park named after the classic of Ukrainian literature Taras Shevchenko. According to tourist guides, in the center of Kyiv there is such a street and a corresponding park, in which one can find the city’s oldest public toilet, built more than one hundred years ago before 1917.

When the writer introduces the story about the place where Kyiv gays usually met in Soviet times into the novel, it seems that he simply recreated the authentic realities. After all, the combination of these three cultural symbols in one line created a sensational semantic field of various senses, no matter what Oles Ulianenko was guided by.

Anyhow, the first seemingly obvious interpretation could be the following hypothesis that both titans of the national spirit were in some way related to homosexuality. Since it is well known from the history of literature that Leo Tolstoy and Taras Shevchenko had heterosexual preferences, this may mean that both of them act as patrons or some kind of cult guardian angels of the followers of other forms of sexual intimacy in the proposed context.

Besides, the meeting place of gays may indicate an amazing way to unite if it is not possible to reconcile on the basis of specific, unconventional, but still love. The place which is inscribed in the context of some of the most important cultural symbols of two national cultures – cultures that

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

have been objectively opposed to each other for centuries - cannot be pure coincidence.

Last but not least, seen from another perspective, the location of the toilet where gays met under, say, the omophorion of two national seers, whose works did not contain even a hint of homosexual issues, may also indicate the dubious and limited artistic and aesthetic foresight of both geniuses. But in the approach described here, in this case, it is a subtle irony, as a result of which the aesthetic content of imagery in Oles Ulianenko's novel leaves no doubt.

The fourth type can also be illustrated by the scenes describing lesbian intercourse without any hint of irony. While Fanni Liechtenstein "was trying to be as tender as she could with Mama,"⁴⁶ to take advantage of their affair, the relationship between Seraphim, a female poisoner in the novel of the same name, and her lover Lera can be described as altruistic or even sacrificial. When Lera was bitten by "a giant black snake"⁴⁷ while making love to Seraphim, the latter "...intuitively [...] found what she needed [...] picked herbs stem by stem, took them into her mouth and chewed", then she "stood over Lera. She spread her arms [...] and pressed her mouth to hers, oozing warm green bolus in". She "did it about four times" until she finally became convinced "that it was all over", that the antidote she had discovered, which she had applied so erotically, worked well, and that she had saved her beloved one from imminent death, although she "defied something, and what she involuntarily rebelled against was her true essence."⁴⁸

Taken together, the evidence of this study suggests the following conclusions:

- firstly, LGBTQIA+ subject matter is indeed a certain figurative constant which is determined by the corresponding thematic orientation of some definite aspects of Oles Ulianenko's literary works;
- secondly, in the writer's literary works, LGBTQIA+ subject matter is represented by a variety of images which can be divided into four types;
- thirdly, these types can be identified as ones which illustrate homosexual contacts a) in a closed environment (asylum, monastery), b) in criminal communities, c) between unequal characters (in age, physically, socially, and etc.), d) between protagonists who are aware of their queer sexuality;
- fourthly, the variety of the corresponding images, descriptions and events are characteristic of evident evolution;

⁴⁶ О. УЛЯНЕНКО, *Квіти Содому...*, р. 231.

⁴⁷ О. УЛЯНЕНКО, *Серафима*, Харків 2013, р. 84.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 88–89.

– fifthly, evolution of these images, descriptions and events is full of controversies hence, it develops from irony to drama, or rather ending in humanistic pathos;

– sixthly, to some extent, every stage of the outlined evolution can be interpreted in aesthetic categories.

Manifesting the invisible

To give one example from the novel *Dauphin of Satan*, the episode which portrays the visitors to the toilet located in Taras Shevchenko Park on Leo Tolstoy Street can obviously be interpreted in terms of gender theory. According to the principles of this theory, as Judith Halberstam notes, “The men’s room [...] constitutes both an architecture of surveillance and an incitement to desire, a space of homosocial interaction and of homoerotic interaction.”⁴⁹

Similarly, it is possible to explain even the utterly absurd actions of Richchi through the queer-subject phenomenon suggested by J. Halberstam “that can successfully challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity”⁵⁰ and, in fact, completely destroy the notion that the man is an intelligent human being.

Nevertheless, these scenes can be interpreted if we consider the fact that Oles Ulianenko has created a work of fiction, whose action takes place in a hostile society, with the protagonist threatening other people’s safety and life.

Both the killer Bilozub and regular visitors to this gents’ toilet are not inspired by any high state motives or ideological guidelines but by their personal corporal desires. Those desires were strong enough for a maniac, who would ignore blood and those others, or according to Halberstam, it is more appropriate to say queer subjects, who would disregard fear, humiliation, and excrement.

Hereafter, as a result of the novel’s protagonists’ ability to overcome various hardships, obstacles and deprivations, there seems to be evidence to indicate that a peculiar unique aesthetics, at least in the context of Ukrainian literature, or rather anti-aesthetics of the texts under study, emerges and is then formed as aesthetics of disgust and horror. But these aesthetics are not produced by the author’s homophobic aspirations, which may prompt a disgusting character of homoeroticism; conversely, portraying homoeroticism, for example, in the men’s room, leads to repulsive homo-

⁴⁹ J. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, Durham and London 1998, p. 24.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

aesthetics ensue. However, there are no reasons to speak about homophobia, first, because the image of homosexuality in Oles Ulianenکو's work is imbued with almost constant ironic connotations, which do not only soften the possible negative perception of this imagery but, most importantly, transform it from the social-ethical to the artistic-aesthetic plane. Secondly, Oles Ulianenکو's works cannot be called homophobic, since the writer does not contrast homoeroticism with heteroeroticism in his books but speaks about an equal queer type of eroticism.

Moreover, the outlined conflict cannot be interpreted through moral imperatives as in the article by the Russian philosopher Vladislav Bachinin who, when analyzing the novel of Thomas Mann *Death in Venice*, bases his research on religious principles to study the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. Consequently, in his conclusions, Bachinin considers the term "*homoaesthetics*" (V. B.'s italics) to be a "camouflage", which "drags one's thought from ethical uncompromisingness, directing it into the realm of uncertain and vague estimation."⁵¹

Nevertheless, an ethical interpretation seems impossible due to equal hetero- and homoerotic components interaction. If existential horror is produced by the subjects despite their sexual orientation, then, one could obviously speak about aesthetic or rather philosophic-aesthetic level of artistic understanding of being in Ulianenکو's works.

Such an understanding of Oles Ulianenکو's literary heritage unexpectedly echoes the ideas of Yevgeniy Fiks, a Russian-American painter and critic, conveyed in the article evocatively entitled *Teoriia pleshki* (*Theory of cruising ground*) ("pleshka is a term for the Soviet gay-argo to define the places where gays used to meet in public areas in Moscow and other cities of the Soviet Union"⁵²). Y. Fiks claims that after 1934, when homosexual relationships were criminalized, "homoaesthetics still remained in Soviet art" but it "only shifted into invisible realm."⁵³

The sexual-aesthetic theme depicted by Ulianenکو mirrors Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's ideas in her distinguished book *Epistemology of the Closet*, in which she says that "...the book's first focus is on sexuality rather than (sometimes, even, as opposed to) gender,"⁵⁴ examining, as noted by Oksa-

⁵¹ В. Бачинин, *Он взвешен на весах и найден очень легким. Смерть, Венеция и игра в гомоэротический бисер*, "Нева" 2014, no. 3, <<https://magazines.gorky.media/neva/2014/3/on-vzveshen-na-vesah-i-najden-ochen-legkim-br-smert-venecziya-i-igra-v-gomoeroticheskij-biser.html>> [retrieved: 24.07.2022].

⁵² Е. Фикс, *Теория плешки*, "Художественный журнал" 2013, no. 91, <<https://moscow-artmagazine.com/issue/5/article/35>> [retrieved: 24.07.2022].

⁵³ Ibidem.

⁵⁴ Е. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the closet*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1990, p. 15.

na Timofeieva, “homosexuality” as a “foundation and condition of «heterosexual» existence,”⁵⁵ whereas the word “closet” in E. Kosofsky Sedgwick’s original book means “a small room for privacy, a place of retreat, a state or condition of secrecy, a cabinet for china, utensils, or clothes, a water closet, a monarch’s chamber...”⁵⁶

Thus, this study has shown that Oles Ulianenko was the first Ukrainian writer who, paraphrasing Y. Fiks, made homosexuality visible, who dared and succeeded, using the metaphor coined by E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, in opening the “closet” to represent “splendors and miseries” of homoeroticism (a paraphrase of Honoré de Balzac), which are no different from the “splendors and miseries” of heteroeroticism, to Ukrainian society.

Finally, Oles Ulianenko was convincingly able to demonstrate in an artistic way that the world consists of diversities, including sexual ones, simply because this world cannot be different with its actual dominant, namely, a body with all the things it needs.

Conclusion

Therefore, in this context, even if it were possible to speak of a “justification” of such a world in ethical language, it is still impossible to do so in the ethical realm because a “justification” can be found exclusively in the aesthetic plane, far from the only one, in which “justification” acquires distinct features of “reconciliation”. In other words, no matter how contentious aesthetics may be, it does not guarantee heaven in the long run, but at least it helps avoid the feeling that we are in hell.

To conclude, it is necessary to state in the language of aesthetics, as Y. Fiks points out, that “only accepting this narrative [...] one can be confident that liberation activism will have a future on the post-Soviet territories,”⁵⁷ the future which the narrative of Oles Ulianenko’s sexualized, homosexualized, and lesbianized literary works speak for; the future when a LGBTQIA+ activist Bohdan Hloba will not be invited to the police office but for an interview to one of the national channels where, looking into the host’s eyes, hence the whole country, he will be able to declare that “Ukraine is [not] a homophobic country”.

⁵⁵ О. Тимофеева, *Тайны пустого клозета*, “Новое литературное обозрение” 2003, no. 6, <<https://magazines.gorky.media/nlo/2003/6/tajny-pustogo-klozeta.html>> [retrieved: 25.07.2022].

⁵⁶ Ibidem.

⁵⁷ Е. Фикс, *Теория плешки...*

The present study confirms that it is just the beginning, and it is not enough. Nowhere and never has the path of freedom been simple or easy, which is proved by the way extremely complicated and controversial LGBTQIA+ subject matter was depicted in the literary works of Oles Ulianenko.

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