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SELF-SACRIFICE AS THE HIGHEST FORM OF GOOD IN K. G. PAUSTOVSKY'S SHORT STORY "THE SCRUFFY SPARROW"

Mahmudova Marina Vladimirovna
Andijan State Institute of Foreign Languages

Abstract

The article examines the problem of self-sacrifice as the highest moral value in K. G. Paustovsky's short story "The Scruffy Sparrow." The analysis focuses on the artistic system of the work, in which the motifs of kindness, gratitude, memory, and fidelity form an integral moral and philosophical space. Special attention is paid to the image of the sparrow Pashka as a bearer of the idea of selfless service to others, as well as to the symbolism of the crystal bouquet, which unites the themes of love, promise, and spiritual continuity. It is demonstrated that self-sacrifice in the story manifests itself on different levels — human and "natural" — allowing the author to affirm the universal nature of good as the foundation of a harmonious world order. The article concludes by emphasizing the significance of a child's perception of the world and of art (theater) in the formation of moral values and in the artistic concept of the work.

Keywords

self-sacrifice, kindness, moral values, symbolism, child's perception of the world, artistic image, memory and fidelity, fairy-tale elements.

Аннотация

В статье рассматривается проблема самоотверженности как высшей нравственной ценности в рассказе К. Г. Паустовского «Растрёпанный воробей». Анализируется художественная система произведения, в которой мотивы добра, благодарности, памяти и верности образуют целостное нравственно-философское пространство. Особое внимание уделяется образу воробья Пашки как носителя идеи бескорыстного служения другому, а также символике хрустального букета, объединяющей темы любви, обещания и духовной преемственности. Показано, что самоотверженность в рассказе проявляется на разных уровнях — человеческом и «природном», — что позволяет автору утвердить универсальный характер добра как основы гармоничного мироустройства. Делается вывод о значении детского восприятия мира и искусства (театра) в формировании нравственных ценностей и в художественной концепции произведения.

Ключевые слова

самоотверженность, доброта, нравственные ценности, символика, детское восприятие мира, художественный образ, память и верность, сказочность.

K. G. Paustovsky's short story "The Scruffy Sparrow" belongs to the group of the writer's works in which the theme of kindness is closely intertwined with motifs of fairy-tale wonder and miracle. The story affirms the idea that the true value of a human being — or even of a small bird — is determined not by strength, wealth, or social position, but by the ability to perform selfless acts for the sake of others.

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From the very first lines, the reader is immersed in an atmosphere of anticipation and silence. Everything in the house seems to have frozen: "the whole house, the garden beyond the windows, and the stone lion… all grew quieter and quieter." Beneath this apparent stillness, however, lies an inner tension — the expectation of an important event: the mother-ballerina's first performance and the moment when she will be able to fulfill the promise she once made to Masha's father. The crystal bouquet becomes a symbol of the bond between two loving people separated by distance and time. Therefore, its disappearance is perceived as a profound emotional loss.

Thus, the house in the story is not merely a physical space, but an image of a peaceful world in which a miracle is possible, though it has not yet occurred.

The main artistic idea of the story is that something small is capable of accomplishing something great. The sparrow Pashka is a tiny, fragile, and defenseless creature: "Pashka lay in a pocket… crying from hunger and hurt." Yet it is precisely he who becomes the center of moral action. In gratitude to Masha, Pashka begins bringing stolen "trophies" into the house, trying to "repay" her — a gesture that has no utilitarian meaning but carries immense emotional significance.

The most important manifestation of Pashka's character is his participation in the "sparrow battle" for the crystal bouquet. Paustovsky describes this scene in a hyperbolic manner, emphasizing the heroism of the tiny birds: "the sparrows attacked the crow's stall in a whole flock." Pashka restores hope to Masha's world and simultaneously grants her mother-Cinderella the opportunity to fulfill her vow of love.

Thus, Pashka turns into a messenger of good, endowed not with strength, but with self-sacrifice.

In Paustovsky's story, the theater is not merely entertainment, but a space where real life passes into a spiritual dimension. The performance is a magical fairy tale, yet it is precisely on stage that a true miracle takes place — one that directly concerns the Mother, Masha, and Pashka. Music, described as a "living and kind being," does not simply accompany the action; it becomes an emotional resonator that amplifies the audience's joy and compassion.

Of particular importance in the story is the motif of memory and fidelity, which is closely connected with the theme of self-sacrifice. The crystal bouquet is not merely an object returned through the sparrow's efforts, but a sign of preserved feeling — a symbol of a promise that has not lost its power despite war and separation. Masha's father remains a moral reference point in the story even in his physical absence: "Father was far away, at war, yet it seemed as though he were still nearby." His image is invisibly present in the house and in the thoughts of both mother and child, setting a high standard of human responsibility.

Pashka's self-sacrifice thus reflects and continues the human feat. The small bird acts unconsciously from the standpoint of rational logic, yet deeply meaningfully from a moral perspective: "the sparrow trembled from cold and exhaustion but did not release its prize." This episode underscores a key idea in Paustovsky's worldview: good is performed not out of calculation, but in spite of circumstances.

An important role is also played by the child's perception of the world, through which Paustovsky conveys the idea of the naturalness of good. Masha does not doubt Pashka, nor does she analyze his actions — she simply believes. A child's faith becomes the moral space in which sacrifice is possible without heroization or pathos. It is no coincidence that the author emphasizes the sincerity and simplicity of the girl's feelings: "Masha stroked Pashka and whispered something tender to him." In this scene, kindness appears as an organic state of the soul rather than an exceptional act.

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The moral culmination of the story is built upon the union of three forms of self-sacrifice: paternal (service to the Motherland and fidelity to love), maternal (spiritual devotion to art and memory), and "avian" (a selfless act performed for the sake of another). All three converge in the finale, creating a sense of restored harmony in the world. That is why the ending is not tragic, but peaceful: "the room was warm, and everything seemed reliable and calm."

Thus, self-sacrifice in "The Scruffy Sparrow" appears as a universal moral law, operating regardless of age, social status, or even species. Paustovsky affirms that good is not an exception, but a natural state of the world — one that may be disrupted, yet can always be restored through love, memory, and gratitude.

The climax of the story is the moment when Pashka brings the bouquet: "The sparrow flew up to Cinderella… and dropped the small crystal bouquet into her palm." The theater becomes the space where a dream is realized, where a fairy tale turns into reality, and where good reveals itself as an exalted force capable of changing destiny.

In the final reflection, a philosophical thought emerges about the nature of human emotions: the mother weeps "because I am happy that people like your father exist in the world." These tears are not a sign of sorrow, but of profound spiritual experience overflowing the heart. Like Pashka, Masha's father performs a feat — only on a different, human level. The story suggests that the great and the small are interconnected, and that heroism may belong both to a soldier and to a tiny bird.

The final image — the characters falling asleep and the snowy night — returns the narrative to the realm of dream: "large snowflakes… kept adding to the silence." The world grows calm because good has restored its rightful order.

"The Scruffy Sparrow" is a work about moral beauty, revealed through self-sacrifice and the capacity for gratitude. Paustovsky asserts that a hero is one who lives for others, regardless of strength or size. The small sparrow accomplishes the impossible because he is guided by love and gratitude — and thus, a true fairy tale lives within his soul.

The story teaches the reader to see a miracle in every selfless act and to understand that true happiness is not external, but spiritual: great joy always brings tears.

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