

GENRE AND THEMATIC INNOVATION OF TAWFIQ AL-HAKIM SHORT PROSE IN THE NEW EGYPTIAN SCHOOL IN LITERATURE

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Summary

The article is devoted to the study of the artistic and stylistic features of the stories of Tawfiq al-Hakim. Tawfiq al-Hakim is one of the most famous Arab prose writers and playwrights of the 20th century, a representative of modern Egyptian literature. He was an innovator in both poetic and epic and dramaturgical spheres. In particular, al-Hakim was one of the first in Egypt to test the free verse form, thereby demonstrating his creative talent and artistic ingenuity. In the prose sphere, he is considered the founder of the national novel, representing with his work not only this genre, but also a variety of other epic forms, including those that were not previously found in the Middle East: essays, short stories, dramas, the genre of the diary novel and the novel in letters. His stories combine philosophical reflections, symbolism, social satire, and psychologism. An important place in Tawfiq al-Hakim's work is occupied by philosophical stories and novels, which raise questions about the meaning of human life, the interaction between the individual and society, as well as the moral responsibility of a man of science. The writer combined artistic prose with deep reflections on the spiritual state of man in the modern world. In some works, the writer shows the danger of a situation when technical progress outpaces the moral development of man. Therefore, he emphasizes the need to combine knowledge with ethical values.

Key words: Arabic literature, story, theme, problem, dialogue, fiction, irony.

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1. Introduction

The multifaceted work of one of the most famous representatives of the new Egyptian school in literature, Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898–1987), has been attracting the attention of researchers for a long time, it is widely known in the Middle East, has become the focus among European literary studies and scientists of the former Soviet Union, where mainly focused on the artist's dramaturgical work, his translation and interpretation (Velychko, 2024). A brief critical review of the writer's work is given in the Ukrainian Soviet Encyclopedia (Kochubei, 1984: 155). Among the English-language publications of the last decades, the monograph by William M. Hutchins (2003) deserves our attention. The author makes a detailed excursus into the multifaceted literary world of Tawfiq al-Hakim and represents an extremely detailed literary analysis of his work.

The works of Tawfiq Al-Hakim – a novelist, dramatist, critic, are extremely popular in Egypt and other Arab countries. The most famous of them are the novel “The Return of the Spirit”, the plays “The People of the Cave”, “Shahrazad”, the stories “The Maze of Justice”, “Bird of the East” and “The Color of Life”.

“The Return of the Spirit” by T. al-Hakim occupies a special place in the context of Egyptian prose. M. Salye, a researcher, translator of the novel into Russian and the author of the preface defines this work as the most interesting example of new Egyptian literature, a turning point in the development of the Egyptian novel, evidence of the maturity of the genre (Velyhcko, 2024).

In the disclosure of the literary evolution and worldview of T. al-Hakim, his interpretation of the art essence and tasks, the novel “The Color of Life” (1943) is of great importance, in which the humanist writer's dream of complete harmony in society is expressed.

Drama occupies a significant place in Tawfiq al-Hakim's work, many of his plays are widely known outside of Egypt. The dramatist's focus is on both socio-political and abstract-philosophical questions.

During his student years, Tawfiq al-Hakim creates fashionable, but not too powerful in the artistic sense, musical plays, vaudevilles, and comedies. The most famous comedy “Modern Woman” (staged in 1924) raises the question of women's role in the life of Egyptian society. The play author having a subtle sense of humor, skilfully uses the vernacular.

The works of a mature dramatist written in the 1930s are of the highest interest. In the play “The People of the Cave” (1933), the author uses mythological material, namely the legend of the seven youths – the first Christians, who have been hiding from the persecution of the Roman emperor and slept in cave shelter for 300 years. They came back to life when the Roman emperors themselves became Christians. In his play, Tawfiq Al-Hakim mainly preserves the content of the legend, significantly changing only its ending.

An admirer of the drama of H. Ibsen and M. Maeterlinck, Tawfik al-Hakim was largely guided by the ideological and aesthetic directions of their works. He preaches the pointlessness of fighting with *fate*. The writer does not see an opportunity to restore ties with life if they were lost. However, its positive idea is hidden in the hopeless end of the play.

Tawfiq al-Hakim, shocked by the backwardness of Egypt after his studies in France and in a hurry to stir up his compatriots, to show them what awaits the nation that has stopped in its development.

A significant number of reviews, critical essays (*Al-Moselkhi*, 1946; *Starkey* 1987; *Kubaylat*, 2004), literary publications and even monographs (*Usmanov* 1968; *Yunusov* 1976; *al Shallal E.* 2022) are devoted to the analysis of the writer's novels and philosophical dramas, but studies of the writer's short prose are clearly lacking (*Long*, 1979). Undeservedly left out of the spotlight, small epic genres carry a significant semantic load, highlight the eternal questions of the meaning of human life, crime and punishment, genius and madness. Acquaintance with translations of these works into Ukrainian is of high interest. Therefore, **the purpose** of this article is to clarify the main ideological-aesthetic vectors, figurative and pictorial-expressive dominants of T. al-Hakim's short prose, to determine the specifics of the author's artistic understanding of the main ontological problems of humanity – life and death.

The relevance of the study lies in the need to develop an idea of the interaction of tradition and innovation, concrete-historical and ontological-existential in the writer's work, in-depth and comprehensive understanding of both his individual works of short prose and creative work in general.

The object of the research is the writer's stories included in the collection “Show me God” (1968).

In order to understand the place of short prose in Tawfiq al-Hakim's artistic output, we consider it necessary to outline some important aspects of his life and work.

2. Tawfiq al-Hakim is one of the most famous Arab prose writers and playwrights of the 20th century

The future writer and playwright was born in the city of Alexandria in the family of a high-ranking official, studied at the Higher Law School, where his interest in the theater was simultaneously formed. After graduating from the Sorbonne Law Faculty, Tawfiq al-Hakim began his independent professional life by working as an investigator in an Egyptian province. It allowed him to see the world around him with the keen, observant eye of a lawyer. The works of Tawfiq al-Hakim, a novelist, playwright, and critic, are extremely popular in Egypt and other Arab countries.

The influence of European values, which al-Hakim experienced during his stay in France, was reflected in the emergence of new artistic forms for Arabic literature, plot elements of the work (introduction, intrigue, culmination) (*Rybalkin*, 2016: 17). The circle of the writer's creative interests is unusually broad – poetry, prose, drama. He was an innovator in the poetic, epic, and drama spheres. In particular, al-Hakim was one of the first in Egypt to test the form of free verse, thus proving his creative talent and artistic ingenuity. In the prose field, he is considered the founder of the national novel, representing with his work not only this genre, but also a variety of other epic forms, among which there were those that had not been found before in the literature of the countries of the Middle East: essays, short stories, dramas, genre of diary-novel and novel in letters.

Al-Hakim is considered one of the founders of Egyptian and Arab drama: he created more than 80 plays, which are staged in many Arab countries, theaters in Europe and America, filmed in movies and on TV. His heritage in short prose is to some degree related to drama, since the first examples in this genre, created by the author primarily for reading, not for stage performance, became known in literary circles as the “intellectual theater” of Tawfiq al-Hakim, although he refused to call these works plays and published them in individual books (*Starkey*, 2006).

In order to determine the genre features of these works, let's pay attention to two factors: on the one hand, these are prose texts in which the features of the narrative genre prevail: small volume, monotony, laconic descriptions, emphasis on certain details, creation of the effect of authenticity, uninventedness of the story; on the other hand, it can be noted that in these works there are also signs of the novel genre (which, however, is sometimes interpreted as a variant of the same story), namely, plot dynamism, an element of situational surprise, especially in the context of the work's resolution.

In the center of attention of Tawfiq al-Hakim are both socio-political and abstract-philosophical questions. An admirer of the drama of H. Ibsen and M. Maeterlinck, Tawfiq al-Hakim was largely guided by the ideological and aesthetic directions of their works (*Toelle, Zakhari*, 2014). That is why the ontological problems of human existence come to the fore in his work – questions of life and death, fate and destiny, etc.

3. The interaction between the individual and society

In particular, one of the main motives of his works is the futility of man's struggle with fate. Tawfiq al-Hakim's story “Master Azrael” is devoted to the theme of inevitability and capriciousness of fate. In the title, the author uses a play on words, because Azrael in Islam and Judaism is called the angel of death, who helps the souls of dead people to move to a better

world. From the first lines of the work, the reader immerses himself in the problem of the eternal struggle between life and death: “Life is stronger than death. This is a fact that is clear to everyone who has carefully observed the events of at least one day of their existence. Death waits us at every step, and, more often than not, we win and remain unharmed. Because they – life and death – play hide-and-peek¹ (*al-Hakīm*, 1968:105).

The action of the story takes place in the 30s of the 20th century, when there were no effective drugs against infectious diseases, and such a disease as, for example, malaria could become fatal for a person. Therefore, Tawfiq al-Hakim further writes:

“Our souls, the souls of ordinary mortals, depend on everything, even on mosquitoes and flies, on the bus driver, they can even depend on the fingers of the barber who shaves us and does our hair. A person at such moments is incredibly far from any evil thoughts (*ibid.*).

Already in the next paragraphs of the story, the playwright confirms the folk wisdom that disaster comes unexpectedly: “In the summer, I went to the barber to shave. I was in a good mood. Peasants passed me with camels loaded with watermelons. I sat down in the barber's chair, closed my eyes and thought about everything wonderful in this life. In the barber shop, a fan was blowing on me, and the barber himself was standing nearby and sharpening a dangerous blade” (*ibid.*:106).

The mention of a household and seemingly secondary object like a razor blade will later have its own logical explanation in the plot of the work. The relaxed state of the main character is in sharp contrast with his subsequent conversation with the hairdresser:

“Then he covered my head with his hands and whispered: – I am sorry! It is immediately obvious that you are a respectable and decent person. I have a request for you. – Well, if you think that I look like a mad patient, then thank you very much..! – For God's sake, I am sorry! I did not want to offend you at all. It is just that you seemed to me to be a very influential person, and I thought that you might know some of the doctors there. My brother is being treated there, and I would like to take him from there” (*ibid.*).

Tawfiq al-Hakim, with the words of his characters, reflects on the fine line that lies between fantasy and reality, between adequacy and madness:

“So what, he was out of his mind, but now he has recovered? – But he was not a dangerous madman, he was unfairly dragged to crazed. And in fact, he just has a very vivid imagination, like many other people. – And what did he do to get in a madhouse? – Nothing special, I tell you” (*ibid.*:107).

The writer pays considerable attention to the problem of the influence of external factors on a person, the close relationship between physiological and psychological factors:

“My brother was a hairdresser, just like me. One day he was quietly working. It was summer and it was terribly hot. Like the rest of the people in such conditions, he really wanted a watermelon to satisfy his thirst. And at the moment when he was doing the client's hair, he had the thought that the client's head was nothing but a ripe, juicy watermelon and really wanted to taste it, to cut it off... – What to cut off? – Cut a piece of watermelon, in other words the client's head” (*ibid.*).

The dual nature of human being, the combination of objective and subjective, angelic and demonic principles in it is revealed in the following lines of the heroes “...And he said it so calmly that my blood ran cold. My head was in his hands, and the blade... it was shining, it was so sharp. I hid from the fear, then collected my thoughts and said quite restrainedly: – Probably,

¹ Here and further, quotations from the works of Tawfiq al-Hakim are presented in a free translation by the author of the article.

your brother is an exception. You are not like he is. – To be honest, it is a family thing for us. I myself sometimes have such associations, especially during the watermelon harvest. So I believe that my brother can be understood” (ibid.: 108).

So, as we can see, the physiological state directly conditions thinking, determines the direction of fantasies, stimulates an innate tendency, exposes thoughts:

“At that moment, his eyes lit up with a strange shine, similar to the blade of a dangerous razor. I realized that my end had come. I closed my eyes not for a pleasant slumber, but in anticipation of death” (ibid.).

In the context the idea that the mind should control thoughts and feelings is actualized, and prudence can be considered a gift, the same as the talent of an artist. Here, the writer indirectly agrees with the words of the Arab medieval poet al-Mutanabbi: “The fact that I have so much diligence, passion and desire to reach great heights is absolute luck, it is in itself a gift from God” (*Subkh, Sushko*, 2020:82).

The final of the story is quite optimistic and even comical. Tawfiq al-Hakim perfectly masters the art of “fake seriousness”. Verbal grotesque, humorous associations, comic comparisons represent the author's attitude towards the image object:

“I opened my eyes only when I felt that he was spraying me with cologne. – Done! I took off with the speed of a comet. I felt like I was born again. I quickly paid the hairdresser. He again asked me to help with his brother. However, I no longer understood something that he was telling me. And only when I was on the street, I breathed a sigh of relief and made a promise to myself never to go to the hairdressers again, especially when the watermelons are ripening” (al-Hakīm 1968, 109). It should also be noted that Tawfiq al-Hakim raises the topic of madness, individual differences in the collective were touched in another of his work – a play called “River of Madness”. The author resorts to a fairy tale, which tells about a fictional kingdom and the main acting characters: the King, the First Minister, the Queen, the Priest, the Doctor. The king had a dream that terrible things happened to the river that flows in the kingdom – the water in it got a purple hue, and snakes fall from the sky into this water, releasing their poison into the river. The King hears a voice that strongly advises him not to drink poisoned water, because a consequence can be madness. The King tells the Prime Minister about his nightmare and finds out that it was not a dream, but a complete reality. And the worst is that almost all the inhabitants of the kingdom have managed to drink poisonous water and now have all the signs of mental disorders. In desperation, the King asks to call first the Priest, and then the Chief Physician of the kingdom to a meeting, but it is already too late – both the Doctor and the Priest, after tasting the water from the river went crazy. There were only two people in the whole kingdom who have not been affected by the poisonous water: the King and the Minister, but the Queen strongly persuades her husband to drink the water, as he looks inadequate compared to the others.

Analyzing the following lines, we see the problem of a person's existence in society, the relationship between the individual and the collective is concentrated in the words of the Minister: “We know that we are well-advised, and everyone else has gone crazy, but we can do nothing” (*al-Hakīm*, 2019:7).

4. The problem of responsibility of science and the scientist

Events of the stories “For the Gang!” and “Amazing Invention” take place in the United States of America. Tawfiq al-Hakim did not accidentally choose this country as the setting for

some of his works, since many of his contemporaries associated America with heaven on Earth. It is in such idyllic conditions develop that dramatic events of short, but so meaningful stories. Despite the fact that in the work entitled "For the Gang!" the main character is a real historical figure of the 20th century, all plot vicissitudes are invented and any coincidence with real events is accidental. The story begins quite expressively: "Sensational news!!! The members of the Union of Atomic workers of the USA have disappeared! This is how journalists commented situation: the enemy country's intelligence has carried out a secret special operation to steal the best minds of America" (*al-Hakīm*, 1968:152)

Here the author refers to the Soviet Union, alluding to the period of the Cold War between the two countries, and further explains the situation: "However, what actually happened was something that no one could even think about. This is how it was. A man sits in the living room near the fireplace, reads newspapers. And suddenly his attention is drawn to a message: the head of the Union of Atomic Scientists of the United States of America announced that new research makes it possible to create a bomb ten times more powerful than the one that was dropped on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in just one year" (*al-Hakīm*, 1968, 153). Thus, Tawfiq al-Hakim raises the urgent problem of nuclear danger, which prevailed over the world in the post-war period and has not lost its acuteness to nowadays. Next, the author introduces the reader to the main character of his work: "This person who was reading the newspaper was none other than Al Capone. By that time, he had already retired from his business, the doctors warned him about a heart disease. He felt that it were his last days" (*ibid.*).

The author of the story turned to the name of the most famous gangster in the world, who was included in the list of state enemies by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and who became a synonym for cruelty, arbitrariness and criminal permissiveness, in order to create a contrast with the intellectual elite of the country and, at the same time, to reveal the extremely urgent question of responsibility for his actions: "And that was when he carried his plan out: he kidnapped all the members of the American Atomic Union, gathered them in his estate in Florida, invited them to the table, treated generously" (*ibid.*).

The plot of the story is modeled in such a way that the recipient is always in tension, because the motives of Al Capone remain completely unclear. It is difficult for the reader to imagine and predict the direction in which events will develop, it is intuitively expected on a violent culmination with elements of a criminal drama, but the denouement is completely unexpected: "And at the end of the buffet, he raised his glass: – For the gang! I apologize for the union! The excited head of the union looked at him. Suddenly they are just mocked?! – I invited you all to pay my respects. Who deserves it more than you? I apologize for the way in which I gathered you" (*ibid.*).

Analyzing the next fragment, we see a dangerous gangster shows himself as a well-educated, intelligent, self-critical person: "Of course, it was possible just to send an invitation, but it would work hardly, because you think we have nothing in common, no similarity in professions. At first glance, this is indeed so" (*ibid.*:154).

Then through the mouth of the main character the author represents the leading thought of the work, expressed in an ironic form: "I am not worthy to be in the company of such heroes who killed in one moment hundreds of thousands of men, women, children and elderly people. No one in the world can judge your deed as I can. I am considered enemy number one because I killed five hundred people (male only) in Chicago in 1929. And you killed 50 thousand at once" (*ibid.*).

So, Tawfiq al-Hakim reflects the question of what should be considered a greater crime: the murder of hundreds of people capable of resistance, or the murder of thousands

of defenseless civilians. Next, the main character with irony continues to think aloud about high scientific technologies, which, instead of their intended benefit, bring only destruction and death to mankind, being at the service of political ambitions: "Sorry, but our technologies were primitive: revolvers and machine guns. All that we have done, compared to your actions, is just child's play" (ibid.).

In other words, Tawfiq al-Hakim actualizes the problem of personal responsibility of a scientist: "I don't even know what title to honor you with. Our time passed, now it's yours. So, let me raise this glass for your gang, for your union! There was an aching silence. Then everyone got up. The buffet ended as if it were a funeral. They all went out" (ibid.: 156).

The question remains open: did the union members of nuclear workers learn the right conclusions from this dangerous adventure, or were they just happy with the happy ending: "The head of the union suggested to his colleagues to keep this case in a secret" (ibid.).

The story brilliantly depicts the psychological portrait of a criminal who rethought his life and tried in a very unusual way to say his last words, to stop the inevitable destruction of humanity: "Al Capone stayed awake all night. He understood that it was the last night in his life, which he ended as he saw fit. In the morning his heart stopped" (ibid.).

The last lines of the work are demonstrably neutral and leave considerable space for reflection: "The newspapers came out with two news stories on the front page: "Death of Al Capone" "Return of all Union Members of Nuclear Workers after the Completion of a Secret Mission" (ibid.).

5. The question of the meaning of human life and knowledge of the future

Tawfiq al-Hakim's story "The Amazing Invention" is devoted to the question of the meaning of human being, in which the theme of the "peaceful" atom is also gently emphasized: "No, this is not the most amazing invention in the world. Why? There is nothing more amazing than the appearance of the atom. Atom is capable to disintegrate and destroy huge cities..." (*al-Hakīm*, 1968: 100). In this sense, a reminiscence from the novel by Herbert Wells is indicative: "However, the invention that I am going to tell you about has a huge impact on humanity. The idea of this invention is not new at all. H. Wells wrote about this in his novel "The Time Machine". We are talking about a device that everyone can buy" (*Wells*, 2005). This is followed by a detailed description of the miracle machine's working mechanism "It has a large number of switches. When you turn the first switch, you will see on the screen what will happen to you in a year, turn the second switch – you will see what will happen in 5 years, the third – everything that will happen in 10 years. Unfortunately, the device is not capable of showing the future for more than ten years" (*al-Hakīm*, 1968: 100). The author intrigues the reader by creating a feeling of being on the threshold of something epochal: "Someone will ask: where is this miracle device? And why isn't it still on the market?" (*al-Hakīm* 1968: 101). Gradually the intrigue is revealed, Tawfiq al-Hakim explains the situation: "In fact, the American firm that acquired the rights to its production suddenly stopped this process, because the first engineer who tested this device committed suicide a few days later, the director of the firm, gripped by curiosity, he also wanted to experiment with this device, and in two weeks he committed suicide. A series of suicides took place among the company's employees. A similar fate awaited everyone who dared to turn the switch of the ill-fated device. The American police conducted an investigation in this case, but for a long time could not get any reliable information, all the victims took their secret with them to the grave" (*al-Hakīm* 1968 :101).

The reader begins to understand that he is dealing with science fiction, wrapped in mystical details, but is already a prisoner of the detective story: “However, one engineer who tried to commit suicide was saved and his secret was found out. The investigator asked what caused the victim to have suicidal tendencies” (*al-Hakīm* 1968: 102). Further, the action of the story unfolds in the form of a dialogue: “I could not stand this life! – answered the engineer in despair. – Did you have some kind of trouble, perhaps? – asked the investigator cautiously. – It seems to me everything is fine. – Did you have a premonition that something bad will happen very soon? – In the next ten years, nothing bad will happen to me. – Are you sure about this? – Yes, because I saw it with my own eyes. – What exactly? “I saw myself in five and even ten years” (*al-Hakīm* 1968: 102). Seemingly the hero of the story managed to realize the dream of millions of people, because the opportunity to look into the future beckoned at all times, stimulated the appearance of a large number of divination rituals, provoked various inventions and fantasies, but Tawfiq al-Hakim evaluates such a perspective in a completely different way: “However, I saw nothing worth to note, except that I had wrinkles, gray hair, a droopy face, and a large belly. Also, I saw a promotion and a salary increase. And I had one more daughter, who was constantly yelling, and because of this I have completely lost my peace. How boring and worthless my life has become!” (*al-Hakīm* 1968: 102). Tawfiq al-Hakim emphasizes the impracticality of such knowledge: “So I thought to myself, why should I go to such a future? I was always sure that tomorrow would be better than today. So it's a sign. I see anything interesting worth paying attention to. Since I already saw the future today, why is it necessary? I lived in anticipation of the future, but here I saw it with my own eyes. Why should I wait for it then? I lost the intrigue” (*al-Hakīm* 1968: 103). So, it turned out that the Device, designed to allow a person to look into the future, does not actually bring any benefit, but, on the contrary, takes away dreams and hopes and, ultimately, the desire to live. In this way, life without dreams and hopes loses its meaning. Then, in the form of a conversation between the characters, the author only reinforces his arguments: “I cannot agree with you,” replied the inspector. – It is not hopelessness, not despair. You can't understand my feelings, and I can't describe them... Have you ever walked into a movie theater and realized you were halfway through the movie? – Yes of course. – What would you do to see the part you missed? – I would watch a second time what I missed. – And when would we get to the moment that we have already seen? – I would go away. – Why? – Well, I already know what will happen next. – I also know what will happen next. The same thing happens to me. I have already seen everything on the screen. Why should I wait? (*ibid.*:104). The author gives readers the opportunity to imagine that the primordial desire of man to know his future in a miraculous way becomes realized, but the future will never be exactly as we imagine it, dreams are leveled by the realities of everyday life.

6. Conclusions

Thus, acting as an innovator in poetic, prose and dramatic genres, Tawfiq al-Hakim showed his multifaceted creativity to pay attention to concrete-historical, socio-political, and philosophical, moral and ethical problems. The originality of the writer's creative talent, the polyphony of his ideological and thematic palette are especially vividly represented in the plane of short prose. Combining the depth of the content and the skillful structuring of the plot, in which the elements of the detective genre play a significant role, Tawfiq al-Hakim reveals the eternal problems of human existence, which revolve around the issues of life and death, good and evil and are connected with the understanding of the ambivalence of human nature, the

inevitability of fate, the relativity of unambiguous judgments, with the search for the border between the real and the unreal, the objective and the subjective. Both ontological (“Master Azrael”) and socio-political (“For the gang!”, “Amazing Invention”) problematics of the artist's works are marked by the dominance of moral and ethical concepts, the disclosure of which occurs by involving elements of realism, fantasy, symbolism, grotesque and of irony, which, in total, forms the original creative manner of Tawfiq al-Hakim.

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