

Ion Luca Caragiale - *The National Specificity of Literary Forms and Genres*

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Abstract: *Ion Luca Caragiale is an essential author of Romanian realism, and his work fits perfectly into the context of realist literature, a particularly strong and enduring literary movement in national literature. If Ioan Slavici is a representative exponent of realism, especially in his novellas and in the novel Mara, and Liviu Rebreanu continues this tradition, Caragiale reinterprets this movement in an original manner in his prose and dramaturgy. Literary critics and historians have emphasized that Caragiale's work is a valuable document, which reflects the national specificity and revives the way in which Romanian structures and institutions functioned during certain historical periods.*

Keywords: *Theatre; I. L. Caragiale; Literature; Comedy; Characters;*

Introduction

At the beginning of modern Romanian literature, romantic and classical elements merged with realist tendencies, and Caragiale became the emblematic author of this process, masterfully illustrating the social complexity of his time and creating characteristic typologies that highlight universal traits of society. Through his comedies of manners, he enriched Romanian theatre and, at the same time, reinterpreted literary genres, advocating for equality between forms and genres, a concept he also expressed in numerous articles, such as *Câteva păreri* (Some Opinions, 1896), *Ceva despre teatru* (Something About Theatre, 1896), and *Literatură și politică* (Literature and Politics, 1897). "Comparing the theatrical performance to the architect's construction, Caragiale points out that, unlike the latter, theatrical constructions are created in motion: they begin, unfold, and fade within a few moments under our eyes and, when repeated, they are always different because their materials are alive"². In his works, Caragiale begins with the simple observation of everyday life, and his comedies, such as *Conul Leonida față cu Reacțiunea* (Leonida Facing the Reaction, 1880) and *O scrisoare pierdută* (A Lost Letter, 1885), are excellent examples of exploring the relationship between theory and practice. In *Conul Leonida față cu Reacțiunea* (Leonida Facing the Reaction), Caragiale humorously addresses the theme of the manipulation of individuals and social influences, while *O scrisoare pierdută* (A Lost Letter) highlights not only the frivolous subject of adultery and sentimental blackmail but also a profound political theme related to the struggle for power. In *D-ale carnavalului* (Of the Carnival), Caragiale deepens his psychological analysis, overlapping social and political themes with a profound reflection on inner misery and the need to maintain a precarious existential balance.

Caragiale was and remains, without a doubt, an innovator in Romanian literature, provoking a significant transformation of the traditional concept of the literary text. He imposed a

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² George Oprescu. 1965. *History of theater in Romania [Istoria teatrului în România]*. București: Academiei RSR, p. 12.

collaboration between the central forms of literature and the peripheral ones, combining narrative and dramatic sequences in a functional and documentary manner. This approach allowed him to build a reference work, capable of reflecting the social and political realities of his time. "By an unexpected gift of fate, while Romanian poetry gained its highest expression through Eminescu, narrative prose and theatre reached the same level in I. L. Caragiale, a writer connected to his lyrical peer by the same perfection of artistic conscience and the same cult of the Romanian word, which he endowed with new and great expressive powers"³.

Literary critics and historians have emphasized that Caragiale's work is a valuable document, which reflects the national specificity and revives the way in which Romanian structures and institutions functioned during certain historical periods. Two major directions of his work can be identified: the attitude towards the public and the critical attitude, both being expressed in his articles and parodic texts. In critical articles, such as *Cercetare critică asupra teatrului românesc (Critical Research on Romanian Theatre, 1878)*, Caragiale actively engages in the analysis of literature and in the discrediting of certain forms and genres that were in crisis at the end of the nineteenth century. At the same time, in his parodic texts and in the farce *O soacră (A Mother-in-law, 1883)*, Caragiale opposes forms of culture that were in decline, such as sensationalist journalism and melodramatic literature, thus denouncing their superficiality and commercial tendencies.

1. Comedy and the Evolution of Caragiale's Theatre

The comedy *O noapte furtunoasă (A Stormy Night)*, first performed on January 18, 1879, and published in *Convorbiri literare* in October of the same year, starts from an apparently banal pretext, a street farce. Nevertheless, it reflects three essential directions in the development of Caragiale's theatre: the social, psychological, and verbal levels. Caragiale reestablishes the connection between realistic details and universal, typical, and classicist meanings, bringing to the stage authentic and local types and styles, which inaugurate a new era of Romanian theatre. Thus, the comedy *O noapte furtunoasă (A Stormy Night)* opens the path of originality and enduring value in Romanian dramaturgy. "The human type of the early bourgeois—conformist and progressive—who believed in top-down democracy and, consequently, in false egalitarianism, social ascension, the positive ideal, and political opportunism; the small and novice bourgeois who revered family and respectability, while wallowing in a subculture (Ibrăileanu calls it 'pseudo-culture') of cheap and sweetened romanticism, typical of the space between social classes and of the transitional era, is nevertheless a remarkable being: sociable and receptive to the spirit of community"⁴.

In 1879, Caragiale wrote *Conul Leonida față cu Reacțiunea (Leonida Facing the Reaction)*, a one-act farce, which was published in *Convorbiri Literare* on February 1, 1880. Considered a masterpiece of irony and dramaturgical technique, it adds a complex initial conflict—the fear of revolution among those who had been involved in one—and extends the theme through more elaborate oppositions, such as appearance versus reality and theory versus practice. At the same time, Caragiale emphasizes the manipulation of public opinion through political and journalistic rhetoric. "A typical phenomenon of Caragiale's universe should be noted: in the presence of a 'friend,' the character becomes comic; in their absence, the dramatic tension tends to shift toward

³ Tudor Vianu. 1977. *About the theater. [Despre teatru]*. București: Editura Eminescu, p. 112.

⁴ I.L.Caragiale.2024. *Theatre. [Teatru]*. București: Editura Exigent, p.16

the tragic... Conu Leonida remains a comic character, and the reason, I believe, lies — aside from the situational comedy — in the presence of Efimița, to whom the 'old combatant' shares all his thoughts, including those about a possible or impossible revolution"⁵.

O scrisoare pierdută (A Lost Letter), first performed on November 13, 1884, at the National Theatre and published in *Convorbiri Literare* in 1885, is one of Caragiale's most famous comedies. Apparently a simple political comedy, it deepens the subject through a play of blackmail and farce, ending with a ridiculous reconciliation, while *D-ale carnavalului (Of the Carnival)*, published on May 1, 1885, and performed on April 8, is a carnival farce that explores spiritual promiscuity and deceit, ending in an almost tragicomic conclusion."Among all our literary figures, none tempts biographical exploration more than Caragiale. Through the originality of his temperament, as well as the varied aspects of his existence, the man suggests as much, if not more, than his work itself. Like Oscar Wilde, the Romanian writer could have said that he placed his genius into his life and only his talent into his work. The zigzags of his life and the waste of verbal wit, the epicurean selfishness combined with the defeats suffered, the professional conscience and the displayed cynicism are all elements that make possible the interpretations of a "literary" biography, not to say a "romanticized" one"⁶.

Caragiale's comedies stand in a similar relationship to Mihai Eminescu's poetry in relation to the poetry of the 1848 generation, being the most original, enduring, and profoundly moral works in Romanian dramatic literature. Caragiale reaffirms the idea of a theatre that combines the classical ideal of simplicity with Shakespearean realism, thus becoming an unparalleled playwright, whose work remains a point of reference in world literature.

1.1 The exploration of the tragic dimension in Caragiale's dramaturgy

Caragiale also explores the tragic side of human existence in the novellas *O făclie de Paști (An Easter Torch, 1889)* and *Păcat (Sin, 1892)*, as well as in the drama *Năpasta (The Blight, 1890)*. In these works, his main concern is the way in which a "normal" man loses his spiritual or moral balance under the pressure of external factors. Furthermore, Caragiale remains a passionate observer of simple forms and a supporter of the use of paraliterary genres in authentic literature."Few are the writers of Romanian literature, besides Caragiale, who have compared in the act of creation with a more lucid and active attitude, and whose execution of the work has been accompanied by so many efforts. Caragiale is a craftsman, the foremost among Romanian literature together with Eminescu, and the one who, even under the appearance of ease, allows us to glimpse the severe law of his art"⁷.

Through his works, especially *Schițe și Momente (Sketches and Moments)*, Caragiale achieves a true "phenomenology" of Romanian society, capturing its aspects in their bourgeois-urban form. He also addresses areas more easily deciphered, such as family, school, bureaucracy, the press, and justice. Within a literary program with multiple aesthetic components, Caragiale reaffirms the most expressive and daring artistic endeavor in Romanian literature, being a creator who excelled both in understanding literary mechanisms and in uncovering the deep springs of the national specificity.

⁵ I.L.Caragiale.2019. *Theatre. [Teatru]*. București: Editura Cartex 2000, p. 9

⁶ Serban Cioculescu. 1977. *The life of I. L. Caragiale [Viața lui I. L. Caragiale]*. București: Editura Eminescu, p. 9.

⁷ Tudor Vianu. 1977. *About the theater. [Despre teatru]*. București: Editura Eminescu, pp. 130-131.

Ion Luca Caragiale portrays with remarkable precision the social status, profession, and cultural level of his characters through language. Language becomes an element for locating each character, clearly outlining their social status and mentality. For example, Zaharia Trahanache, with his position as a great landowner and leader of several committees, is depicted through a calm discourse that reflects the confidence given by his social status. In contrast, Jupân Dumitrache, a timber merchant from the suburbs, expresses his excessive pride towards those he considers inferior, using disdainful expressions such as “mațe fripte” (“fried guts”) and “coate goale” (“bare elbows”). Thus, the characters’ speech reveals their lack of education and their limitations, becoming a means of deep characterization. “...his comedies bring to the stage several types from our present social life and develop them with their characteristic signs, their habits, their expressions, with all the apparatus of their appearance in situations carefully chosen by the author”⁸.

Caragiale diversifies the means of theatrical expression, bringing to the forefront diverse typologies, as well as comic moments and specific conflicts. In this way, he captures the social reality of a historical period with a carnivalesque character, through a vision that reflects the end of a century. The writer creates a vast gallery of social types, from the small merchants of the suburbs to the politicians of the county capital, all bound by the same principle of social climbing. Criticizing demagogy, lack of education, immorality, and stupidity, Caragiale builds characters that symbolize the vices and contradictions of a society in transition. Thus, the Romanian playwright is considered a master of human types and the portrayal of social flaws. Ion Luca Caragiale succeeds in capturing the essence of the complexity of the human being, depicting both the social influences on the individual and the depth of his inner side. In this sense, his work is endowed with a special relevance, and its value remains enduring. His characters are animated not only by the events that occur on stage but also by subtle allusions to contexts and figures that exist beyond it. Caragiale creates a living literary universe, in which the daily life of the characters becomes a true spectacle of humanity, with all its contradictions and illusions.

Ion Luca Caragiale holds a central place in world theatre. If we were to draw a map of the countries where Romanian plays have been performed, Caragiale would appear in most of them. His work has been treated with respect, but also with a certain freedom specific to modern creators. His plays have been reinterpreted over the decades in various ways, becoming a source of inspiration and a point of support for new trends in contemporary theatre. A suggestive example of his international impact is a performance of *O scrisoare pierdută* (*A Lost Letter*), staged by Juan Enrique Acuna in San Jose, Costa Rica, in 1978. The play was produced using puppets instead of actors, in a version that was well received by the public but also drew criticism from officials, being perceived as an allegory of the political elections of that time.

1.1.1 The International Recognition of Caragiale’s Work

Caragiale’s work has been translated and performed on all continents, and in Italy, it became extremely well known from the early decades of the twentieth century. The first translations date back to 1914, and in 1929, *O scrisoare pierdută* (*A Lost Letter*) was published in an edition with a preface signed by Giulio Bertoni. After the Second World War, the interest in

⁸ Ioan Roman. 1975, *Studies on the work of I. L. Caragiale [Studii despre opera lui I. L. Caragiale]*. București: Editura Albatros, p. 3.

Caragiale's work increased, especially due to the satirization of capitalist society and the revolutionary spirit it conveyed, in line with the tendencies of postwar Italian theatre.

Anna Colombo, in her work *Vita e opera di I.L. Caragiale (1934)*, emphasizes the universality of his work and associates it with the great Italian Renaissance playwrights, as well as with authors of contemporary theatre, such as Molière and Scarron. In the researcher's opinion, Caragiale can be considered a precursor of the "theatre of the absurd," given the absurd mechanisms he stages, such as "absurd phrases" or "absurd situations" in his plays. Thus, in every country where it has been translated and performed, Caragiale's work has been perceived differently, but it has had the same strong impact on audiences. His plays have been recognized as a form of universal art, and the Romanian author is still considered one of the greatest playwrights in the world. Ileana Berlogea, quoting Anna Colombo (*Vita e opera di I. L. Caragiale*), believes that in this work "there are statements that announce Caragiale as a precursor of contemporary theatre, even of the theatre of the absurd"⁹.

Ion Luca Caragiale remains a titan of Romanian literature, and his work continues to resonate with strength and relevance even more than a century after its creation. Through his comedies, but also through his novellas and dramas, Caragiale succeeds in capturing the essence of an era, outlining memorable portraits of Romanian society in the nineteenth century, while also raising fundamental questions about human nature, vices, illusions, and the inherent contradictions of any community. Essentially, his work is a reflection of a world in transformation, one that combines social reality with the psychological complexity of individuals and the absurdity of an existence governed by conventions and illusions. Caragiale was a penetrating observer of society and a critic of its fundamental flaws: demagoguery, corruption, hypocrisy, and superficiality. However, instead of simply condemning them, he highlights them through a humorous, though often bitter, approach, succeeding in combining political satire with a profound analysis of human behavior. His theatre is not merely a form of entertainment, but a meditation on human destiny, on its limits and contradictions.

2. Conclusion

Beyond his contribution to Romanian literature, the author left a significant mark on world theatre. His plays have been translated and staged on stages across the globe, and his characters—so precisely and universally crafted—have become archetypes of humanity. With a keen eye for human psychology and a vision that is both realistic and symbolic in its portrayal of society, Caragiale managed to transcend the limitations of his time and secure a place in the pantheon of world-class playwrights. At the same time, he demonstrated that, in the face of life's absurdities and contradictions, humor and irony can become powerful tools for introspection and social change.

Thus, Ion Luca Caragiale is an author whose relevance will never fade. His work remains and will continue to be a vital reference point for the study of literature, theatre, and Romanian society. Like the great classics of the world, Caragiale understood the complexity of human nature and succeeded in capturing it in literary creations that will continue to fascinate and provoke reflection long after the curtain falls. "Caragiale truly acted as a pedagogue and guide for the art of acting on stage, in the performances he directed and presented, and it is evident that these texts

⁹ Ileana Berlogea. 1983. *Romanian theater. Universal theater. Confluences [Teatrul românesc. Teatrul universal. Confluențe]*. Iași: Editura Junimea, p. 23.

were written by a practitioner—meant to be supported not so much in reading, but within a proper theatrical setting"¹⁰.

3. References

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¹⁰ Alina Rece. 2014. "The History of Romanian Theatre and Performing Arts: From the Origins to the Establishment of the First Theatres" [Istoria teatrului românesc și a artei spectacolului. De la origini până la înființarea primelor teatre. Craiova: Editura Universitaria, p. 140.