



Literary Devices in Gott hold Ephraim Lessing's Works

Mamatova Anora Iminovna

Teacher, Department of German and French Languages, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Fergana State University, Fergana, Uzbekistan

E-mail: anoramamatova1967@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article shows the main theoretical works of Lessing are written in an acutely polemical form, with tremendous energy and temperament. Lessing's struggle against such enemies as the head of German classicism Gottsched stirred up the ideological life of Germany and helped awaken the progressive democratic minds. In the eyes of Lessing, there is one main criterion for evaluating not only an individual person but also each nation and their service to the progressive ideals of humanity, the ideals of humanism and progress.

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Introduction

[Gotthold Ephraim Lessing](#) as a school-boy read much Greek and Latin that formed no part of the school course; read also the German poets of his time, wrote a "History of Ancient Mathematics," and began a poem of his own on the "Plurality of Worlds."

Lessing's whole life was spent in the relentless struggle. "He was a living critic of his time, and his whole life was a controversy," G. Heine said about Lessing. The main theoretical works of Lessing (Laocoon, Hamburg Drama, etc.) are written in an acutely polemical form, with tremendous energy and temperament [1,2,3]. Lessing's struggle against such enemies as the head of German classicism Gottsched, the translator Horace Pastor Lange, who was considered one of the pillars of scholarly burgher poetry, the antiquary Klotz, the reactionary theologian Götse, stirred up the ideological life of Germany and helped awaken the progressive democratic minds. A fervent desire for truly living, creative knowledge, intended to serve not only science itself but also the development of life, permeates Lessing's theoretical works [2,3,4,5].

In 1753 he gave himself eight weeks of withdrawal from other work to write, in a garden house at Potsdam, his tragedy of "Miss Sarah Sampson". It was produced with great success at Frankfort on the Oder, and Lessing's ruling passion for dramatic literature became stronger for this first experience of what he might be able to achieve. In literature, Frederick the Great cared only for what was French. A National drama, therefore, could not live in Berlin. In the autumn of 1755, Lessing suddenly moved to Leipsic, where an actor whom he had befriended was establishing a theatre. Here he was again abandoning himself to the cause of a National drama when a rich young gentleman of Leipsic invited his companionship upon a tour in Europe. Terms were settled, and they set out together. They saw much of Holland and were passing into England when King Frederick's attack on Saxony recalled the young Leipziger and caused a breach of what had been a contract for three years of travelling companionship. In May 1758, Lessing, aged twenty-nine,

returned to his old work in Berlin [4,5,6]. Again he translated, edited, and criticised. He wrote a tragedy, "Philotas," and began a "Faust." He especially employed his critical power in "Letters upon the Latest Literature," known as his *Literatur briefe*. Dissertations upon fable led also to Lessing's "Fables," produced in this period of his life.

Methods

A characteristic of Lessing's writings at this period is his *Rettungen* ("Vindications"), which is outstanding for its incisive style and clarity of argument. In their four essays, he aimed to defend independent thinkers such as the Reformation-period writers Johannes Cochlaeus and Gerolamo Cardano, who had been unjustly slandered and persecuted. His scintillating and biting polemic *Ein Vade Mecum für den Herrn Samuel Gotthold Lange* (1754) was directed against the carelessly corrupt translations of the poetry of Horace by the arrogant scholar S.G. Lange, whose literary reputation was demolished by Lessing's attack. From this point on, Lessing was justly feared as a literary adversary who used his command of style as a finely honed weapon. The philosopher Moses Mendelssohn and the writer and publisher C.F. Nicolai stand out among Lessing's Berlin friends. With these men, Lessing conducted a truly epoch-making correspondence on the aesthetic of tragic drama. Tragedy, Lessing maintained, should not preach morality but rather should arouse admiration and pity in the audience as evidence of emotional involvement [7,8,9].

Defending realism in literature and art, Lessing in *Laocoon* criticizes not only the general principles of classicism aesthetics but also specific features of the style and language of aristocratic art of the nobility. Thus, he advocates an accurate and avaricious speech against the artificial, "decorated" style of salon-aristocratic poetry, saturated with graceful allegories and conventional mythological attributes. Not the external picturesqueness of the image, but the most complete revelation of the action, the external and internal movement of an object, while depicting each moment of this movement in a few, scanty strokes - these are the features of a truly epic style, which Lessing illustrates with the example of Homer. Lessing struggles in *Laocoon* not only with the poetry of the nobility. Rejecting the view of poetry as a "talking painting", claiming that action is its soul, Lessing opposes the contemplative descriptive-didactic poetry that was cultivated by the conservative German burgher poets of the 18th century. Criticizing descriptive poetry, Lessing, using a number of examples, reveals the fundamental opposition between the description and the depiction of action in poetry from the point of view of the impression they produce. When Ariosto describes the beauty of Alcina, the reader remains indifferent: individual features do not add up in his imagination to a living image. On the contrary, when Homer, instead of describing Elena's beauty, depicts her effect on the Trojan elders, the reader gets a vivid idea of the power of beauty. Instead of describing the sceptre of Agamemnon or the shield of Achilles, Homer tells the story of their creation, making them, as it were, gradually appear before the eyes of the reader. When describing the poet and the reader do not leave the position of the contemplator. Their attitude to the depicted reality remains external: gradually, line by line, they seem to inspect the depicted object from all sides, remaining aloof from it. On the contrary, when depicting an action, the poet, and with him the reader, leave the position of the contemplator. They become accomplices of the depicted action, are actively drawn into it and experience the entire course of its gradual development. Therefore, as Lessing argues, not description but action is the true soul of poetry [10,11,12,13]. In contrast to the description, action in poetry expresses the poet's interest in the development of reality, in the actions and struggles of people. Where there is no action, there is no living, active attitude to life, and consequently, there is no poetry.

Lessing then accepted the offer of some Hamburg merchants to act as advisers and critics in their privately funded venture of a national theatre. Within a year, however, the project collapsed, and Lessing recognized with some bitterness that the time for a German national theatre was not yet ripe. Even so, his reviews of more than 50 performances were published, in the form of 104 brief essays on basic principles of the drama, under the title of *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1767–1769). Here, too, Lessing argued against tragedy modelled on that of Corneille and Voltaire, although he praised the realism of the contemporary French writer Denis Diderot's descriptions of middle-class life. Lessing interpreted Aristotle's concept of tragic catharsis (purging) as meaning the emotional release that follows tension generated in spectators who witness tragic events; he concludes that the sensations evoked by pity and fear should afterwards exert a

moral influence on the audience by being transformed into virtuous action. In 1768–1769 he published *Briefe antiquarischen Inhalts* (“Letters of Antiquarian Content”), an attack on the pretentious learning and elitist attitudes of the Halle professor C.A. Klotz. Another result of this dispute was the lucid and perceptive essay *Wie die Alten den Tod gebildet* (“How the Ancients Depicted Death”) [14-19].

Results

Being extremely poor, in 1770, Lessing had no choice but to accept the badly paid post of librarian at Wolfenbüttel, which he had earlier visited in 1766. His years there were unhappy and tempestuous but rich in achievement. His tragedy *Emilia Galotti* was performed in 1772. Written in intense and incisive prose, this brilliantly constructed play deals with a conflict of conscience at the court of an Italian prince. Lessing became involved in perhaps the most bitter controversy of his career when he also published extracts containing extremely radical ideas from the papers of the recently deceased biblical critic and scholar H.S. Reimarus under the title *Fragmente eines Ungenannten*. Theologians viewed these publications as a serious challenge to religious orthodoxy, even though Lessing himself had taken up a mediating position toward the radical theses of Reimarus, who had rejected the basic tenets of the Christian faith. Lessing went into battle against the orthodox clergy, involving himself in violent controversies with their leader, the chief pastor of Hamburg, J.M. Goeze. Against this rigid dogmatist, who was a man of almost pharisaical narrow-mindedness, Lessing launched some of his most cutting polemics, notably “Anti-Goeze”, in which he expounded his belief that the search for truth is more valuable than the certainty gained by clinging to doctrinaire orthodoxy [20-24].

This controversy culminated in *Nathan der Weise* (1779), Lessing’s “dramatic poem” in iambic pentameter. This is a didactic play of a theological and philosophical nature, combining ethical profundity with many comic touches, and is a work of high poetic quality and dramatic tension. *Nathan der Weise* symbolizes the equality of three great religions in regard to their ethical basis, for the play celebrates man’s true religion love, acting without prejudice and devoted to the service of mankind. Among the representatives of the three religions Islāmic (Saladin), Christian (the Templar), and Jewish (Nathan) only the Jew, in whose character Lessing paid tribute to his old friend Moses Mendelssohn, lives up to the ideal of full humanity; he alone is capable of complete self-abnegation and has the courage to speak the truth even to the mighty. The fact that the main characters discover in the end that they are blood relatives serves to underscore their common membership in the larger family of humankind.

Discussion

Let’s see some examples for metonymy. Metonymy is an effective literary device. Here are some examples of metonymy and their interpretations in well-known literary works:

Example 1: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Gotthold Ephraim Lessing)

And as imagination bodies forth

The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen

Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing

A local habitation and a name.

In this example, Lessing uses metonymy with the phrase “poet’s pen.” The poet, of course, is actually producing the imaginative creation. The poet forms “things unknown” into words with “a name.” However, metonymy in this passage creates an image for the reader that the source of poetry is the pen rather than the poet. Therefore, the literary device gives the impression that the tool has mastery of the artist rather than the artist mastering the tool.

Example 2: *All’s Well that Ends Well* (Gotthold Ephraim Lessing)

I know a man that had this trick of melancholy sold a goodly manor for a song.

In this line, Lessing uses “song” as a figure of speech indicating an inexpensive or cheap price assigned to something of value. Here, the word song is associated with a street performer being paid small sums for singing. The idea that a man sold his “goodly manor” for a “song” reflects various interpretations of the line. Either the man either didn’t properly or adequately value his manor, no longer wanted it, or was unaware of it’s full value.

The metonymy “song” is also a clever manner of expression in this line when compared to the phrase “trick of melancholy.” In general, “song” has positive and happy connotations, which would be the opposite of melancholy.

Example 3: Bartleby the Scrivener (Herman Melville)

As I afterwards learned, the poor scrivener, when told that he must be conducted to the Tombs, offered not the slightest obstacle, but in his pale, unmoving way, silently acquiesced.

In this quote from his short story, Melville utilizes the “Tombs” as metonymy. The “Tombs,” in this case, is another way to express a detention center in New York where people awaited their court trial and subsequent conviction or acquittal for crimes. Though Bartleby’s character has not been convicted of a crime, he is “conducted” to the Tombs as if he is facing his death sentence.

Described as pale, unmoving, and silent, Bartleby resembles a living corpse. Melville’s use of metonymy with the Tombs is clever in underscoring two plot elements. The first is that Bartleby is to be interned in prison. The second is foreshadowing that he is to be interred in a “tomb” simultaneously. Therefore, Bartleby’s character is literally and figuratively entombed through the use of this literary device.

With his play *Miss Sara Sampson*, Lessing also introduced to the German stage a new genre: the *bürgerliches Trauerspiel* (“bourgeois tragedy”). It demonstrated that tragedy need not be limited to the highborn, as Gottsched had maintained in his interpretation of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Lessing reinterpreted Aristotle in his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* asserting that the cathartic emotions of pity and fear are felt by the audience rather than by figures in the drama. With this stress on pity and on compassion, Lessing interpreted Aristotle in terms of Christian middle-class virtues and established Lessing as the model for German dramatists to follow. According to Lessing, Lessing’s tragedies arouse fear, pity, and compassion more successfully than the dramas of French Classicism. In *Emilia Galotti*, his major “bourgeois tragedy,” Lessing adapted the Roman legend of Virginia to the setting of 18th-century absolutism: a father is forced to kill his own daughter in order to protect her from seduction by an absolutist prince. This obvious indictment of a political system escaped contemporary audiences but inspired the later dramatists of the *Sturm und Drang* (“Storm and Stress”) movement, which exalted nature and human feeling and individualism [23-27].

In *Minna von Barnhelm*, Lessing’s most successful comedy, he deals with love and honour in 18th-century Prussia. The play shows the protagonists’ emancipation from the Prussian code of honour and from societal conventions of marriage. Lessing’s lighthearted yet profound questioning of severe codes made his play the first work in German literature with a significant contemporary content.

Chernyshevsky called Lessing “the father of new German literature.” “He gave German literature the strength to be the focus of people’s life and showed it a direct path, he accelerated the development of his people,” wrote Chernyshevsky about Lessing’s historical merits, who treated the great German writer and educator with great love and dedicated a special monograph to him. An outstanding writer, critic, theorist of realism in literature and art, an undaunted fighter against the political and ecclesiastical reaction of his time, Lessing embodied the best features of that humanistic German culture, on the legacy of which the democratic forces of the German people are based, which today are fighting for a united, an independent, peace-loving and democratic Germany against American reaction, which seeks to turn West Germany into a hotbed of a new aggressive war. Lessing’s literary activity dates back to the second half of the 18th century. Germany at this time was experiencing a tragedy of deep political and national humiliation. From the devastating Thirty Years’ War, Germany in the middle of the 17th century came out fragmented into more than 300 small states in which power belonged to princes and nobility. The German principalities fought among themselves and waged ruinous wars against each other, the burden of which fell on the masses of the people. These wars contributed to the rise of the reactionary-militarist Prussia. Deep economic backwardness and political fragmentation made the foreign “great powers”, above all England and France, the actual masters of Germany. The German nobility cruelly oppressed the peasantry, which was still in serfdom, and despised it, preferring to their native language - the language of the “exemplary” aristocratic society of the 17th-18th centuries. - French. But the German burghers, especially its wealthy elite, were imbued with a servile, loyal spirit and turned out to be incapable of leading the struggle for the unity of Germany and the abolition of serfdom. While England and France in the XVI-XVII centuries created their own national literature, the literature of the German nobility and burghers was cut off from the people, from

national traditions and bore the stamp of imitation. Lessing's literary activity was a vivid expression of these aspirations. As a writer and critic, Lessing raised the banner of the struggle against German absolutism for the ideals of humanism, reason and freedom. Lessing called for the creation of German national literature, in which he saw a powerful means of awakening the mental forces of the people, one of the conditions for its national revival. Boldly castigating the imitative aristocratic class art, Lessing fought for the original development of German culture in a popular, democratic spirit. He spoke out against the separation of literature from life, against the idealization of German backwardness, against reactionary nationalism. Lessing fought for national literary traditions, for high ideology, for courageous and bold realism, for content reflecting the life and interests of broad strata of the German people. Lessing's dramas, and in the next period - the works of Goethe and Schiller (who went further along the path paved by him) were the realization of the ideals put forward by Lessing. On the legacy of Lessing, Goethe and Schiller, President of the German Democratic Republic Wilhelm Pieck said that their works are for the German people "a sacred obligation to act and fight in the spirit of their images and ideas for freedom and humanity, for peace and progress and to give their good for them and their blood ... They strove not only to enlightenment or aesthetic impact, but, above all, to purify and educate their people." This is the vital significance of Lessing for the democratic forces of modern Germany, for the peoples of the world fighting for peace and democracy. Lessing is instead interested in philosophy, philology, and theater. To the horror of his pious parents, he spends his free hours in the company of Leipzig actors who belonged to the troupe of the famous German actress of the 18th century, a follower of classicism, Caroline Neuber in 1748, Neuber's troupe successfully staged Lessing's youthful comedy *The Young Scientist*, which ridiculed the type of pedantic scientist traditional for Germany at that time. During his studies in Leipzig (1746-1748) Lessing became a freethinker deist. At this time, he begins to engage in journalism. In the feudal Germany of Lessing's time, a writer from among the burghers could count on a somewhat secure position only by renouncing independence and entering the service of one of the patronizing German or foreign princes. Even the most daring minds in 18th century Germany had to come to terms with this humiliating state of affairs [19-25]. Young Lessing rebelled against the established order. To the career of a professor at one of the German universities, completely dependent on the tyranny of the princes, or to the position of a court poet, he preferred the half-starved but independent existence of a professional writer. Having moved to Berlin in 1748, Lessing devoted himself entirely to intense literary and magazine work. In Berlin Lessing writes poems, epigrams, fables, comedies. In his critical articles (about Gottschede, Lange, and others), he castigated the servility of German writers before power and title, the "guild" scholarship, ignorance and pedantry divorced from life.

Several tragedies were written about the Virginia story before Lessing. But Lessing approached Livy's story differently from his predecessors. He wanted to show that if in his time crimes reminiscent of the atrocities of the Roman patricians continue to be committed at the courts of German princes, then, on the other hand, heroism and moral valor are often hidden in the bourgeois-democratic layers, not inferior to the valor of the most exalted ancient Roman heroes. To this end, Lessing transferred the plot of Virginia from ancient Rome to his own era. His heroine became, in the words of Lessing himself, "burgher Virginia." In the conditions of the despotism of the absolute monarch of the 18th century the hero of Lessing's drama Odoardo Galotti, like Virginia's father, kills his daughter, following her request so that she would not be forced to become the prince's favorite. The act of Emilia and Odoardo, who prefer death to violence and injustice, symbolizes in the eyes of Lessing the courage of the best people of the "third estate", their ability to resist the arbitrariness of princes and nobility.

His final, blank-verse drama, *Nathan der Weise* is representative of the Enlightenment. Set in 12th-century Jerusalem during the Crusades, the play deals with religious tolerance. The dramatic conflicts are oriented to the conflicts of the three religions involved Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and coalesce in the love of a Knight Templar for the daughter of Nathan, the wise Jew who embodies the ideal of humanity. At the core of the play is the parable of the ring that Nathan offers as an answer to the question of which of the three religions is the true one. A father has one precious ring but three sons whom he loves equally. To avoid favouring one son, he obtains two identical copies of the ring, but only the "genuine" ring has the power to make its possessor beloved of God and men. The brothers are advised to prove through their actions which

of the three received the original ring. With this play Lessing was far ahead of his time, not only in terms of religious tolerance but also in his dramatic subversion of one of the stereotypes of European religious anti-Semitism: the evil Jew and his beautiful daughter. Lessing's use of a wise Jew was a tribute to his friend Moses Mendelssohn, a philosopher who was the central figure of German Jewish emancipation.

Lessing's last tragedy - the philosophical drama *Nathan the Wise* (1779) - was a continuation of Lessing's polemics against Goetse and other opponents of the writer from the camp of reactionary churchmen. After in 1778 the Duke of Brunswick, denounced by Goetse, forbade Lessing to continue the struggle, Lessing decided to see, as he wrote in a letter to Eliza Reimarus dated September 6, 1778, "whether he will be allowed to preach freely even from his old pulpit - from stage of the theater ". This is how the drama "Nathan the Wise" arose, in which Lessing, with the weapon of the artistic word, continued his struggle for the ideas of humanism, freedom and equality. In *Nathan the Wise*, Lessing opposes religious oppression and enmity between nations. He defends tolerance, mutual respect, equality and brotherhood of peoples. The drama takes place during the Crusades. Its heroes - the Arab Sultan Saladin, the Jew Nathan and the Christian Templar - belong to the three nations and religions that were at war at that time. However, at the end of the drama, they are forced to abandon mutual prejudices, to realize the brotherhood that binds the peoples. Speaking in defense of the ideas of tolerance and brotherhood of peoples, Lessing. By no means preaches an indifferent tolerance that denies the struggle against evil and oppression. In the central scene, the hero tells the Sultan the famous parable of the three rings, in which Lessing put the grain of his philosophical and historical worldview.

Conclusion

The great dramatist expressed the ideas of Renaissance humanism, formed in the struggle against the church, in the form of a story about three rings in the 3rd novella of the 1st day of "The Decameron". The father, who possessed a wonderful ring and had three sons whom he loved equally, ordered two more rings, completely similar to the first. Just as his sons, after the death of their father, could not distinguish the rings they inherited from each other, so one cannot give preference to one religion over another: they are all equal. This answer by Boccaccio and the humanists of the 15th-16th centuries on questions of religion Lessing in "Nathan the Wise" revises and deepens from the point of view of the advanced ideas of the Enlightenment. Lessing argues, not rings (that is, not religions), but deeds - that is what determines in reality the dignity of people and peoples, their right to respect for humanity. Each of the brother nations who inherited the wonderful rings must bring their deeds to the judgment of history, must win the respect of other nations with their lives. In the eyes of Lessing, there is one main criterion for evaluating not only an individual person, but also each nation - their service to the progressive ideals of humanity, the ideals of humanism and progress.

Nathan der Weise shows that Lessing was involved in one of the central theological debates about religious revelation in 18th-century Germany, a debate in which he yielded neither to orthodoxy nor to superficial rationalism. The play was first conceived as a religious statement opposing Protestant orthodoxy rather than as a stage play. Lessing is the largest representative of the German bourgeois-democratic Enlightenment, the most revolutionary mind in Germany in the 18th century. Animation "ardent enmity towards serfdom and all its products", "defense of enlightenment, self-government, freedom", "defending the interests of the masses" - features that V.I. At the same time, like other enlighteners, Lessing did not yet understand the contradictions of the bourgeois system of life and sincerely believed that the abolition of absolutism and class would bring with it general prosperity, the approach of which he sought to contribute with his literary activity.

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