# *THE IMAGE OF CHILDHOOD IN THE WORKS OF MIHAIL SADOVEANU*

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***Abstract:*** *The aim of this study is to reflect a synthetic view of the child's world and childhood in the works of Mihail Sadoveanu, one of our great classics. Beyond sobriety, force, and manifest intelligence, beyond the grandeur of the historical novels he wrote, the children books of Mihail Sadoveanu never cease to amaze us with their playful style, full of subtleties, and concern for detail. His literary world is truly amazing. A world of harmony between child and nature, composed of pure images and sensations, unaltered by conventional vision.*

***Keywords:*** *Mihail Sadoveanu, image, childhood.*

Over time, both Romanian and foreign writers enriched children's literature with works that have entered the history of literature under the name of "children's books".

Through their creations, the Romanian writers and the foreign writers help us each time to find the living childhood in us, that world that was permanent, sustainable, and unwavering.

About Sadoveanu, G. Călinescu said that "he is a great storyteller, with an enormous capacity to speak authentically, resembling the one of Creangă's and Caragiale's, more inventive than the first one, and more poetically than the second one, although, he didn't have the artistic balance of Caragiale." (Călinescu, 1941: 561)

The era in which Sadoveanu writes is the one of the Realistic novel, as well as the Modern one. Zola, Flaubert, Gogol, Kafka, T. Mann were already there. Thus, Sadoveanu is perceived by the literary criticism of that time as a realist with a Romantic vision, and a Romantic who shapes details as well as a Realist, a contemplative.

But the originality of his work is given by his capability to merge with the world he described. The charm in his stories relies in the mystery to be relieved, to whom we, as the readers, can reach gradually, through repeated readings, discovering their musicality, their emotional dominance, their balance status and their meaning.

For Sadoveanu, as well as for Creangă, the return to childhood represents the meeting with the age of innocence, that becomes a moral refuge in hard times. On the one hand, he relives the moving moments of his childhood, in writings like *Mister Trandafir*, *The Apprenticeship Years*, and on the other hand, he portraits child characters that become role models due to their capacity to face life's hardships (*The Wonderful Grove*, *A Gloomy Man*, *Little Boy*, *At Mestecănei*).

The most persistent memories are linked to schoolyears and the teacher Busuioc (the story *Mister Trandafir*). Sadoveanu recalls the memories as a letter addressed to a friend. He combines the description of the childhood places with the image of his beloved teacher, with the story about the minister's visit, introducing the dialogue in the key-moments. In the same way as Creangă, Sadoveanu uses oral expressions, Moldavian dialect specific terms: barrels (poloboace), apostle (apostol), to sift (iscodi), to tease (a dăscăli). The expressiveness of the text increases with the using of comparisons and metaphores that accentuates the image of children's games.

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When reading *The Wonderful Grove*, *At Mestecănei*, *A Gloomy Man*, we can identify the traits of the child character realized by Sadoveanu. "I Praise our Lord for having a childhood", Sadoveanu wrote in *The Apprenticeship Years*, and thus, we understand how that marvelous pages of children's literature appeared.

Although he wrote a good deal of his reference works in prose renewal period, in the light of modernization brought by Liviu Rebreanu, Camil Petrescu, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu etc., Sadoveanu remained in the area of short stories, stories and novels avaible for teaching reading (either by Romantic texts or Realistic ones).

Structurally, Sadoveanu has a certain sensibility towards the show of the world, and an outstanting reception capability. His available material seems inexhaustible. This explains his impressive pace of books composition – which is rather a result of his receptivity and his conception of literature than of his creative imagination. From the beginning, contemplation was an important element in making his prose formula. Sadoveanu is a contemplative, not an observer. He looks from a distance, out of a cosmic perspective in which things become components of a great all, moments in a continuos flow.

This receptivity, together with the perception of infinite diversity inevitably develop the feeling of time, which, from the registration of the unceasing change of objects's shape, becomes a reason for philosophizing. It is right here where we can find Sadoveanu's lyricism source, and its expression varies from sentimentalism, to lamentation, and meditation.

When looking translates from the landscape to the people, the receptivity keeps its high tone, his writings are inspired by the exact intuition of different types, taken from all steps of our society. (Maiorescu, 1967: 474)

The Realist character (even Impresionist) of this prose is seriously mitigated by the intervention of some factors: by the perspective we already discussed, by his contemplative attitude, by the feeling of time. There are a multitude of characters in his prose, but very few of them are memorable, and none of them is properly a great literary hero. The facts, the events are as well many, but few of them are to be remembered by their own consistency.

In most of Sadoveanu's writings, a writer with a good narrative school, we can feel the presence of a storyteller. His charateristics: the narrative "focusing" of the whole discourse, the oral and archaic style, the emotional tone exposure, the popular expressions, the stories within a story, these make up all reasons for a vivid and captivating reading.

Mihail Sadoveanu's art as a storyteller consists in combining the epic with the lyrical, the story with his poetic genius.

The childhood theme can be found especially in the stories *A Gloomy Man*, *At Mestecănei*, *Mister Trandafir*, *Little Boy*, *Through Eyelashes*, and *The Wonderful Grove*.

The place where these events occurred is the Moldavian Valley, crossed by the Siret, a river comparable to the seas. There is still an affective persistency of unforgettable familiar sights, "thus they belong to childhood." (Călinescu, 1964: 294)

The past, the Moldavian Valley and the autumn are the three important sources of inspiration, and the most recurrent expression is that of melancholy, which gives a special charm to the writings of Sadoveanu.

Memories of childhood adventures revive "the faces past", as it's the teacher's face, Mister Trandafir, whose prototype was Sadoveanu's teacher from Pașcani. The



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writer described him in two portrait sketches named *Mister Busuioc* and *Again About my Teacher*.

The autobiographical notes can be detached as well from his authorial discourse formula. Being written as a letter, the story imposes, right from the beginning, some evocative accents: "I was thinking at the time when I wandered these places with you…" (Sadoveanu, 1978: 41)

A simple physical portrait, but a memorable one, follows immediately: "…tall, well built, with a short black mustache, as always, kindly smiling, scowling sometimes, inspiring us a boundless respect." (*ibidem*: 43)

The last details of the physical portrait make a direct move towards the shaping of the moral portrait, suggesting the key reading: the emphasis on human qualities. Short (respecting proportions and the rules of a story), the details that made such an impression upon the writer impress the reader as well: everything the teacher said entered in our memory for the entire life (even though all four of the primary classes were "piled in a long room").

Several times, in order to emphasize his generosity, the author compared the teacher with an apostle.

Over the course of the narration, the author discloses two of his own sources of inspiration (Neculce and Creangă). At a time, recounted with great emotion ("There was a great calm around us, in that spring, and far away, to the Siret, we could hear a whistle song. The twilight shadows came upon us, the storyteller remained silent, and we were speechless…"), the teacher reads them the story of Harap-Alb. (*ibidem*: 44)

There's a break, followed by late memories, when the teacher, at an old age, suggested to his ex student the near end, in a poetical manner: "I'm going to meet with Harap-Alb and Creangă." (*ibidem*, 45)

This formula had a great influence upon the writer, and so, when he comes home, later on, after the death of his teacher, he writes: "Mister Trandafir wasn't happy, nor sad or old anymore." (*ibidem*)

Reprising his childhood memories, the author reproduces again the portrait of the protagonist, but this time, in a dynamic, even cinematographic way: "When smiling, his short mustache revealed some long teeth, with a great gap in the middle. When he was trying to show us how to recite heroic poetry, he was talking very loud, and he was raising his right arm." (*ibidem*: 47)

Following this, there is a particular sequence in the economy of the story: the visit of two foreign guests, who want to have a talk with the teacher, to see the school, and even to attend the class.

The meeting shows some other details, dense touches of color on the teacher's portrait: in his entire career, the schoolmaster did his job with passion, showing love for his students, and not because he was scared or for a check up. By introducing in the scene two objective characters, the narrator tries to convince us that the enthusiastic impressions of the children, and their loving memories weren't just some emotions or sheer inventions in their memory.

Written as a letter, the story acquires more credibility, as a sincere and confessive discourse. By adding certain elements of the memorialistic prose, the writer manages to create an attractive fictional universe, in which the reader can go through very easily.

The child characters created by Sadoveanu are, most of the time, motherless, raised up by loving grandparents, and thus, they are forced to overcome life's difficulties much too soon (s. *A Gloomy Man*).



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Despite its shortness, catching only a single episode (meeting a child who, sadly, drives the sheep to pasture), the writing shows an unexpected complexity, which can hardly be distinguished at a superficial reading. *A Gloomy Man* was initially considered a sketch, but we can rather talk about a story, a species particularly developed by Sadoveanu.

The aforementioned complexity is given by the alternation between timelines (present–past), and between story modes (narrative–evocation), as well as by the writer's ability to ilustrate the harmony or the contrast of moods, the moods of the main character, and nature's moods; another aspect of this complexity is the extraordinary psychological depth of the child character.

Undisputed master of winter images, Mihail Sadoveanu captures, like an Impressionist painter, the vernal landscape: "the ground was dried, the cornel trees were beginning to flourish… The violets dribbled through the dead leaves." (Sadoveanu, 1979: 70)

This is the framework in which the meeting between the narrator and the youngest child of Dumitru Onișor takes place, and the youngest is described as follows: "He was a pale and tiny kid, and he was dragging, on the moist ground, the heavy boots of his older brother. He raises his sad eyes, wrapped in a gray shadow, towards me… He said hello with a soft voice, in which I could depict an early suffering…" (*ibidem*)

Calling this "halt kid", who had just entered in the "eighth spring of his life" a "lad", the author tries to get close to him, to make him a dialogue partner.

The narrator's attitude changes gradually, and what initially seemed like an ordinary conversation between a wayfarer and a child, who was grazing sheep outside the village, becomes a profound dialogue abot responsability and pain, about life and death.

Although the early experience of his mother's death forced him to grow up, his childish soul begins to stir every time he remembers his mother; you coul feel his "tearful voice." (*ibidem*: 72)

Between the plan of the events and the evoking plan, the narrator places a curtain, that is, another landscape: "the grove with its hazel wood, the flourished cornel trees and the violets, woken up by the singing birds. This picture is in high contrast with the mood of the characters, while the Siret, whirling, big and turbid..." seems to suggest exactly the child's worries, troubles, and pain. (*ibidem*: 74)

Unsurpassed creator of atmosphere, Mihail Sadoveanu continues the storyline with an evocation of his own childhood, presenting the portrait of the child's mother, Irina, whose eyes, "drowning in a smoky wave", were the eyes of Niculăeș as well: "Now, our Irina was dead... leaving her warm soul and her rich mind to the child. The memory of our Irina will only live through the pale child." (*ibidem*: 75)

Imagining the child's separation from his mother, on the dying bed, the writer uses once again the elements of nature, whose purpose is to emphasize the tragedy of the situation: "Her tenderness and her wisdom seemed to belong now to my small traveler companion, in those lonely nights of suffering, when both of us were conferring in tears, and outside, the stormy winter raged with despair." (*ibidem*)

Returning to the grove, where the child sees himself vaguely, "in a fog light" (an extraordinary suggestion of the clear-obscure) brings a change in the atmosphere. His state of mind is filled with joy, due to the revival of his sheep. He smiles for the first time, and his smile casts the narrator back to the past, reviving for a moment "the face that flourished, and charmed, with a single smile and a look, the fleeting hour of his life." (*ibidem*: 76)



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Although is mostly fiction, the work of Sadoveanu on childhood is based on many autobiographical elements. We will find again this characteristic in the stories *At Mestecănei* and *Through Eyelashes*.

Using the same narrative technique as in *Mister Trandafir*, addressing an imaginary friend, Sadoveanu recalls two distinct emotional moments, that have a common bond: two characters deprived of the maternal love much too soon.

*At Mestecănei* shows a touching moment from the life of Iliuță, a seven years old child, delicate and sickly, raised by his grandparents. The storytelling takes place from the perspective of the grown man, narrating with emotion and tenderness an episode of his childhood: a vacation spent in Mestecănei, at an old woman called Mărgărinta, "who breast fed me for almost two and a half years, for I, dear, didn't have a mother, like you." (Sadoveanu, 1978: 77)

The reason for this particular travel is the boy's recovering after a long illness. The road carriage gives the narrator the opportunity to describe, in his unmistakable style, a late winter landscape: "The forests looked bare and brown, the mountains blue... and a silvery light, endless and sweet. Up in the sky, the mist and the clouds rised a gentle light, of pink-rose. I immediately knew the smooth side of the village, with its birch trees lined on the ridge, like an iron bar, unflinching in the red sunset." (*ibidem*: 79)

After the touching description of his encounter with the old woman, Mărgărinta, it follows a series of events occurred in the company of Irinuța, the daughter of Mărgărinta: the exploration of the village's surroundings, the involvement in domestic activities, the games played on the ice slide. The narrator shows a special attention to a funny, and, on the same time, weird event for the child raised in the city: the manner in which the geese hatch their eggs, and take care of their offspring: "Although I didn't really understand what that is and what is about to happen, this incident caused me such great joy, that I was waiting for the geese to come to the door, to knock, and to ask if they could come in. I would have jumped immediately to let them in." (*ibidem*: 83)

With a linear construction, *At Mestecănei* could be a really captivating reading for the children, and for the adults, longing for the beautiful moments from their childhood.

*Through Eylashes* constitutes a change in the narrative register. Although it begins in the same epistolary style, with the characteristics of a confession, made to a close person, the evocation begins with a visit to the native village. The reason for this visit is to solve certain problems related to the division of property between the relatives on the mother's side.

The narrator is struck by the reviewing of the childhood places, and this triggers his memories and the change in the timeline: "And in one night, as I was laying on the porch, the past had come back to me, with such an unusual force that I started to think without interruption about the one that had no tomb anymore…" (Sadoveanu, 1979: 46) The evocation of the mother is full of tenderness ("I remember my mother young and beautiful, tall, red-cheeked, with dark, gentle eyes", *ibidem*: 48), but as far as his recollection go, we can depict some feelings of spite and late reactions of indignation. The childhood he describes is an unhappy one, marked by the violent reactions of his father and his relatives towards his sick mother, events that had a great influence upon the child's evolution: "My father would twist his mustache in great anger, and he was looking daggers at us, screaming, and I will always remember those eyes, mad with rage, popped out of their sockets." (*ibidem*: 49)



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The story ends as the narrative returns to the present timeline, on the porch of the grandparents' house, the connection to his only beautiful memories from childhood. The finale image has a strong emotional touch: "I closed my eyelids, and I felt how my dead mother's dark eyes were opening inside me, starring at me." (*ibidem*: 61)

A series of biographical details reveal, as well, the spiritual warm, and the understanding the writer manifests towards children. Before being written, *The Wonderful Grove* was secretly narrated to one of his little girls.

*The Wonderful Grove* (from the volume *Through Eyelashes*), is a masterpiece when it comes to the shaping of the child character. Through all the nine chapters, we make this wonderful journey alongside Lizuca, in which the real elements combine with the fantastic ones, and thus, making us think, in some extent, about Dorothy's journey, from Kansas (s. *The Wizard of Oz*, Frank Baum).

Lizuca's physical and moral portrait is shaped gradually, starting with the observations of her stepmother, Missis Mia Vasilian, in the presence of some guests ("If the poor child didn't have a proper education, you can only blame it on the grandparents. She came from there with the gestures and the habits of a peaseant... I can't put a single piece of embroidery on her, or a ribbon, for that matter. Could you imagine that at her age – she is six years old – she can't do a proper bow?"), (Sadoveanu, 1978: 8) until her actual appeareance, in the first chapter: "She was a small girl, but, in the same time, robust and well-rounded. Her blue canvas dress was crooked, and hanging innapropriately on her littel body. Her booties were full of dust, and the laces were untied... Her hair was cut very short, boyish... Her little nose was in great need of a handkerchief... Her mouth was a little too big, and her cheeks too red... The young lady wasn't pretty or delicate at all. Only her brown eyes, shadowed by black eyeleshes had something like a small flower of light." (*ibidem*: 10) The portrait suggests the environment in which the little girl was raised, deprived of the maternal affection, neglected by a stepmother who was too busy with the visits of her friends, from the so-called hight society of the town. Her lack of education is emphasized by her behaviour around the house: She doesn't show any shyness towards the noble gathering, she doesn't say hello, she thrust two fingers in the jam. In the house, Lizuca is struggling with loneliness, she is being hit, and treated harshly by the maid servant, and her only friend is Patrocle, the little dog, an old brown badger, with human eyes.

Tired of loneliness, Lizuca starts to decipher the mysteries of life, and gets the courage to leave the parental home. She embarks on a journey to her grandparents' house, in the company of Patrocle: "And both of them emerged... starting on a long road, and full of adventures." (*ibidem*: 16)

Using the quest motif, which we generally know from fairytales, Sadoveanu analyzes the child's traits at this age. Not having enough knowledge to understand the real world, Lizuca can't make the difference between reality and fantasy. She assigns human qualities to all the living creatures she meets along the way: "Lizuca knew that these willows were humans and beasts, wise men of old ages. She was looking at them shyly, and listened to their sighs and whisperers." (*ibidem*: 18) Her imaginary talk with the sun-flower depicts all the suffering she endured in her stepmother's house. By walking in the grove, Lizuca enters another world. The writer himself prepares the readers for what it follows: "It seemed like they entered in the land of a fairytale." (*ibidem*: 19)

Describing her walk through the grove, Sadoveanu blends the epic tale with descriptions of nature. G. Ibrăileanu said that "Sadoveanu is a gifted painter of the nature. He knows how to play with words, how to put in words the pictorial aspect of



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things." The images are portrayed through the eyse of the six years old girl, gaining exaggerated proportions: "Very high wattles were raising from the right to the left... Lizuca had never seen the moon so close, and it was so big... Some kind of restlessness sneakes in her soul..." The little girls plucks up courage, and she nestles with Patrocle in an old osier hollow, imagining that the flowers are asleep. She goes to sleep, and in her dream, the elements of the surrounding reality combine with the memories from the world of stories, that her mother and her grandmother have told her ("My mother used to say that without stories, this life would be dull and sad"): the seven dwarfs and a beautiful lady, Statu-Palmă, Sfarmă-Piatră, Strâmbă-Lemne, and two old people, resembling her grandparents.

When she wakes up, Lizuca is in her grandparents' house, and she can hear the voice of her stepmother outside, who had come to take her home. Although the grandparents are present only at the beginning of the story, in the presentation of the stepmother, when they refuse to let Lizuca go back, the image that the readers form is that of simple and honest people, who lead a modest life, caring about little Lizuca, and loving her. She stays with them, determined to never return to the parents' house: "And when I see my father, I will convince them that I would rather die than go back there again." (*ibidem*: 40)

The story of the little Lizuca, the majestic descriptions of the grove and its living creatures, awaken the imagination of the little readers, and takes them to a world of wonders, close to their warm and innocent souls. Here, we can recognize the stylistic mastery of Sadoveanu, who knows how to emphasize the characteristics of this age: the interest and love for the small creatures and nature, the curiosity and the desire to grasp the mysteries of the unknown through the medium of fantastic elements, known from the fairytales.

Many literary critics consider *The Wonderful Grove* to be a brilliant combination between reality and poetry. Beyond the story of little Lizuca, there is a monumental illustration of the feeling of merger, of community with nature, of human tenderness towards nature and the trust in a certain goodwill shared by all the beasts of the field. Garabet Ibrăileanu compares this feeling of community with nature with the one from *Mioriţa*.

For the child described by Sadoveanu, the nature is a familiar place, where he feels protected. Often, the nature is recording the personal tragedies and events that took place in the interval of a lifetime, or during a period when memory could be operated, and it returns these memories back to us. Nature constitutes the exciting element, or the bridge that allows the writer or the characters to slide with imagination towards a past that usually lies there, hidden, in the depths of its own memories.

The impulse of nature, of natural factors like: the wind, the warm spring sun, or the tender autumn sun, the moon light, the birds song, the smell of flowers or the smell of hay, the murmur of springs, the snowfall, regularly stay (in an implicit or in an explicit manner) at the origins of most of these forays into the writer's (or the characters') past.

From a psychoanalitic perspective, we can identify in this profound nostalgia of the past a more pronounced form of nostalgia, for childhood and its universe, a nostalgia for the pure forms of life. And Sadoveanu's Realism lies precisely in his familiarity with the things of nature, and the past, while his Romantic view lies in his profound nostalgia for the familiar things, for the community with nature.

The fact that his passion for nature, with all that it implies, followed the narrator, as well as the one for stories, since childhood, could be easily observed, and in



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a fun way, in the autobiographical prose, called *My Mother Was a Well Known Mischievous*, which marks the encounter with a destiny that would dominate his entire life. A hunting episode makes his personality split, separating from the civilized part of his human being, in order to live the primary emotions of the archaic human being. The perception of the writer is a cosmic one. The revelation of greatness which amazes the soul and shows willingness towards contemplation is purely sensorial. The reality and the dream merge like a mirage, real, changed in the invasion of light, in the twilight or in the whitish morning haze.

In the low haze of the Siret, in a complete wonder, the young hunter's sensations, still a child, resemble the ones of discoverer, who finds strange lands, with no connection to the previous life. People, beasts, birds and all living creatures, who are searching for each other suggest a vital entity. The native space, the place you feel like home, is an universal center.

So, Sadoveanu wrote both for the child that tries to discover the mysteries of the universe, as for the grown man, that finds himself living hard times, and he looks for consolation, and maybe, for some answers, in the happy moments of childhood.

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