



**ARTISTIC DETAIL IN THE PROSE OF SERGEI DOVLATOV:
FUNCTIONAL AND SEMANTIC ASPECTS**

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A B S T R A C T	K E Y W O R D S
<p>This article examines the functional and semantic role of artistic detail in the prose of Sergei Dovlatov, one of the most distinctive representatives of late Soviet and émigré literature. Dovlatov’s narrative style is characterized by brevity, irony, psychological precision, and a deliberate focus on seemingly insignificant details that acquire symbolic and semantic depth within the literary text. The study analyzes how artistic detail functions as a structural, psychological, and ideological element in Dovlatov’s prose. Using textual and contextual analysis, the article explores selected works including <i>The Suitcase</i>, <i>Compromise</i>, and <i>The Zone</i>. The findings demonstrate that artistic details in Dovlatov’s prose serve not merely descriptive purposes but become instruments of characterization, irony, emotional expression, and sociocultural commentary.</p>	<p>Sergei Dovlatov, artistic detail, prose analysis, semantic function, narrative style, Russian literature, irony, literary poetics.</p>

INTRODUCTION

The study of artistic detail occupies an important place in modern literary criticism because detail often functions as a concentrated carrier of meaning within a literary text. In prose narratives, seemingly minor objects, gestures, or descriptions frequently reveal deeper psychological, ideological, and symbolic dimensions of the work. The artistic detail not only enriches the imagery of a text but also contributes to the formation of narrative structure, characterization, and authorial worldview.

Sergei Dovlatov (1941-1990) remains one of the most original voices of twentieth-century Russian prose. His works combine autobiographical elements, irony, colloquial simplicity, and subtle philosophical reflection. Unlike many Soviet-era writers who relied on extensive descriptive narration, Dovlatov developed a concise literary style in which details perform a central semantic function. Everyday objects, fragmented dialogues, and situational nuances become meaningful components of the narrative system. Through these details, Dovlatov constructs a literary reality that reflects the absurdity of Soviet life, the fragility of human relationships, and the contradictions of personal identity.

Scholars have repeatedly emphasized the laconic nature of Dovlatov’s prose and his ability to transform ordinary details into expressive literary devices (Markov, 2012). His artistic method reflects the traditions of Anton Chekhov and Ernest Hemingway, both of whom employed minimalistic detail

to achieve emotional and semantic density (Zholkovsky, 2015). However, Dovlatov's prose possesses a unique stylistic individuality grounded in irony and autobiographical authenticity.

The relevance of this research lies in the growing scholarly interest in narrative minimalism and the semantics of literary detail in post-Soviet literary studies. While Dovlatov's prose has been examined from autobiographical, stylistic, and sociocultural perspectives, insufficient attention has been paid to the functional-semantic role of artistic detail as a system-forming element of his narrative poetics.

The objective of this article is to analyze the functional and semantic aspects of artistic detail in Dovlatov's prose. The research seeks to identify the principal functions of detail and to determine how these details contribute to the creation of irony, psychological depth, and sociocultural commentary.

The following research questions guide the study:

- What types of artistic detail dominate in Dovlatov's prose?
- How do artistic details function within the narrative structure?
- What semantic meanings are conveyed through these details?

Methods

The research employs qualitative textual analysis combined with elements of structural and semantic literary criticism. Selected prose works by Sergei Dovlatov, including *The Suitcase* (1986), *Compromise* (1981), and *The Zone* (1982), constitute the primary corpus of analysis.

The methodological framework includes:

- Close reading for identifying recurring artistic details;
- Semantic analysis to interpret symbolic and contextual meanings;
- Comparative analysis to evaluate similarities and differences in the use of detail across texts;
- Contextual analysis to relate literary details to Soviet sociocultural realities.

The study also draws upon theories of artistic detail developed in Russian formalist and structuralist literary criticism.

Results

The analysis demonstrates that artistic detail in Dovlatov's prose performs several interconnected functions.

Descriptive Function. Dovlatov frequently employs concise details to construct vivid narrative settings. Instead of extensive descriptions, he introduces one or two precise elements that immediately define atmosphere and social context. For example, in *The Suitcase*, worn clothing and outdated household objects symbolize both material poverty and emotional attachment to the Soviet past (Dovlatov, 2011).

Psychological Function. Artistic details often reveal the inner state of characters more effectively than direct psychological commentary. Small gestures, pauses, or repetitive habits expose emotional tension, insecurity, or alienation. In *Compromise*, fragmented conversations and awkward silences reflect the moral uncertainty of Soviet journalists.

Symbolic Function. Many details acquire symbolic significance throughout the narrative. Objects such as suitcases, uniforms, or notebooks transcend their practical role and become metaphors for memory, identity, and existential displacement. In *The Zone*, prison details symbolize broader mechanisms of ideological control and human dehumanization.

Ironical Function. Irony constitutes one of the defining features of Dovlatov's style. Artistic details often create comic effects through contrast between ordinary situations and deeper existential implications. A trivial object or absurd phrase may expose the contradictions of Soviet bureaucratic reality.

Discussion

The functional-semantic role of artistic detail in Dovlatov's prose reflects his broader literary philosophy based on economy of expression and hidden emotional intensity. Unlike traditional realist prose, where detailed description serves mimetic purposes, Dovlatov's details operate as compressed semantic units. Their significance emerges not through quantity but through contextual precision.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Dovlatov's poetics is the transformation of mundane reality into a source of philosophical reflection. Ordinary objects become indicators of historical trauma, personal disillusionment, and cultural identity. This narrative strategy aligns with the principles of literary minimalism, where omission and understatement create interpretative openness (Genis, 1999).

The semantic richness of Dovlatov's details is closely connected with irony. Irony in his prose rarely appears through explicit authorial judgment; instead, it emerges indirectly through carefully selected details. For instance, bureaucratic language, poorly furnished apartments, or absurd institutional rituals function as condensed representations of Soviet social absurdity. These details produce a dual effect: they evoke humor while simultaneously revealing existential despair.

Furthermore, artistic detail contributes significantly to characterization. Dovlatov avoids lengthy psychological explanations, preferring indirect representation through external signs. This technique creates a sense of authenticity and conversational spontaneity. Characters are remembered not because of ideological declarations but because of small behavioral or material details associated with them.

Another important aspect concerns autobiographical authenticity. Since many of Dovlatov's texts are semi-autobiographical, details often function as markers of lived experience. The specificity of objects, names, and situations enhances documentary credibility while preserving literary artistry. According to Lipovetsky (2011), Dovlatov's prose occupies an intermediate space between memoir and fiction, where detail serves as a bridge between reality and narrative construction.

The analysis also demonstrates that artistic detail structures narrative temporality. Recurrent objects or motifs connect fragmented episodes and create internal coherence. In *The Suitcase*, the suitcase itself becomes an organizing symbol linking memories, identities, and historical transitions. Thus, detail functions not merely at the micro-level of description but also at the macro-level of narrative composition.

Overall, Dovlatov's artistic details reveal a paradoxical aesthetic: emotional depth achieved through stylistic restraint. His prose confirms that minimalism does not reduce semantic complexity; rather, it intensifies the reader's interpretative engagement.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that artistic detail occupies a central place in Sergei Dovlatov's narrative poetics. In his prose, details perform descriptive, psychological, symbolic, and ironic functions simultaneously. Through concise yet semantically charged details, Dovlatov constructs a multilayered literary reality that reflects the contradictions of Soviet society and the complexities of human identity.

The findings confirm that artistic detail in Dovlatov's prose serves as a key mechanism of narrative economy and semantic concentration. His literary style transforms ordinary objects and situations into powerful carriers of emotional and philosophical meaning. Future research may further explore comparative aspects of artistic detail in Dovlatov's prose and its relationship to broader traditions of Russian and American literary minimalism.

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