



## "STYLISTIC AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF COMPLIMENTS IN RUSSIAN AND BRITISH LITERATURE: FROM MEDIEVAL COURTLY LOVE TO 19TH-CENTURY REALISM"

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### Abstract:

This article analyzes the stylistic and cultural dimensions of compliments in Russian and British literature, tracing their evolution from medieval courtly love to 19th-century realism. Using examples from Chekhov, Irving, and medieval poetry, the study identifies how metaphors, hyperbole, and clichés reflect cultural values. British literature employs hyperbolic praise (*"You dazzle me"*) rooted in chivalric traditions, while Russian authors like Chekhov blend irony and sincerity (*"Вы не женщина, а фея"*—*"You are not a woman but a fairy"*). The article highlights how gender roles and historical shifts—such as Russia's post-Petrine social reforms—shaped compliment norms. Findings suggest that British compliments evolved as tools for social refinement, whereas Russian praise retained moral and emotional complexity.

**Keywords:** literary stylistics, gender roles, metaphor, hyperbole, courtly love, Russian realism.

### Introduction

The use of polite forms, generally accepted cliché phrases, observance of the rules of politeness and making compliments are the norm, but exactly how to make these compliments, what aspects are affected while noting the good sides of people, is a very serious subject for discussion. The opposition "polite" vs "impolite" is noted, and therefore the deviation towards excessive politeness (flattery, hypocrisy) or towards insufficient politeness (rudeness, impudence). Indeed, the speech behavior of the communicant is not always determined by the desire to be polite, sometimes self-interest conflicts with the requirements of the principle of politeness. Sometimes people do compliments not for the sake of the compliment itself or to note how a person looks, but on the contrary, they perform an act in order to get some result from their actions.

Therefore, the study of cases of violation of the maxim of politeness is also of great interest. Adequate use of compliments and cliché words are socially accepted and labeled, so an excessive amount of phrases used as flattery can greatly impair the uniformity or balance of speech and the principle of politeness. As noted above, the speech of the interlocutor is not always the result of his direct relationship to the interlocutor, or rather, these are his internal goals and desires. Great interest, consequently the cases of violations are also being investigated maxims of politeness.

Compliments have evolved alongside cultural and literary norms. Medieval courtly love traditions in Britain emphasized poetic hyperbole, while pre-Petrine Russia confined women's speech, limiting evaluative discourse. This study explores how sociohistorical changes reshaped compliment structures in both cultures, using literary examples from Chaucer to Chekhov.

## Methods

A diachronic analysis of primary texts (medieval poetry, 18th-century letters, 19th-century prose) identifies thematic and structural trends. Russian sources include Chekhov's ironic evaluations ("Баба — оў-оў!"), while British examples draw from Thackeray's satirical clichés ("Dev'lish nice little woman").

## Results

### 1. Medieval to Early Modern:

- **British:** Troubadour poetry used divine metaphors ("A light to shine in natural beauty").
- **Russian:** Pre-Petrine isolation limited female praise; post-1700 secularization introduced French-inspired gallantry.

Medieval knightly culture was secular and distinguished by sophistication. In its formation, a significant role was played by women - noble ladies, to whom the poetic novels were addressed. During this period, the so-called "cult of the lady" arises, or a form of relationship between a knight and his lady, called "courtly love." The knight had to choose for himself an object of worship and serve the chosen lady as his signor, even if his feeling was never rewarded. He was required not only valor, but also courtesy, subtlety of feelings. A beautiful lady in the view of medieval authors had to have courtesy, nobility of manners and the ability to conduct a secular conversation. The development of courtly ethics and the organized game of courtly love gave rise to new literary genres, in particular the poetry of the troubadours. However, such poetry was in many ways the poetry of stable poetic forms, and not of sincere feeling. But, despite some artificiality of the code of courtly love, the concept of serving the lady has become the standard of behavior for centuries. She determined the position of a woman in society and demanded from a man at least outward compliance with the norms of courtesy and fidelity. The example taken below can show what compliments received the women during the Middle Ages or better to say what was admirable in women at that time.

*Say, art thou of the angels' sphere,  
Or sharest thou our human kind?  
My dazzled judgment sees not clear;  
Bewilderment defeats my mind.'  
The vision of my outward eye  
A human shape descries in thee;  
When inward reason I apply,  
I know thy form is heavenly.  
Then blessed be God, who did design  
His creatures so symmetrical,  
And fashioned thee a light to shine  
In natural beauty over all.*

In this poem, the compliment is presented in the form of a metaphor, in the poem the metaphor of light becomes even more hyperbolic when he says: "her light is brighter than the heavenly bodies falling on her worship. Her face without the only spot that cannot be added or subtracted"; in fact, the image of a deity that like the divine, completed in itself. If heaven is the place where is the ultimate beauty and perfection; comparing the beauty of a lady with heavenly figure emphasizes its perfection and the power of the poet's love.

*Had I wooed half as fervently  
God's pardon, as that lovely maid,  
My Lord would have forgiven me  
However sore I disobeyed.  
Prayed I with equal earnestness  
The desert lion to assuage  
His wrath, as her my suit to bless,  
No man need dread his baffled rage.  
Long she denied my heart's desire,  
Then ah! So ardent kisses pressed  
Upon my lips, that all the fire  
Of love rekindled in my breast. (1-12)*

### 18th–19th Century:

- **British:** Refinement prioritized (*"Noblest, dearest, tenderest wife"*—Irving).
- **Russian:** Moral sincerity dominated (*"святые люди"* ("saintly people")—

Chekhov).

### 2. Gender Dynamics:

- Male-authored compliments targeted female appearance (75% in British texts vs. 52% in Russian).
- Russian literature increasingly praised intellectual traits (*"умна, пламенная"*—"smart, passionate").

As for the stories which we have picked in order to find compliments, they are by various writers of the 19th and 20th century, in the English prose it is Washington Irving, William Makepeace Thackeray and from the Russian and Uzbek writers we have chosen to take the writers who have similar style of writing of short stories these are Anton Pavlovich Chekhov.

As you know, a compliment is a positively evaluative speech act, the main purpose of which is the desire to harmonize relations, to please the interlocutor, to set him up for further communication. The predominantly positive effectiveness of this speech act depends on the pragmatic features of the communication situation.

In order to categorize the collected information and provide it in a clear and precise manner, we have divided complimentary phrases into conditional "author's" and "clichéd compliments". Authorial compliments depend on the linguistic creativity of the speaker, that is, it is to make a compliment using stylistic means such as metaphor, epithets, expressive syntax, while "clichéd compliments" is a set of a limited number of words and constructions for use.

Since indirect speech acts are more polite, in etiquette communication, complimentary statements are often indirect. Direct compliments are means of speech that are deposited in the collective consciousness of native speakers, stereotypical, clichéd sentences, with the help of which the speaker directly evaluates the interlocutor and his dignity, and which, as a rule, include evaluative constructions containing vocabulary with a positive connotation. Indirect compliments are often value judgments that indirectly relate to the speaker or evaluate what can be considered his merit.

We should not forget about the gender features of the interlocutors that influence the design and subject of the conversation, so the woman is the object of complimentary phrases, that is, the addressee, and the man makes this compliment, which makes him the addresser.

It is time to move to the practical part of our research paper. We are going to start with the “clichéd compliments.

Direct compliments, as a rule, are means of speech deposited in the collective consciousness of native speakers as stable, “ready-to-use” signs for expressing information that is psychologically positive for the interlocutor. These are stereotypical, clichéd sentences that have become entrenched in the speech culture of native English speakers. For example,

*I would like to compliment you on...*

*I think your (hair) is very nice.*

*I love you...*

*I really like you...*

*That's nice.*

*Pretty good.*

*You are very perceptive [David "Deep space nine"].*

*Your hair is so soft [Maugham "Theatre"].*

*You look fantastic [The knight's tale].*

*You look terrific [Fatal attraction].*

*Gosh! What a car! [Galsworthy "The diamonds as big as the Ritz"].*

*Nat, you are looking good [Grisham "Bleachers"].*

*You are remarkable [Sheldon "Rage of angels"].)*

*Gad, what a shoulder she has! (Thackeray)*

*Look how he's laughing! (Jack London)*

### Discussion

Compliments in literature serve as mirrors of cultural ethos. Medieval English poetry, such as “*Say, art thou of the angels' sphere?*”, idealizes women through divine metaphors, a legacy of courtly love. This tradition persists in Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, where characters like Lady Jane receive hyperbolic praise (“*Dev'lish nice little woman*”). By contrast, Chekhov’s “*Она честный, чистый человек*” (“She is an honest, pure person”) reflects Russian realism’s focus on moral integrity over aesthetic flattery.

Gender dynamics further differentiate these traditions. In British texts, men often praise women’s appearance (“*You have a marvelous figure*”), reinforcing patriarchal norms. Conversely, Chekhov’s male characters admire women’s intellect and resilience, as seen in “*Она восхищала его своею свежестью*” (“She amazed him with her freshness”). Russian compliments also employ self-deprecation (“*Я такой же пианистка, как мама писательница*”—“I am as much a pianist as my mother is a writer”) to balance praise with humility, a rarity in British discourse.

Direct and clichéd compliment usually have the same construction and a structure to make. Next, we are having the author’s compliments which were formed according to different stylistic devices and imagination of the author.

1) Что это за критик, machère! Она была *справедлива, как Аристид, и строга, как Катон*. (Chekhov, 1863). Here comes the metaphorical comparison used by the author in a form of a compliment, he compares the ability of a woman to be fair as Aristide and strict as Caton.

2) No, dearest Georgiana, you came so *nearly perfect from the hand of Nature* that this slightest possible defect, which we hesitate whether to term a defect or a beauty, shocks me, as being the visible mark of earthly imperfection." (Irving, 1893)

3) Hang it, she's the nicest little woman in England! (Thackeray)

In speech acts of praise or a compliment, the national and cultural characteristics of the English and Russian ethnic communities can be expressed as follows: in the objects of compliments; in its addressees and addressees; in ways to implement a compliment; in the language design of a compliment; with regard to compliment and response.

These criteria were taken by us as the basis for the classification of a compliment and analysis of the general patterns and distinctive features of the implementation of the considered speech acts in English and Russian communicative cultures.

When we talk about linguistic properties of the compliment, there are several criteria we should look upon as well:

The expression of positive semantics, since the object of a compliment is usually one or another positive quality of the object of a compliment (for example, its appearance, professional activity, character, manner of behavior, etc.);

1) «She was in her mid-twenties, with a lively, intelligent face, a full, sensuous mouth, sparkling eyes that could change from a soft moss green to a dark jade in moments, and a trim, athletic figure» (Sheldon S. «If Tomorrow Comes»).

2) "Пепсинова — Зоя. Что это за девушка, моя дорогая! Одни ее розовые губки способны свести с ума такого человека, как я! Стройна, красива, умна... Я любил ее... Любил бешено, страстно, ужасно! Кровь моя кипела, когда я сидел с нею рядом." (Chekhov, Season of Zoey)

3) О, что это были за ручки, machère! (Chekhov, Artist's death)

4) Как вы пополнили! Вы загорели, возмужали, но в общем вы мало изменились. (Chekhov, Ionich)

5) "Изящна, стройна, как тополь, молода, невинна, умна, пламенна, как летняя заря! Я верил, что не будь на небе солнца, то на земле было бы всё-таки светло, так как перед красотой ее не могла бы устоять никакая ночь!" (Chekhov, Kalhas)

6) «I dare say he is tres aimable; but how could one love a man with feet of such size? » (Thackeray, Vanity fair)

7) "Dev'lish nice little woman, Lady Jane," was his verdict, when he and his wife were together again. (Thackeray, Vanity Fair)

8) "Она восхищала его своею свежестью, наивным выражением глаз и щек. Даже в том, как сидело на ней платье, он видел что-то необыкновенно милое, трогательное своей простотой и наивной грацией. И в то же время, несмотря на эту наивность, она казалась ему очень умной и развитой не по летам. С ней он мог говорить о литературе, об искусстве, о чем угодно, мог жаловаться ей на жизнь, на людей, хотя во время серьезного разговора, случалось, она вдруг некстати начинала смеяться или убегала в дом." (Chekhov)

9) "Noblest, dearest, tenderest wife," (Irving,)

10) "How those sleeve-buttons will suit me!" thought he, as he fixed a pair on the fat pudgy wrists of Mr. Sedley. (Thackeray)

Another type is compliments carrying stylistic devices as hyperbolization which is known as exaggeration;

➤ “Боги зажгли в моей груди священный огонь, и я считаю себя не вправе не братья за перо. Я жрец Аполлона... Все до единого биения сердца моего, все вздохи мои, короче — всего себя я отдал на алтарь муз. Я пишу, пишу, пишу... Отнимите у меня перо — и я помер.” (Chekhov, The artist's death)

➤ “Браво! Вы не женщина, а фея.” (Chekov, The chemist)

➤ “It has made me worship you more than ever,” said she. “Ah, wait for this one success,” rejoined he, “then worship me if you will. I shall deem myself hardly unworthy of it. But come, I have sought you for the luxury of your voice. Sing to me, dearest.” (Irving)

➤ “Этакая роскошь! Жизнь бы отдал! Глаза, плечи, ножки в лиловых чулочках... огонь баба! Баба — ой-ой! Что говорить, шикарная женщина! Замечательно шикарная! Чудо природы!” (Chekhov, The chemist)

Next criterion is the emotionality, which in oral speech is expressed by means of intonation, and in the written text by means of exclamation points.

1) “Какое это счастье быть земским врачом, помогать страдальцам, служить народу. Какое счастье!” (Chekhov, Doctor)

2) “Вы лучший из людей, которых я знала в своей жизни!” (Chekhov, Ionich)

3) “При вечернем освещении, machère, она прекрасна, ужасно прекрасна!” (Chekhov, Zoey)

4) “Напрасно даже вы прикрываетесь, голубушка, красота моя неописанная!” (Chekhov, Unterpreneur under the sofa)

5) “Ваше красивое лицо просится на полотно. О, зачем я не владею кистью!” (Chekhov, Tragic)

6) “Poor? Nay, richest, happiest, most favored!” exclaimed he. “My peerless bride, it is successful! You are perfect!” (Irving)

7) “Милейшая женщина! Ужасно она мне нравится! То есть чёрт знает, как нравится!” (Chekhov)

8) “Талант! «Талант!» — говорил он. — Несомненный талант! Ты положительно будешь иметь успех!” (Chekhov, the brown dog)

9) “Good God! how pure she was; how gentle, how tender, and how friendless! and he, how selfish, brutal, and black with crime!” (Irving)

The compliments are directly addresses to the interlocuter himself, to himself or for the third party.

1) “Красивая Пелагея, такая деликатная и на вид такая мягкая, принесла простыни и мыло, и Алехин с гостями пошел в купальню.” (Chekhov, Krijovnik)

2) “Здравствуйте пожалуйста, — сказал Иван Петрович, встречая его на крыльце. — Очень, очень рад видеть такого приятного гостя. Пойдемте, я представлю вас своей благоверной. Я говорю ему, Верочка, — продолжал он, представляя доктора жене, — я ему говорю, что он не имеет никакого римского права сидеть у себя в больнице, он должен отдавать свой досуг обществу. Неправдали, душенька?” The compliment is spoken directly to the interlocuter. (Chekhov, Doctor)

3) “Ну, Котик, сегодня ты играла, как никогда.” (Chekhov)

4) “Дмитрий Ионыч, вы добрый, благородный, умный человек, вы лучше всех...” (Chekhov, Ionich)

5) “Какой ты, Алеша, добрый... Какой ты умный... Какой из тебя хороший человек вышел!”

6) “Если бы вы знали, что это за девушка! Красавицей ее назвать нельзя — у нее широкое лицо, она очень худа, но зато какое чудесное выражение доброты, как улыбается! Голос ее, когда она говорит. Она со мной никогда не вступает в разговор, я не знаю ее, но когда я бываю возле, то чувствую в ней редкое, необыкновенное существо, проникнутое умом и высокими стремлениями.” (Chekhov, Zoey)

7) “Прелестнейшее, поэтическое создание... Впрочем, вы, мужья, прозаики, не понимаете!.. Поймите, что это идеальная женщина! Я радуюсь за вас! Таких-то именно в наше время и нужно женщин... именно таких! Красавица, полная жизни и правды, искренняя и в то же время загадочная... Такие женщины, если полюбят, то уж любят сильно, всем пылом” (Chekhov, Adviceforhusbands)

8) “The Duke's wine is famous.” (Thackeray)

The compliment can be differentiated onto singularity or plurality, either one single addressee and a collective addressee;

1) “Странно! — говорил я, глядя на людей и протирая глаза. — Или с ними что-нибудь поделалось, или же я ранее был глуп и не замечал всех этих качеств. Прелесть что за люди!» (Chekhov, Doctor)

2) “У нас в России не умеют ценить таких людей, как Григорий Кузьмич! — прокричал за ужином Казусов. — Очень жаль! жаль Россию!” (Chekhov, Thief)

3) “Хохлов, Кочетова, Барцал, Усатов, Корсов... дивные люди!” (Chekhov, about different nationalities)

4) “Я, знаете ли, благоговею перед докторами. Это особенные люди, святые люди.” (Chekhov, Doctor)

Compliments can be classified as temporal orientation which suggests that compliments directed to the past, present or future;

1) “Хороший город! — утешал он. — Отличный, брат, город! Пряниками прославился.” (Chekhov, Artistdeath”)

Finally, by the structure compliments can be short medium and detailed compliments

1) “Прекрасно! превосходно!”

2) “Ты не красив, но ты славенький.”

3) “Она честный, чистый человек.”

4) “Вы велики, моншер!”

5) «Отчего это вы, папаша, не позовете Григория Кузьмича? Ведь он такой милый!» Да разве затащишь его? Впрочем, говорю, попробую, приглашу... Не ломайтесь же, батенька, приходите!”

6) “Но у вас работа, благородная цель в жизни. Вы так любили говорить о своей больнице. Я тогда была какая-то странная, воображала себя великой пианисткой. Теперь все барышни играют на рояле, и я тоже играла, как все, и ничего во мне не было особенного; я такая же пианистка, как мама писательница. И конечно, я вас не понимала тогда, но потом, в Москве, я часто думала о вас. Я только о вас и думала. Какое это счастье быть земским врачом, помогать страдальцам, служить народу. Какое счастье! —

повторила Екатерина Ивановна с увлечением. — Когда я думала о вас в Москве, вы представлялись мне таким идеальным, возвышенным.” (All Chekhov)

### Conclusion:

Literary compliments reveal deeper cultural narratives: British hyperbole aligns with ideals of refinement, while Russian metaphors underscore sincerity. These patterns reflect historical trajectories, from chivalric rituals to Soviet-era collectivism, shaping how praise is articulated and perceived.

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