

**“THE LITTLE WORLD” BY GIOVANNINO GUARESCHI:
HOW THE MICROCOSM OF A PROVINCE BECOMES THE IMAGE
OF THE WHOLE COUNTRY**



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Abstract

“The Little World” by Giovannino Guareschi is a cycle of 346 short stories, describing the world of Italian countryside in the first decades after the end of the World War II. This peasant world with its poverty and political tensions, different conflicts and contradictions, became the image of an Italian soul and cultural values for both Italian readers and foreigners. It is the most translated Italian text of 21st century. The present research provides the analysis of literary construction, narrative schemes and technics used by the author. The first part of the article is dedicated to geographical reality and illusions, to how it becomes a chronotope. The second part shows the functions and the system of main characters and the mechanism of their interaction. We also give a short overview of the Italian political background, that explains why such a literary analysis was absent until now.

Keywords: Italian literature, fiction, humour, chronotope, theatre.

Giovannino Guareschi (1908–1968) remains a controversial phenomenon in the Italian literature up to this day. Different aspects of his versatile activity were evaluated by his contemporaries and descendants in different ways. It is important to notice that

the literary critics' opinions differed dramatically to that of common readers, as it usually happens to mass literature. But even in this attitude, perception of Guareschi's works remains ambivalent and changing throughout more than half a century.

Guareschi was a journalist, cartoonist and a writer. During his lifetime and in the first decades after his death, the main attention of researchers was given to his journalistic activity whereas his literary works have not enjoyed serious analysis until the very end of the 20th century. Since 1927 Guareschi worked in dozens of newspapers and magazines as a reporter, analyst, columnist, cartoonist, editor, commissioning and chief editor. During his lifetime, 13 of his literary works were published; after his death, about 20 more collections were published from the materials collected through the pages of periodicals.

Stories and novels by Guareschi enjoyed a great success in periodicals and even greater in a book format. Circulation of his books and speed they were sold at were incredible for those times: half a million to a million copies a month. Books were translated practically into all languages and were a success everywhere – both in Europe, Asia.

For the last 70 years, Guareschi has consistently remained one of the most widely read of the Italian writers, as we can see from the number of reprints of “The Little World” in Italy – more than 60 times; for many countries Guareschi became the first translated author in the 20th century.

The most important work of Guareschi – the cycle of stories about Don Camillo the “Little World” – was filmed several times; the first five films starring famous Fernandel as Don Camillo and Gino Cervi as Peppone still remain cult for the Italian audience and break audience records regularly. It should be noted that the reverse side of the enormous reading and commercial success was the long-term rejection of Guareschi's works by Italian literary criticism. The only analysis attempt was made by professors Luca Clerici and Bruno Falchetto in the collection of articles “Literary Success”, published in Milan in 1985, and devoted to the phenomenon of commercial success of mass literature. Spinazzola's introductory article to the collection (“Success With No Value”) begins with the words: “This book is an attempt to apply normal literary analysis criteria to texts that are not part of the literature as such. According to the general opinion, these texts are not of great value, and therefore from the literary point of view they do not deserve an in-depth analysis, and from the point of view of the history of literature they do not deserve the memory of subsequent generations” (Spinazzola, 1985: 5). Nevertheless, after more than thirty

years, it can be noted that Guareschi's works remain among the most readable, republished and relevant ones and therefore deserving an in-depth analysis.

As Clerici and Falchetto correctly notice in their article: “The Little World” of Guareschi, a piece of fictional Italy “has a deep symbolic meaning. It is concentrated in one place the essence of Italy as such” (Clerici, Falchetto, 1985: 74). In order to understand what kind of essence it is we propose you to look at the analysis of the structure of the “Little World”.

First of all, it is precisely localized and at the same time completely invented geographically.

“The Little World” is described myth-like as a new epic space. That is why it was even more important for Guareschi to put the “Little World” in absolutely real geographic boundaries, which gives it real credibility. Firstly, it is the region of Emilia-Romagna. However, Emilia-Romagna is a very large region, it has a plain, a sea and even mountains, it is inhabited by Emilians and Romagnolos. For Guareschi it is important to create a unified, homogenous world, and therefore he narrows the region, immediately distinguishing Romagnolos as “other”. The story “Romagnolo” (Guareschi, 2003: 110) begins with the following words: “He was called Romagnolo only because he was from Romagna. He had lived in the town for years and years, but he remained a Romagnolo to the backbone” (Guareschi, 2003: 546). According to the comment of Roberto Kerki: “Emilians and Romagnolos are ethnically different. Emilians – Celts, Romagnolos – Byzantines” (Cherchi, 1998: 51). I. Rossi underlines the same thing: “<...> it is impossible to claim that the same thing could happen both in the province of Piacenza and around Ravenna. The Piacentinos still, if you look closer consider themselves to be at least as fierce as Longobards while the Ravegnanos will never forget how great and interesting it was for them to live in the western capital of the Byzantine Empire” (Rossi, 1994: 15). This means that the space described in the stories is more neutral, more centrally located Emilia.

At the same time, the “Little World” is a plain. The only attempt to place it in the highlands (the story “Gian” / film “Such a People” (Fernando Cerchio, 1949)) was not a success. There were both the mayor-communist and the priest, but the action in the mountains did not have that breath, that depth, that life that the “Little World” was filled of. Thus, the scene was strictly bordered by the Po River Valley. And not even by the entire lowland, but only by the right bank, owned by Emilia. That means that, the “Little World” is a strip of plain between the Roman road Via Emilia and the river Po. The Po river, the great river, the river the river par excellence, the only “worthy of respect” (Гуарески, 2012: 31) river in Italy, defines the entire life of the

population of the “Little World”: “For a thousand years its water barely touches the ground, and nothing happens, and suddenly the water begins to make its way into the shore and gradually eats it all. Or vice versa, the river suddenly gives a piece of land to a poor, who had nothing but a narrow strip of poplars between the dam and the river, and suddenly he turns out to be the owner of large fertile lands” (Guareschi, 1953: 7). The border in the south is Via Emilia. From both sides the area is bound by two streams: Ongina in the West and Taro in the East. The western and eastern borders are controversial, the author himself did not write about them anywhere directly. It is important for us that in most cases this is the part of the Valley which belongs to the province of Parma, which additionally narrows the lens of perception, and at the same time makes it possible to create an ideal homogenous world. Of course, as everyone notices, this leaves outside the framework of the “Little World” the very area that has become its cinematic face.

The town of Brescello, where all the films about Don Camillo and Peppone were made, is located in the province of Reggio Emilia and could not enter the triangle described by Guareschi. This frustrated immensely the author himself, who wanted to make a film in Rocca Bianca, his native district center, but fate (and the director) had the say differently, and now everyone thinks of the town of Don Camillo as Brescello, which once again confirms our idea that this is not the real essence of the “Little World”. Restricted localization for the “Little World” is important, but not a sense-making factor.

Nothing exists outside the borders. “This is a possible scene for many novels. This is an island separated from the whole world by raging waves (in this case, not the sea, but rivers), and the blessed land, and the battlefield, and the last refuge” (Clerici, Falchetto, 1985: 73). One cannot but agree with Luca Clerici and Bruno Falchetto, who were the first to say: “Thus, geography becomes a topos. Each indication is typical and conditional. Guareschi himself defines the Valley – “the country of melodrama” (Guareschi, 2003: 900).

Indeed, the “Little World” is practically a theatrical scene on which the action takes place. Firstly, the narration itself is dramaturgic. No wonder that so many plays had been staged (not less than 3 in Italy – which continued to be a success for decades, and one is going on now, and also some plays in Germany, Austria, France), and five films, which gained even more success, were made. Secondly, the description of the place is built like a change of scenery, on a constantly enlarging scene, and the characters are appearing as actors of a drama.

In the first story, without a description, even the shortest, a church (“a little church”, the dome of which “started shaking from the words of Don Camillo”) and a parish house appear as if from nowhere. In the second story of the first collection (the third story according to the general numbering), the action takes place in the church. In the third, the action goes to the square, and a room for the party committee sitting with a wall newspaper appears.

The theme of the bell tower arises there, and in the fourth story the bell tower with bells appears itself. The bell tower is the tallest tower, from where you can see everything and where neither enemies (Don Camillo hides inside the bell tower, taking a ladder with him during a communist rally) (Гуарески, 2012: 115) nor waves (Don Camillo takes refuge in the bell tower during the flood and serves the Mass there) (Гуарески, 2019: 99-100), nor death (Maguggi’s son escapes from fascists) (Гуарески, 2012: 245) can reach; the bells mark the flow of life with their ringing, they measure the organization of the collective’s life: stun them on holidays, mourn the deceased, warn them of danger.

In the same story, the fourth, the action first comes out of the town: Peppone finds out that in one of the surrounding villages people saw a man who once had tried to kill him; Peppone goes there, followed by Don Camillo, and they meet on the bridge over the Fosson Creek.

In the fifth story, appear the fields and the first house detached from the city: “They got to the backs of a small house, standing alone at a distance of half a mile from the town, and climbed over the bushes of the green fence straight onto the garden beds” (Гуарески, 2012: 212). In the sixth story the municipality and large estates are introduced. Guareschi doesn’t talk yet about the estates as such, but about large private piece of land, where hunting is prohibited. In the seventh, the first legend appears, quite a short one: “The old house was the name for an abandoned wreck on the top of a hill near the town. People were afraid to approach it even during the daytime because there were rumours that there were a lot of snakes and ghosts” (Гуарески, 2012: 80).

Beginning with the eighth story, the scenery is gradually being completed: the first stones of the People’s House and the Children’s Park are successively laid. And so it goes further down to the 305th story, where the description is summed up and presented in all the fullness. Such a gradual introduction of more and more details must create the impression in a reader’s mind that he is becoming a part of the locus – of the theatrical scene and the emotional space in it.

“The Little World” is strictly limited, and it is of great need for Guareschi as a condition of integrity and homogeneity of its nature.

Each story is preceded by an author’s illustration, in which he shows one or the other part of his “little world”. Matching descriptions to illustrations the author conveys that his word descriptions copy the figurative techniques of a painting. The illustrations are often made almost with one line, they are static, statuesque (all the motion is focused in an angel and an imp, symbolizing Don Camillo and Peppone in several lines uncovering the plot of the story). Poplars along the roads. The church with its bell tower. Square squat houses with balcony in the middle of the first floor, porticoes, overhead power lines. Small illustrations are drawn in ink without perspective and volume. Similarly, short descriptions (there is no description of a landscape longer than five sentences) immerse the reader in the atmosphere of the “Little World”. As this world is shrouded in mist during the mornings and evenings falling on the Valley, everything in it seems stable, located in its permanent place. Objects which serve as a base for the narration are being introduced into the text gradually. Small objects are only mentioned, big ones are accompanied by a legend. The legend becomes part of the narration as relevant – “journalistic” – information. Telling a legend, the author appears as a chronicler, a writer, describing neighbourhood, almost a guide compiler. And at the same time the legend helps to make the reader get acquainted with the “Little World”. Getting to know and learning the legend the reader becomes one of the “natives”, for whom every toponym means more than just a name.

The Valley is introduced gradually too: first basic geographical coordinates, and more details appear from one story to another; at the same time the Valley’s “character” gradually is revealed, as well as the way the Valley interacting with people. Guareschi considers the Valley not only as a geographical background, but as a main character of his stories: it affects the way people live through the heat, “which beats on top like a hammer”, the mud, the rain, the fog, «which can be cut with a knife”, through the horizonless fields and the endless dikes it prompts a person to think in a particular way, forms his humour, his way of living.

There are only three climatic indicators: the sun, the rain and the fog. All of them are described as bound attributes of the “Little World”, at the same time they are an important component of the plot, they appear as if from the plot necessity. It often happens that their character itself determines the features of people living under them: “In the Valley everything seems motionless, and one can think that nothing ever occurs along these deserted dikes, and nothing happens in these red- and blue-

coloured houses with small windows. But actually more things happen here, than in mountains or cities, because damned sun is dissolved in blood. <...> And in winter, when it gets colder and fog presses on the Valley, the heat accumulated in the blood during the summer clouds the sight and one doesn't manage to think of the things he did so that gun shots can be heard occasionally or some girl does something she shouldn't do” (Гуарески, 2012: 80). “But the climate of the Valley has such a character: in summer the sun heats on the heads and melts the houses and in winter is not possible at all to understand whether you are looking at a village or at a graveyard, that's why any ballyhoo is enough for a unending conflict” (Гуарески, 2012: 81).

The weather in Guareschi's narrative is organized the way the rest of the entire “Little World” is organized: it consists of specific real details, combined with fiction, legends and stories.

The characters of the “Little World” appear on the stage gradually like actors. The first one to appear is Don Camillo and then the voice of Christ from the crucifix in the central altar is immediately heard. Introduction of such a character is no doubt a novelty of the Guareschi's text and a great display of courage for an Italian literary work. The author himself designates the voice of Christ as “the voice of my conscience” (Гуарески, 2012: 57). The voice of Christ not only brings to light the sins of Don Camillo, each time he plans to do something evil, the voice of Christ changes the reader's view, picks him up from following the main characters to offer him to observe the entire picture of the universe. After Don Camillo and Christ we can see the following characters appear: Peppone with his wife and child, then Peppone's “people”, a teacher signora Cristina, town dwellers. And then the rest of the population of the “Little World”. Only in the sixth story the “reds” appear. The later a story is the more details there are in the description of a character and the more place the other characters take.

In the first collection, taking into account the times the “other population” is mentioned you can count not more than thirty people, in the second one there are already more than eighty characters. From a role of extras, almost disembodied figures in the beginning of the story they gradually become an organism of characters, and each of them gains its completeness, making a part of the overall image of the story. As new characters appear from story to story they reveal themselves more: farm laborers, landlords, shopkeepers, old folk, women and children gradually acquire their names, faces and features.

The "landlords" and "town dwellers" are mentioned very briefly, their characters are not described but gradually acquire their form due to repeating references, development of action, or they are reflected in the words and actions of the main characters. Each of the characters has its own features which at the same are to some extent typical of all of them leaving in the same place. These general features more or less match the general image of the Emilia dwellers: they are very proud and sensitive, hot-tempered and incredibly stubborn, prone to sudden, harsh and sometimes paradoxical actions, traditionally religious, at the level of prejudice, it is a kind of popular "deep" religiosity, they are decisive and dreamy. The dwellers' reactions as well as weather and landscapes indications do not need verbal explanations. They can be seen through certain gestures, which are used as a tag of one or another state of soul, so that the reader, recording this code of repeating gestures, can finally imagine the character and the psychological state of heroes in a more or less precise way depending on the number the stories he has read. The gestures are conventional but they acquire code format due to the deliberate frequency of use. Some of them: has shaken the head (has expressed his displeasure in 35, 48, 65, 66, 69, 82, 83, 100, 114, 124, 126, 159, 179, 182, 183, 186, 188, 191, 194, 221, 232, 247, 267, 272, 279, 291, 307, 334, 340, 342, 345, 347, 370, 371), has thrown up his hands and (has surrendered reluctantly 37, 64, 68, 69, 76, 78, 83, 86, 94, 95, 101, 105, 108, 113, 144, 146, 156, 159, 161, 163, 167, 176, 182, 199, 201, 232), hasn't taken off his hat/ has taken off his hat (has displayed disrespect/respect – 38, 201, 205, 239, 282, 283, 301/47, 153, 198,245) etc.).

There exists a contrast between the "village dwellers" and the "city dwellers".

The "village" characters are vivacious, lively and deep. The most important of them are the characters of the priest Don Camillo and the mayor-communist Peppone. There are their real prototypes: Don Lino Maupas, Giovanni Faraboli and others. But Guareschi himself said: "Not only two people but twenty to forty priests and twenty to forty communists are concentrated in these two characters" (Villari, 1996: 64). All the "city dwellers" (except for the old bishop which belongs not to the town but to the Church) are deliberately nebulous, they almost have no names, surnames or features. We just find: "has come from the city", "a party member from the city", "people from the city" or to put it more simply – the "city dwellers" which is a definition itself. They are not the part of the "Little World" which means they cannot be described using the techniques inherent to this world.

Don Camillo and Peppone are the main characters in 330 of the 346 stories (in the 41 stories only Don Camillo is engaged, in 20 – only Peppone, in 269 – both of them.)

The collections published during the lifetime include only one story in which neither the priest nor the mayor-communist take part; this is a short story “The Tale of Saint Lucia” (128), the last one in the collection “Don Camillo and his flock”, where the main hero, a boy, escapes from Milan to his native village in the Valley to leave St. Lucia a message with his new address, with which she will be able to find him among the “city dwellers”. This story is an important explanation of the meaning of the Valley and its dwellers’ nature and how tales and legends come true in this place.

The trigger for almost all the stories of this cycle is the political opposition between Don Camillo and Peppone. All the actions of Peppone are determined by his affiliation to the party same way as the actions of Don Camillo are determined by his beliefs. Don Camillo follows rightist views but this as Guareschi underlines does not equal being a member of the Christian Democratic Party. Being a devoted Catholic and being a member of the CDP are not the same thing. Guareschi protested more than once in his reviews against tendency to take one thing for another and he gave this point of view to Don Camillo who understands the difference between the Church and the Party, between political (no matter what name they have) and Christian values. These are the words of Don Camillo: “Azione Cattolica is not a political party, especially since I am the chairman” (Гуарески, 2012: 201) – invective against the CDP, as the main aim of this social organization was wide electoral support of the Christian Democrats through the local Catholic parishes.

Without a keen and strong political conflict between Don Camillo and Peppone the collection “Little World” wouldn’t have been such a great success. But the work would seem superficial if Guareschi wouldn’t take in more consideration the conflict of values in the conscience of each hero, determining the inconsistency of their behaviour. Peppone in many stories does things that contradict his political credo, “behaves not like a communist” (52, 55, 56, 67, 87, 88 and others), i.e. repudiates from the party, from the mass for the sake of the personal, from the party’s voice for the voice of heart. Don Camillo also does things inappropriate for his priesthood. The mismatch between beliefs and actions is the basis for the comic effect in the cycle. But the author’s attitude to this discrepancy is different. Peppone’s actions which contradict his ideology must provoke the reader’s tender emotion, enlightenment. While impulsive actions of Don Camillo sometimes provoke fear or anxiety.

Don Camillo and Peppone are ideological antagonists, but it’s important that Guareschi gives them apparently analogical features. Both of them have common heroic and magnificent past: participation in the World War I and in Resistance – in a partisan unit, where both of them dealt with arms.

Both of them use the same means in mutual struggle: they cunning, make frauds, provoke and deceive each other, try to steal something from each other (Camillo is the one who is more successful in it, he steals mostly weapons) and betray each other. The “disgraces” of Don Camillo were counted up by Guareschi’s children in the supplement to the collection “The Complete Little World of Don Camillo”. It turned out that Don Camillo detonates a bomb (80); sets fire (8); throws people and statues into a river (50, 5257); poaches (7, 235); flings a hammer (170); tries to lift the wind (17, 299); provokes everyone but more than anyone else – 19 times of the total 38 – Peppone (8, 13, 14, 16, 33, 37, 47, 54, 56, 68a, 86, 90, 94, 102, 104, 127, 135, 166, 168, 169, 170, 172, 174, 187, 188, 198, 201, 213, 220, 259, 306, 325, 330); blackmails (9, 80, 201, 283, 318-319, 326, 332, 328); tells a lie (30, 41, 54, 116, 136,142, 167, 234, 256, 292, 323, 328); plants on counterfeit money (37, 256); shoves opponents’ heads in cans with paint etc. The disgraces of Peppone are not counted up, but it’s obvious that there are not less of them than Don Camillo has, the difference is not in the quantity but in the fact that Don Camillo is more cunning, while Peppone is more forthright. In all their tricks there is ideological as well human motive. In the story (4) Peppone, under the guise of confession, brings his first speech to be checked by Don Camillo. Don Camillo, under the guise of grammatical corrections, makes a part of Peppone's promises to repair the bell tower. Christ’s voice notices that Peppone could treat Don Camillo with a cigar and forgives Don Camillo for stealing it from Peppone’s pocket himself.

Both characters use the most precarious means to achieve their goals. In the story (9) Don Camillo is invited to consecrate the first stone, which the Communists lay for the future “People's House”. Don Camillo guesses that 10 million lire for the construction was got from the gold stolen by Germans, which the partisans stole under the guise of a coffin with a deceased, and blackmails Peppone, threatening with a machine gun, and as a result he receives a check for 3 million for his garden-club for children. The parallelism of the two characters is emphasized with their equally exaggerated physical force, which equally turns both of them into fabulous, almost mythological heroes, challenging each other and equal in strength. Guareschi describes both with the same words: “They were huge men with an iron grasp” (2), “huge hands like cars” (144). Throughout the cycle, with a certain frequency Peppone and Don Camillo prove their physical equality. On the one hand, it is a condition of balance in the conflict. On the other hand, it is the guaranty and the image of human “sentimental” unity of the characters. In the story (16) Peppone explains to a young priest why he cannot replace Don Camillo: “If I slap you right now you will fly five meters or so away from here if I did the same thing to the honoured curate of this

parish, he wouldn't shake a millimetre!” (Гуарески, 2012: 157). In the story (11) at the fair, Don Camillo and Peppone measure their strength on the power meter and each fears the other to be weaker (Гуарески, 2012: 119).

Parallelism in the description of the two main characters makes it possible to talk not just about the similarity but also about the unity of the two heroes. Regarding the topic of a one basis for the Peppone–Don Camillo image many works were written by everyone, who in one way or another analysed the texts of the “Little World”. Look the words of Simonetta Bartolini in the article “Guareschi–novelist”: “Considering Peppone and Don Camillo two separate characters is a mistake that limits our understanding of the text, they are one single character, and Guareschi himself confirms it in the drawings that precede the chapters: they have the same facial features; identical figures; only distinctive markers are different: angel or devil wings, a halo of one, a tail of the other, a tunic of one, and pants with a shirt of the other” (Bartolini, 2002: 30-31).

Different explanations are offered for the unity of the two antagonists. For Simonetta Bartolini: “Don Camillo and Peppone are two souls in one single character – the Italian who survived the war, about whom Guareschi tells the Italians who survived the war” (Bartolini, 2002: 30-31). Clerici and Falchetto ground this unity with Guareschi's system of values: “Divided into three parts [the third is the voice of Christ], forming a unity that demonstrates a steady and clearly stated system of values” (Clerici, Falchetto, 1985: 95).

In political publications, the duality / unity of these characters have a different and wider interpretation. In 1953 Benny Lei in the Christian Democratic Party’ “Gazetta del Popolo” wrote that Guareschi in his stories tries to “prove that there is a possibility of coexistence of Marxism and Catholicism. This is a profound errancy, and the Church has already condemned him” (Lai, 1953: 3). Having accused Guareschi of the heresy of Irenicism, the author of the article suggested to include Guareschi's books in a list of books that were not recommended for reading by the Catholic censorship. Similar accusations occurred repeatedly.

Among the leftists there were also opinions that Guareschi was offering an ideological compromise. When at the end of the 60s began discussions about the possibility of a rapprochement and a dialogue between leftist and rightist forces, of the “historical compromise”, there appeared a saying that “Don Camillo” is a prevision, a prototype of such a dialogue. In the monograph “Don Camillo Peppone and the Historical Compromise”, Gian Franco Vene wrote that the main goal of Guareschi's “fairy tales” was to show “on what conditions and from what points of

view the post-war petty and middle bourgeoisie could agree to cooperate with the hated leftists”, though he specified that “it is unthinkable to include Guareschi in the list of those who anticipated what we call today the “historical compromise” or the dialogue of Catholics and Marxists” (Vené, 1977: 25).

Baldassare Molossi recalls: “Guareschi is said to have invented the historical compromise” quite by accident, as it usually happens with great discoveries and inventions. One day I hinted at it to him almost in a form of a joke, and he answered me with a bitter smile: “The difference is that I was joking, and they are doing it seriously” (Molossi, 1994: 324).

In this way, we see that having created a closed world that is not localized on a geographic map, though possessing all the characteristics of an average Emilian lowland town, populating it with non-psychological, static characters, Guareschi creates a special chronotope of the post-war Italian countryside, in the conflicts and confrontations of which Italian contemporaries recognized themselves, in resolving these conflicts, in finding the deep value structure of this “Little World” of Italy, today's Italians can recognize themselves.

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