



Article

Universal Myth as a Structural Element in the Works of Russian Writers

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Abstract: This paper investigates the role and significance of myth as a structural element in Russian literature, with a particular focus on its transformation and reinterpretation from the 19th century through to the 21st century. Drawing upon both classical and contemporary sources, the study highlights how myth has served not only as a narrative foundation but also as a medium for cultural reflection and philosophical exploration. The integration of myth into literary texts has enabled Russian writers to address complex existential questions, articulate national identity, and critique socio-political developments. Particular emphasis is placed on the Symbolist movement, where poets such as Vyacheslav Ivanov and Andrei Bely adopted myth as a creative tool to synthesize pagan and Christian motifs, and to explore metaphysical themes. The analysis extends to postmodern and contemporary writers, such as Viktor Pelevin and Ludmila Ulitskaya, who employ authorial myths as frameworks for constructing alternative worldviews and for deconstructing prevailing ideological narratives. The research demonstrates that myths in Russian literature have evolved from static folkloric traditions into dynamic literary devices capable of conveying irony, parody, and intertextual commentary. Through close textual analysis, the paper illustrates how myth functions not merely as thematic content but as a structural and symbolic mechanism, shaping the aesthetic and ideological dimensions of literary production. Ultimately, the enduring appeal of myth in Russian literature reflects its adaptability and its capacity to resonate with readers across historical and cultural contexts.

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1. Introduction

The concept of myth, while rooted in the distant past, continues to occupy a vital place within the cultural consciousness of societies, including that of the Russian people. Traditionally associated with ancient civilizations and folklore, myth has demonstrated remarkable resilience by embedding itself in diverse cultural expressions—particularly in literature, where it has acquired renewed interpretative and symbolic significance. Russian literature, in particular, has shown a sustained and multifaceted engagement with mythological themes, reflecting broader aesthetic, philosophical, and national concerns[1].

Myth in this context functions not merely as a relic of the past, but as an enduring narrative framework through which complex human experiences are articulated. The mythologies of ancient Greece, with their tragic and existential overtones, have especially resonated with Russian writers, offering a rich symbolic language for exploring the human

condition. Consequently, myth serves both as a repository of collective memory and as a tool for artistic innovation[2].

This study examines how mythological structures have been adapted and reimagined across different periods of Russian literary history. From early romanticism to the height of symbolism and through to postmodernist reinterpretations, the literary myth has evolved in form and function. The exploration of myth in Russian literature thus reveals not only the persistence of mythological thinking but also its transformation as a means of engaging with social realities, spiritual quests, and aesthetic experimentation. By tracing this evolution, the paper aims to demonstrate the integral role that myth continues to play in shaping the narrative and symbolic structures of Russian literary tradition[3].

2. Materials and Methods

As early as 1828, A.S. Pushkin elucidated the appeal of Russian literature to myth as follows: There is a point in the development of mature literature where the reader, bored of monotonous works of art and the limited scope of conventionalised, chosen language, turns to folk fictions for fresh material[4].

In the context of Russian literature, the genuine interest in myths, and their integration into literary works as a component of fiction, reached its zenith at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The concept has been linked to the resurgence of romantic traditions observed in the works of numerous Russian poets and writers. Concurrently, L. Dolgoplov asserts that Russian literature's fascination with myth as a component of fiction was shaped by the concepts propounded by R. Wagner, the progenitor of neomythologism in the West, and F. Nietzsche's notions concerning the salvific function of mythologising "philosophy of life", which gained widespread acclaim. Collectively, they exerted a significant influence on the development of mythology in Russia, particularly within the domain of literature[5].

The resurgence of literary interest in myth, following a prolonged period of neglect in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, manifested itself in some of the most pronounced forms:

1. Firstly, it is evident that the utilisation of mythological images and plots within the oeuvre of poets is significantly amplified.
2. Secondly, a plethora of stylisations and variations on themes from myth, folk rites or archaic art are created. Concurrently, the artistic traditions of non-European cultures entered the global cultural landscape, thereby significantly broadening the spectrum of mythological influences to which numerous artists and writers began to refer;
3. Thirdly, the so-called "author myths" manifest themselves in literature.
4. Fourthly, the traditions that emerged within the context of Greek mythology underwent a gradual process of synthesis with emergent literary trends that were characteristic of the historical period in question.
5. Fifthly, the process of myth-making begins to permeate all spheres of human activity in a rapid and active manner[6].

Symbolist poets were among the first to utilise myth in their oeuvre. Many exponents of this literary movement, including Vyacheslav Ivanov, A. Blok, A. Beloi, F. Sologub and others, in their search for a synthesis of Christianity and paganism, declared the creation of myths to be the very purpose of their poetic work.

Representatives of other trends in Russian poetry also began to incorporate myths as an element of artistic work at the beginning of the 20th century. In the poetry of V. Khlebnikov, O. Sologub and others, mythology became a peculiar form of poetic thought. Khlebnikov, O. Mandelstam, M. Tsvetaeva, M. Voloshin.

Symbolists utilise myth as a medium for the articulation of their theoretical concepts, akin to the manner in which myths functioned as a means of expression during the period of the "childhood of mankind"[7].

The utilisation of myth can be regarded as a pursuit for innovation within a traditional framework, necessitating a reevaluation of established perspectives. This perspective is articulated by Andrei Bely, who remarks on the Symbolists' inclination to employ myth as a foundation for their poetic ingenuity, stating that it 'revises a series of forgotten world views' and 'represents the future of the new art'.

As demonstrated in his inaugural collection of poetry, entitled "Stone", which was published in 1913, O. Mandelstam's unabashed affinity for antiquity was discernible in the poetic imagery employed in numerous poems. In the poem *Silentium*, for instance, the poet turns to distant times in an attempt to ascertain the 'primary basis of life':

...remain foam, Aphrodite,
And the word return to music,
And the heart of the heart be ashamed,
Merged with the primordial basis of life!

In the poetry of V. Bryusov, for example, the images of ancient gods and heroes are imbued with allegorical significance and become the bearers of an established allegorical meaning[8].

The recourse to myth as a special form of expression of the poetic attitude to the world is also noticeable in the late poetry of B. Pasternak, in the early prose of M. Bulgakov and in many stories and novels of A. Platonov.

The myth has become a significant component of the works of writers and poets from the late 20th to the early 21st century.

In the works of V.P. Rasputin ("The Last Term" and "Farewell to Matera"), V. Astafiev ("The Kingfish"), Ch. Aitmatov ("The White Steamboat" and "Peggy the Dog Running by the Sea"), Yevgeny Nosov ("Usvyatskie Slamonosets"), etc., mythology becomes an integral part of the author's world view. Concurrently, the folklore and mythological images created by the authors in their works were, according to G.M. Torunova, explained as special forms of circumlocution necessary for the more complete creation of an ethnopsychological portrait of artistic images. The myth is not confined to a particular artistic direction or genre; indeed, it permeates all levels of the artistic text. Its presence is most clearly manifest in the form of reminiscences. The most common forms of mythological reminiscence are as follows: mythological character, i.e. mythological name; mythological plot; myths and mythological archetypes[9].

A particular interest in myths in the 20th century was linked to modernist art, which was characterised by a desire to reveal eternal human principles. However, in contrast to ancient myths, the images created in the works of twentieth-century poets and writers are employed metaphorically, resulting in the meaning of traditional myths being frequently reversed in their use. Meletinsky's study posits that in the twentieth century, myth-making functioned as a "means of renewing culture and man"[10].

During the 1970s and 1980s, as E.D. Mongush observes in her study, there occurred a comprehensive reevaluation of historical, cultural and national myths in Russian literature. For instance, mythologems and archetypes of world culture were extensively employed, playing a pivotal role in the consciousness of heroes experiencing a state of discord with the world around them (see, for example, "Only My Heart Has Broken" by L. Ginzburg, "Belka" by A. Kim, "The Law of Eternity" by N. Dumbadze, "Altist Danilov" by V. Orlov, etc.).

A new upsurge of neo-mythological tendencies was discovered in the 1990s and 2000s, connected with the processes of mythologisation and archaisation of mass consciousness caused by the effects of the crisis of the Soviet image of the world[11].

The prevailing tendency in contemporary Russian literature is the establishment of an authorial mythos, akin to archaic mythological traditions, which engenders a distinct

conception of the world. The potential for such a phenomenon to occur can be ascribed to the capacity of authorial myth to incorporate fragments of reality into the context of its narrative. An exemplary illustration of this phenomenon can be observed in V. Pelevin's novel *Chapaev and the Void*[12].

However, according to V.A. Pyanzina, the very concept of 'author's myth' can be considered somewhat of an oxymoron, which, in her opinion, symbolises the connection between the past, represented by archaic myth, and the present, personified by the author, our contemporary. It is therefore argued that the author's myth should be regarded as a phenomenon that has been continuously developed in the work of many writers of the 21st century.

The appeal of myth in modern literature is rooted in a shared purpose with the authors of Ancient Greece, namely to achieve spiritual purification and catharsis through the depiction of humanity's struggle with fate[13].

This may have provided the foundation for the emergence of the authorial myth in the literature of the new century. The formation of the author's myth is intrinsically linked to the modernist period, drawing upon the rich tapestry of traditional archaic myths as a foundation. It is evident that the contemporary author's myth incorporates elements of poetics, as evidenced by the following characteristics:

1. The validity of the mythological narrative is widely accepted, while postmodernism interrogates the very possibility of truth as a concept.
2. The purpose of traditional myths is to facilitate the integration of the individual into the world around them. In contrast, postmodernism emphasises the loneliness and alienation of the hero.
3. Mythological narratives are distinguished by an inherent sense of timelessness, which is firmly embedded within the collective consciousness. In contrast, postmodernism is associated with the concept of historical time and personal memories, reflecting a more dynamic and subjective approach to temporal interpretation.

The primary functions of the author's myth are as follows:

1. The creation of an image of reality that is distinct and specific to itself (e.g. M. Galina's 'Autochthons', M. Pavic's 'Khazar Dictionary').
2. Upon initial observation, the events depicted in the novel may be perceived as a component of authentic historical occurrences. This observation is exemplified by the works of L. Tsypkin, notably 'Summer in Baden', and G. Grass, particularly 'The Tin Drum'.

The utilisation of myth in modern literature facilitates the resolution of various artistic and philosophical dilemmas[14].

3. Results and Discussion

A fundamental responsibility of Soviet-era writers was to accurately depict objective reality. The recreation of this phenomenon is attributable to the influence of myth. The endeavour to formulate a distinctive, authentic, and poetic myth in contradistinction to the Soviet period's mythological tradition prompted numerous writers and poets to gravitate towards a primordial approach, namely the myth-making of man, who is more closely aligned with nature than with society. The piece of prose entitled 'Kaip's Second Journey', written by Timur Pulatov, is an exemplary illustration of harmonious prose.

The second task that myth as an element of artistic narrative solves is to debunk those myths that were created by the policies pursued by the Soviet state. A notable exemplar of this approach is the Russian-American writer Yuri Druzhnikov, whose oeuvre is widely appreciated in numerous foreign countries.

The writer has designated his primary book the novel 'Angels on the tip of the needle', the creation of which is associated with the author's work in the newspaper

'Moskovsky Komsomolets'. It was through the work of a correspondent that the future writer became directly acquainted with the process of creating a Soviet myth, the source of which most often became the printed word. In her study of the oeuvre of writer Alicia Volodzko, it is noted that the primary action of her literary works is set in the editorial office of a central newspaper. This allows the reader to gain an insight into the kitchen of Soviet mythology, and to learn how and why newspaper myths are created, and how these are consumed the next morning by millions of people[15].

It is evident that myth is integrated into the artistic narrative due to the ironic utilisation of traditional mythological elements. In this particular instance, the utilisation of mythological motifs within the text serves to establish the initial framework of the plot. For instance, in T. Tolstoy's novel *Kyss* and Boris Akunin's *Pelagia and the White Bulldog*, the authors make direct reference to the Russian folklore tradition. In Victor Pelevin's novel *Generation "P"*, as noted by numerous researchers, the author makes direct reference to Sumerian and Babylonian images and plots.

This appeal to myth and the purpose of such use of myth reflect the peculiarities of understanding and attitude of modern literature to myth. In T. Tolstoy's novel, the image of Kysi and other mythical creatures present in the work help the author to create a terrifying atmosphere that arises in society after an atomic explosion. In Akunin's novel, the legend of the idol Shishiga, the sacrifice to him and the chopping off of heads is a role model for both the murderer and his superior, who, for selfish reasons, inflates this into a story of fictitious, terrible pagan sacrifices.

In works representing different directions of Russian prose of the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the process of mythologisation is carried out differently, and the same myths and mythological motifs receive completely different interpretations. Nonetheless, ultimately, notwithstanding the indisputable discrepancies, the objective of the artists is congruent: through the utilisation of established models and methodologies, they endeavour to re-evaluate contemporary reality, to delve more profoundly into the intricacies of phenomena. The myth is said to 'grow' into reality, mythologising the image of an ordinary man, his everyday life and the civilisation he has created. However, the incorporation of mythological elements into a narrative is contingent upon the author's perspective, with the resultant worldview being influenced by the author's attitude towards myth.

1. The character in question can be described as 'sublime' or 'heroic'. An example of this can be found in L. Ulitskaya's novel *'Medea and Her Children'*.
2. The tragic character is exemplified in L. Petrushevskaya's stories and D. Lipskerov's novels.
3. The presence of a farcical character is evident in T. Tolstoy's novel *Kyss* and N. Baitov's story *The Judgement of Paris*.

The artist's perception of reality and their aesthetic attitudes are the primary factors influencing this.

4. Conclusion

It is noteworthy that in the aftermath of the publication of *'Dead Souls'*, N.V. Gogol alluded to the 'terrible granites' that had been laid in the foundations of Russian literature, emphasising its distinctive character: 'The very speech of their (poets) will be closer and more related to our Russian soul. The influence of our folk origins is particularly pronounced in this context. However, the versatility and poetic depth of our mind, encapsulated in our numerous proverbs, has not been fully recognised. It is important to note that the same can be said about the use in works by Russian writers and myths, which are most often derived from Russian folk art. Mircea Eliade, a renowned researcher in the field of mythology, asserts that "Mythological thinking can evolve to adapt to new cultural fashions." However, the complete dissolution of the phenomenon is not a possibility. Myth

constitutes one of the most complex realities of culture, and it can be studied and interpreted in a variety of ways.

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