

THE CONCEPT OF THE PROTAGONIST IN LITERARY STUDIES: THE EVOLUTION OF THE IMAGE FROM CLASSICAL TO NARRATOLOGICAL APPROACHES

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Abstract

The article traces the historical and theoretical evolution of the concept of the protagonist - the central character of a literary work - from ancient poetics to modern narratology. It examines key stages in the understanding of the hero in the aesthetic systems of classicism, romanticism, realism, formalism, and M.M. Bakhtin's dialogic theory. The work analyzes the approaches of Western (M. Bal, W. Booth, J. Levin), Russian (M.M. Bakhtin, Yu.N. Tynyanov, Yu.M. Lotman, B.M. Eichenbaum), and Uzbek researchers (Sh. Rakhmatullaev, A. Safar, M. Khodjaev), which allows for the identification of cross-national typological similarities and differences. The article offers a comprehensive narratological-comparative analysis of the concept of the hero as a phenomenon of literary consciousness and the structure of the artistic text.

Keywords: Protagonist, narratology, narrative structure, dialogism, formalism, polyphony, typical character.

Introduction

The concept of the main character - the central figure of a literary work - has undergone a complex evolution in literary studies across various countries. Over the centuries, perspectives on who the protagonist of prose is, what their role entails, and how they are constructed by the author and perceived by the reader have transformed. In different eras - from classical to postmodern - the hero's image acquired new features depending on the aesthetic ideals, philosophical ideas, and literary schools of its time.

Modern narratology and comparative studies offer a comprehensive approach to character analysis that considers not only the narrative structure but also the cultural and national context. This article traces the development of the concept of the main character in prose, drawing on the works of foreign (M. Bal, W. Booth, J. Levin), Russian (M.M. Bakhtin, Yu. Tynyanov, Yu.M. Lotman, B.M. Eichenbaum), and Uzbek researchers (Sh. Rakhmatullaev, A. Safar, M. Khodjaev).

The concept of a hero dates back to ancient poetics (Greek *protagonistes* - first actor), where the hero of a dramatic or epic narrative was understood as the leading character performing the main role. In ancient tragedy, according to Aristotle, the protagonist was associated with a noble hero whose fate evokes catharsis in the viewer.



In classicism, the hero is static and embodies a stable moral ideal, unchanging from beginning to end. Romanticism, on the contrary, puts forward the concept of an exceptional, rebellious individual hero who comes into conflict with society. Such a hero is emotional, subjective, and endowed with a "heightened consciousness," striving for the ideal.

In both classicism and romanticism, the hero remains the center of the work - the bearer of the author's idea and the embodiment of the era's worldview.

An important shift occurs in 19th-century realistic prose: the main character becomes a representative of their social circle, a "typical character." Belinsky defined the hero as a "person of their time," in whom social contradictions are concentrated.

Yu.M. Lotman noted that a realistic novel can require development from some characters and constancy from others [1]. Thus, in L.N. Tolstoy's novel *"War and Peace"*, Nikolai Rostov changes situationally, but without profound transformation, while Pierre Bezukhov and Andrei Bolkonsky undergo a true evolution of personality [1, pp. 263-290].

Western researchers, such as J. Levin, pointed out that a realist hero is an "ordinary person," whose moral reflection gives everyday life an epic scale [2]. Thus, in realism, the hero acquires social-anthropological significance: their individuality becomes a model of the epoch.

In the 1920s, Russian formalists (B. Eichenbaum, Yu. Tynyanov, V. Propp) proposed a new, structural view of the character. The hero was considered not as a bearer of psychology, but as an element of the artistic organization of the text.

B.M. Eichenbaum argued that the character's nature is determined by the system of narrative techniques. Yu.N. Tynyanov introduced the concept of a character's functional weight, depending on their role in the literary system [3].

V.Ya. Propp in *"Morphology of the Folktale"* (1928) described the hero not through individual characteristics, but through a set of functions - search, struggle, reward [4]. This approach laid the foundation for subsequent narratological models of actants (A. Greimas). Thus, for the first time, formalists objectified the image of the hero, making it an element of the plot, not a psychological unit.

M.M. Bakhtin's concept holds a special place. In his work *"Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics"* (1929, 1963), he formulated the concept of polyphony - a multiplicity of independent voices. Dostoevsky's hero, according to Bakhtin, is the subject of consciousness, not the object of authorial speech.

Each character has an autonomous worldview that does not coincide with the author's position. Bakhtin wrote: "Heroes suffer failure because they cannot fully affirm another - 'thou art'." [5] Thus, the main character becomes not a monologic embodiment of the author's will, but a participant in a multi-voiced dialogue of consciousnesses. This idea radically changed the approach to the character, paving the way for the development of narratological and post-structuralist theories of character.

Conclusion

The concept of the protagonist has come a long way - from the ancient "first actor" to the multi-layered subject of modern narratology. The evolution of this concept reflects not only artistic but also anthropological shifts in culture.



In classical literature, the hero was the embodiment of an ideal; in romanticism - an exceptional personality; in realism - a typical representative of the era. 20th-century formalists objectified the hero as a structural unit of the text, while Bakhtin restored its subjectivity and dialogic nature.

Today, in the context of narratology and comparative studies, the protagonist is viewed as a dynamic construct where individual consciousness enters into complex relationships with the author, text, and culture.

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