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SEMIOTIC AND COGNITIVE INTERPRETATION OF THE POSTMODERN MYTH

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Abstract

One of the systematically important concepts of postmodernism is the concept of myth. Meanwhile, among the distinctive features of the postmodern discourse are the rapprochement of high and mass cultures, the active mixing of literary languages, styles and genres, the citation, the game features, the emphasized poly variety and the increased irony. It's the remythologization of postmodern literature that provides the rapprochement of high and mass cultures. This process takes the form of styling and parodying the original myths, so that the postmodern text begins to resemble the myth structurally. In the postmodern myth an occasional unit turns into the category of "cyclic repetition": on the one hand, an event, recorded in a myth, is thought to be unique; on the other hand, this event is repeated regularly. Cyclical repetition of the original myth turns it into a model which provides the self-organization of a postmodern work. In terms of cognitive linguistics, this statement allows the myth to be interpreted as a dynamically represented frame or script.

In case of establishing a similarity relation with the original myth, the postmodern myth is the styling of the original one, and the contrast leads to the parody of the primary myth. In the framework of this study the semiotic and cognitive analysis of the postmodern myth is carried out on the example of works by an American writer J. Barth.

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1. Introduction

The remyphologization of the postmodern literature provides the rapprochement of high and mass cultures. Being a structural basis of modern literature works, myth helps to align high and mass cultures so that it leads to blurring of rigid borders between high and low literature. Dual addressing of the postmodern work at mass and intellectual readers and "deep relation of mass literature and high culture, oriented on archetypes of collective unconscious" (Rudnev, 2017, p. 224), is provided by the main feature of the myth – repetition. Accordingly, within the framework of postmodernism, the myth is understood as "a set of rules following which one can get from the object the second one, the third one and so on by resetting its elements and some other symmetrical transformations" (Encyclopaedia, 2010).

2. Problem Statement

The tasks of this study include revealing of the essential features of the postmodern myth and establishing the place of the postmodern myth in the semiotic semiosphere space.

3. Research Questions

In the work "Mythologies" (1956) by Roland Barthes the myth is considered as a secondary semiological system. "The fact that in the primary system was a sign (the result of the concept association and image) is interpreted as a meaning in the secondary system. The myth seems to be one step above the formal system of the primary language meanings" (Barthes, 2008, p. 239). In other words, the myth contains "firstly, the system of natural language, or object-language possessed by the myth in order to build its own system; secondly, it contains the myth itself, or metalanguage, which is a secondary language used for describing the primary one" (Barthes, 2008, p. 240). As the postmodernism literature is characterized by so-called "tend to zero", that is its "destruction as an object-language and reservation only as a metalanguage, where the search for the metalanguage becomes a new object-language at the last moment" (Barthes, 1994, p. 132), the myth (in a traditional sense) becomes a starting point of the tertiary semiological chain and its meaning becomes the first element of the secondary (postmodern) myth. In case of establishing a similarity relation with the original myth, the postmodern myth is the styling of the original one, and the contrast leads to the parody of the primary myth.

As an example we will consider a novel "Chimera" (1972) by an American postmodernist writer J. Barth. The novel shows the reinterpretations of the Arabic and Greek legends. In the chapter "Dunyazadiad" the author reveals the idea of the modern society mythologization, telling the story of the Banu Sasana University best student, a Vizier's daughter Scheherazade, who is known in mythology and folklore for trying to find a way to restrain the King Shahryar and stop the endless flow of innocent girls executions. The Scheherazade story acts as the primary myth on the basis of which a secondary semiological system is created – a story written by the Genie. Iconicity of the original and postmodern myths allows to consider the Barth's myth, which reflects the same objective reality as in the original text and reproduces its essential features (use of the high-flown addressing – the King of the Age, the King of the Sun and the Moon and

Arabic names – Sa'ad al-Din Saood, metaphorical euphemisms – the Destroyer of Delights, the Severer of Societies and Arabic realities – harem, mameluk, hassock), as an example of the styling of Arabic tales.

The two subsequent parts ("Perseid" and "Bellerophoniad"), mainly devoted to the narration problems and postmodern letters peculiarities, reflect the parodistic rethinking of myths about legendary heroes. Thus, the chapter "Bellerophoniad" is a postmodern version of the life story and feats of the legendary hero Bellerophon, which is based on the ancient Greek myth, in particular a fragment from the "The Greek Myths" by R. Graves.

4.   Purpose of the Study

In our study we should consider a typical scenario of the myth and identify cognitive mechanisms for organizing a postmodern myth.

As is known, mythological texts are characterized by the isomorphism of messages transmitted by these texts. The principle of isomorphism brings all possible plots to the single plot, which is invariant to all myth-narrative possibilities and all episodes of each of them. A structuralist theory of mythology based on the structure identification as a set of relationships, which are invariant in some transformations, was developed by a French ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. In definitions of a structural folklore founder, Vladimir Propp, there is a "sustainable sequence of the actors' functions". "Function" means "the act of a character determined in terms of its value for the course of action" (Propp, 2001, p. 462). Based on these statements, Lévi-Strauss points out that a myth is nothing but a "story that reveals functions, which number is limited, while the sequence is the same" (Lévi-Strauss, 2001, p. 432). Characters and their attributes also change, however, their actions and functions stay the same. In terms of cognitive linguistics, this statement allows the myth to be interpreted as a dynamically represented frame or script. The typical myth scenario as a sequence of episodes is as follows:

- events that prompted the hero to leave the house;
- receiving a task to perform a certain action;
- preparation (quite often at this stage the hero meets one who can help him and receives a magic remedy);
- task completion;
- in some cases, the completion of additional conditions;
- receiving the award.

The events described in the work by R. Graves fit to this scheme quite well. His work is dedicated to the Ancient Greek mythology Olympic period, which is characterized by the emergence of heroes who defeat the monsters. The fragment from this work presented in "Bellerophoniad" contains five paragraphs. The beginning of each paragraph is marked by the corresponding letter (a, b, c), which reflects one of the top elements of the network (the script can be represented as a network, the top elements of which correspond to some situations, and arcs correspond to links between them):

- Having committed a murder, Bellerophon leaves Corinth and spends some time with Proetus, the King of Tiryns, and his wife Antea.

- Antea, being rejected by the Bellerophon, accuses the young man of making an attempt on her honor, and Proetus sends Bellerophon to his father-in-law Iobates, the King of Lycia. Proteus handed him a letter containing an order to kill Bellerophon.
- In order to execute the order, Iobates gives work to Bellerofon to fight with a three-headed fire-breathing chimera.
- The gods supply Bellerophon with the winged horse Pegasus, with the help of which he kills the Chimera.
- Bellerophon repels the attack of the Solim tribe, kills the Amazons and honorably completes the last challenge (ambush). This forces Iobates to recognize Bellerophon a hero and make his daughter Philony a Bellerophon's wife.

The above scenario as a single structural scheme, which lies at the heart of most myths about the heroes who defeat the beasts, can be realized in the narration in different ways. An example of the multiple-variant scenario "myth" is demonstrated by the last challenge of Bellerophon, mentioned in many sources. In the encyclopedia "Myths of the Peoples of the World" it is said that "Iobates arranged an ambush for Bellerophon, but the hero defeated all the assailants" (Encyclopaedia, 2010). A more detailed description we find in the work of A.N. Kun "Greek Myths and Legends". "Then Iobates sent the strongest men of Lycia to meet Bellerophon, so that they could kill him while unexpected attacking. The Lycian drew him into ambush but he stayed alive again. All the strongest men of Lycia were killed by Bellerophon" (Kun, 2014, p.112). Another way of the events development is given in the fragment from the book by R. Graves. Having known about the ambush, Bellerophon addresses Poseidon with a prayer, so that Poseidon poured water directly in his footsteps in the Xanthos Valley. Since no man could have forced Bellerophon to turn back, Xanthos women decided to surrender to Bellerophon in order to turn his anger into mercy.

The described myth (in the interpretation of R. Graves) becomes the basis of the so-called secondary (Barth's postmodernism) myth, according to which Bellerophon in his forties, doubts in his own power and starts learning himself. In a new myth the events also occur in accordance with the typical scenario. Moreover, here we find a repeated execution of the previous feats with the purpose of true heroism proof. At the same time, J. Barth is not limited by simple styling. Using the material of myths and legends, "playing with the meanings on the endless field of intertextuality" (Il'in, 2018), in many cases he is ironic about the modern reality.

In particular, the author presents his way of the development of events related to the victory of Bellerophon over the fire-breathing chimera, which inhabited the mountains of Lycia. According to the Greek myth, Bellerophon must fight the fire-breathing three-headed beast. J. Barth, using the effect of the failed expectation, strictly follows the myth in describing of the events which precede the battle (flight on the winged horse Pegasus, which ends in the crater of the volcano), but then he introduces the "new" chimera image - an old man in a coat of snakeskin (an old beardless chap in a snakeskin coat). Irony (perhaps self-irony) permeates the image of the failed writer who burns the work of his life -"paper doesn't burn, but only spreads clouds of black smoke." "New" chimera is a modern literature, which is able to attract attention only of "mountain lions and wild goats" (Barth, 2012, p.226). The ironic modality of this fragment contributes to the expression of the author's attitude to the reality indirectly.

5. Research Methods

The study is performed by using such methods as the semiotic method and the method of linguistic interpretation. Methods of descriptive and comparative analysis are used as additional ones.

6. Findings

The analysis of Barth's language means shows that, as a rule, the parody-ironic effect, is achieved as a result of usual compatibility violation at different levels and collision of elements belonging to different language subsystems (to different functional styles, to different semantic fields and to the vocabulary of different historical periods). A bright example of the styles mixing is the chapter "Perseid". It's a story told by a mythical hero, where predominates the colloquial and stylistically reduced vocabulary (cf. pig rhetoric, shut your pig mouth, fuck). There are also scientific style fragments - the hero's reflection of the relationship of his own life and myth (cf. research, archetypal pattern, comparative study, dissertation), as well as the use of medical terms (cf. herpes, radiation, chambers of the heart, ventricle), linguistic terms (allusion, metaphor, alliteration, paragraph) and other.

An example of the game with the meaning by using lexical units which belong to different temporal layers is the wide use of anachronisms like advertisement, graffito, fan, IQ, lawyer. Their stylistic contrast becomes the basis of parody.

Another reason for considering the postmodern myth as a parody is its potential cyclicity and incompleteness. The hero of the secondary myth, having coped with the challenges described in the primary myth (according to the script: saboteur –challenge – benefactor – magic remedy), has to repeat everything again and again, turning either into a stellar constellation (Perseus), or into the document (Bellerophon), who tells the story about himself. Thus, Barth's postmodern text built in accordance with the myth typical scenario, generates peculiar creative myth processing and interpretations, and turns into "the story of the creation and interpretation of the text" (Rudnev, 2017, p. 337), which proves to be extremely full of quotes, allusions and other reminiscences, that refer to the specific mythical works.

7. Conclusion

The process of remythologization, which takes the form of styling and parodying of the original myths, leads to the fact that a postmodern text starts to resemble a myth in structural terms. Among myth's main features are "cyclical time, a game at the intersection between illusion and reality, assimilation of the literary text language to the mythological pre-language" (Rudnev, 2017, p. 270).

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