

THE MONOMYTH AS A UNIVERSAL NARRATIVE MODEL: ON THE QUESTION OF THE THEORETICAL STATUS OF THE CONCEPT IN LITERARY STUDIES AND MYTHOLOGY

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Abstract

The article examines the concept of the monomyth as one of the key theoretical models in comparative mythology and narratology of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It analyzes the origin of the term, its conceptual content in the works of J. Campbell, as well as the structural model of the “hero’s journey.” Particular attention is paid to the theoretical foundations of the monomyth concept associated with C. G. Jung’s analytical psychology and A. van Gennep’s anthropology of ritual, as well as to the main lines of criticism of this model in contemporary humanities scholarship. The article concludes by emphasizing the functional significance of the monomyth as an analytical tool in literary studies and mythological discourse.

Keywords: Monomyth, hero’s journey, narrative structure, comparative mythology, archetype, initiation, literary studies.

Introduction

The concept of the monomyth occupies a special place within the system of contemporary humanities, situated at the intersection of literary studies, mythology, anthropology, and psychoanalytic theory. Its significance stems from scholars’ efforts to identify universal foundations of narrative structures underlying myths and literary texts across different cultures and historical periods. The concept of the monomyth represents an attempt to provide a theoretical interpretation of the recurrence of plot patterns and archetypal schemes in the world literary tradition.

Definition and Origin of the Concept

The term monomyth (from the Greek μόνος — “one” and μῦθος — “myth”) was introduced into scholarly discourse by Joseph Campbell and was first systematically presented in his monograph *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). The word itself was borrowed by Campbell from James Joyce’s novel *Finnegans Wake* (1939), where it was used in a different, artistic and metaphorical sense. Within the framework of comparative mythology, the monomyth is defined as a universal narrative model that unites mythological and heroic plots of various cultures on the basis of their structural similarity.

It is fundamentally important that the monomyth is not interpreted as a specific text or a fixed plot, but rather as an abstract structural scheme that makes it possible to describe and compare narratives by identifying recurring stages and functions of the hero.

Main Part

In Campbell’s concept, the monomyth is realized through the model of the “hero’s journey,” which includes three fundamental phases: the first — **Separation** — the hero leaves the familiar world, accepts the call to adventure, and breaks away from ordinary existence. The second — **Initiation** — involves undergoing a series of trials, experiencing crisis, symbolic death and rebirth, and obtaining sacred knowledge or a special gift. The third — **Return** — is the hero’s return to the original world with the acquired experience, which carries transformative value for the community. In the works of M. Y. Lermontov, one can trace the specifics of how these stages are experienced by the heroes of his works.

The Lermontovian hero is initially in a state of existential alienation. In his poetry (“The Sail,” “I Go Out Alone on the Road”) and prose (*A Hero of Our Time*), the motif of departure, escape, and internal rupture with the world functions as the stage of Separation. However, unlike the mythological hero, Separation in Lermontov is not the result of a free choice or sacred calling, but is an ontological given, determined by the conflict between the individual and society.

The stage of Initiation in Lermontov’s works acquires the character of an internal, psychological trial. The hero experiences suffering, the loss of illusions, and confrontation with the void of existence. In the figure of Pechorin, Initiation manifests as a series of existential experiments upon himself and others, which do

not lead to the harmonization of personality. In this sense, the Lermontovian monomyth shifts the focus from external trials to inner conflict, aligning it with the modern model of the subjective hero.

A key feature of Lermontov's interpretation of the monomyth is the absence of a fully realized stage of Return. Having undergone the crisis of Initiation, the hero does not gain knowledge or a gift capable of transforming the world or society. The Return is either impossible or illusory. This reflects a deep axiological disintegration characteristic of the Romantic consciousness, in which the hero lacks a foundation in a stable system of values.

From an axiological perspective, the Lermontovian monomyth reflects a crisis of the heroic ideal. The traditional mythological model, oriented toward creation and the restoration of cosmic order, is transformed into a tragic schema in which the hero realizes the impossibility of harmony. In this way, Lermontov reinterprets the monomyth as a form of critical reflection on human existence under conditions of historical and spiritual upheaval.

Results and Discussion

Theoretical Foundations and Scholarly Criticism

The theoretical basis of the monomyth concept is formed at the intersection of several academic traditions. Analytical psychology, particularly C. G. Jung's theory of archetypes within the collective unconscious, has had a significant influence, viewing myth as a symbolic expression of universal psychic structures. Equally important are the studies of Arnold van Gennep on rites of passage, in which initiation is understood as a culturally established mechanism of personal transformation.

At the same time, the concept of the monomyth has been subject to well-founded criticism in contemporary scholarship. Researchers (A. Dundes, R. Segal, and others) point to Campbell's methodological selectivity, his tendency to universalize heterogeneous cultural forms, and the risk of reducing the specific historical and national features of myths. These debates fit within the broader context of discussions about the permissible limits of structural and comparative analysis.

When considering the function of the monomyth in literary studies, several key roles can be distinguished. First, it serves as a formal model for plot analysis, enabling the identification of deep structural correspondences between texts.

Second, the monomyth proves to be a productive tool for cross-cultural comparison, revealing typological similarities between mythological and literary narratives. Third, within the framework of narrative theory, it facilitates the study of archetypal images and stable plot patterns that shape artistic thinking.

Conclusion

Thus, in literary studies, the monomyth represents a complex theoretical category that reflects the humanities' endeavor to identify the universal foundations of narrative. Despite justified criticism, the concept of the monomyth retains heuristic value as an analytical tool, allowing scholars to interpret myth and literature in their structural and symbolic interrelations. Its scholarly significance lies in expanding interdisciplinary dialogue and deepening the understanding of the narrative mechanisms of culture.

An analysis of the monomyth of the “hero’s journey” in the works of M. Y. Lermontov leads to the conclusion that the universal narrative model undergoes a fundamental transformation within the framework of Romantic poetics. The Lermontovian hero retains the archetypal structure of the monomyth, yet loses its theological completeness. As a result, a distinct type of tragic, existential monomyth emerges, reflecting the crisis of individual and cultural values in the nineteenth century. This interpretation confirms the productive potential of applying the theory of the monomyth to the analysis of classical literature, provided it is adapted in a historical and philosophical context.

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