

STORYTELLING IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE: A HISTORICAL VIEW

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The evolution of Russian literature saw its inception with the advent of stories influenced by Western norms, championed by leading figures of the sentimentalist movement. Throughout the 19th century, luminaries like Pushkin, Gogol, and Chekhov solidified Russia's literary presence on the global stage with their seminal works. In the ensuing 20th century, socialist realism, as the official state ideology, wielded hegemonic influence over artistic expression, including within the realm of storytelling. Nonetheless, the genre of the story retained its artistic merit, producing notable writers despite adherence to ideological mandates. The dissolution of the USSR precipitated a period of democratization within Russian literature, mirroring global trends, with postmodernism emerging as the predominant literary zeitgeist.

Keywords: Russian literature, Soviet literature, postmodernism, democratization

1. Introduction

In the annals of Russian political history, the prevailing worldview of its rulers or governing elites has wielded unparalleled influence, profoundly shaping the trajectory and destiny of Russian literature. This hegemonic sway is exemplified through three pivotal events in Russian literary evolution. The first of these epochs is epitomized by the reign of Peter I. During his tenure from 1689 to 1725, Peter I enacted sweeping reforms that heralded the advent of Westernization within Russia. This epoch witnessed a liberalization of Western cultural inflow, fostering nascent attempts at the assimilation of Russian literature into the broader Western literary canon.

The denouement of this transformative period is signified by the year 1917, which marks the ascendance of the Soviet state and the subsequent dictation of literary norms and narratives by its ideological apparatus. While the rubric of "Soviet literature" ostensibly encompasses the literary output of diverse ethnicities within the Soviet Union, the primacy of Russian language, culture, and literature remained undisputed. Consequently, the geographic expanse delineated by the borders of the post-USSR Russian Federation became not only the cradle of Russian ethnicity but also the bastion of Soviet literary tradition.

The denouement of Soviet literature in 1991, concurrent with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, heralded a gradual erosion of socialist literary mores, commencing in earnest with the advent of Perestroika. In the nascent post-Soviet epoch, literature has burgeoned in tandem with the burgeoning democratization movements sweeping through society.

2. Emerging Characteristics of the Story Genre in New Russian Literature

The genesis of 19th-century Russian literature is rooted in the oeuvre of both elder statesmen and burgeoning talents of preceding epochs. While the corpus of 19th-century literature may not yet rival its counterparts in quantity, its historical import is underscored by a series of innovative strides. Scholars concur that this

epochal shift in Russia's political narrative demarcates the inception of "old Russian literature" before integration with the Western canon, "new Russian literature" coinciding with Peter I's reforms, and the subsequent era of "Soviet literature". Yet, the ontological contours of 19th-century Russian literature remain the subject of ongoing scholarly debate. [2]

This section examines stories that meet Western literature criteria to highlight the innovative practices of authors and identify characteristics of the story genre in old Russian literature. Some literary historians consider the end of old Russian literature to be the tsarist period of Peter I (1689—1725), marking a cultural turning point in Russian history. Peter I's reforms aimed to transform Russia into a European-like state with a strong defense, altering both the appearance and mentality of the Russian people. For example, between 1700 and 1701, Peter I issued orders for the nobility to shave their beards, wear German or French clothes, and become literate and numerate, punishing those who resisted these changes. [3]

We will explore how these reforms are reflected in the selected stories, understanding the genre's evolution. It is crucial to define what constitutes a story and which works qualify, as old Russian literature's stories do not always meet contemporary criteria. In Western literature—comprising French, English, German, and American works—the story genre has specific standards. Russian literature began adopting these Western values in the second half of the 18th century. The essential question here is: What distinguishes these stories from those in old Russian literature? Answering this will clarify the criteria for contemporary stories. [1]

In his work "Russian Culture from the Earliest Periods to the Present," V.V. Dolgov explains the shift in Russian literature during the 17th century, noting it as a period of rigid, unchangeable rules. He highlights that this era saw an innovation in narrative fiction that classical Russian literature did not recognize. Historical figures, such as churchmen, knyazs, and boyars, domi-

nated old Russian literature, leaving little room for fictionalization, as altering historical narratives was equated with lying. These works, often written by aristocrats, depicted real events like wars and societal victories, aiming to teach lessons through a serious and sacred lens.

Lihachyov, a respected scholar of old Russian literature, adds that these works sought to comfort and fascinate the reader through familiar rituals, with subjects closely tied to Russian history and life. Literature from this period often repeated previous works and focused on religion, guiding readers in line with state control mechanisms. During Catherine II's reign (1762-1796), literature's primary function was to educate and direct thought. [1]

One major distinction between old and new Russian literature is the use of narrative techniques. Old Russian literature lacked a distinct narrator, a role often assumed by the writer themselves. In the second half of the 18th century, early Western-style Russian stories, such as Mikhail Dmitryevich Chulkov's "Anyone's Mistake" (1766), began to incorporate narrative techniques from German literature while maintaining a parable-like character.

In the 18th century, three significant movements influenced Russian literature in the 19th century. The first was classicism, also known as "pseudo-classicism" by some scholars. Key figures included A.D. Kantemir, V.K. Trediakovski, and M.V. Lomonosov in its early phase, followed by M.M. Heraskov, Ya.B. Knyajnin, and G.R. Derjavin during its rise. A.J.P. Sumarokov applied classicism principles in a developed form in his tragedies and comedies. [5]

The second movement, termed "fictional realism" by V.V. Dolgov, was exemplified by D.I. Fonvizin's comedies "Brigadir" and "Nedorosl," which adhered to classicism principles while presenting events realistically.

The third movement, sentimentalism, emerged in the second half of the 18th century, influenced by Western and American literature. Sentimentalist writers idealized human emotions and nature. This period also marked the beginning of the story genre in Russian literature. Nikolay Mikhailovich Karamzin, a key sentimentalist, successfully applied Western literary criteria in his works. His long story "Poor Liza" (1792) received significant attention for its content and form. Despite classicism's disdain for prose genres like novels and stories, Karamzin's serialized novels were well-received by readers. [8]

Sumarokov, a prominent classicist, viewed novels as "less beneficial and more harmful." However, the success of Karamzin's stories indicated a shift. The quantity and quality of stories produced during this period, along with reader response, suggest that sentimentalism played a crucial role in aligning Russian literature with Western standards and gaining reader acceptance. Although not initially recognized as a serious literary movement, sentimentalism significantly contributed to the evolution of Russian literature.

The 19th century saw Russian literature fully integrate into Western literature across various genres, in-

cluding romanticism, realism, critical realism, and naturalism. Key figures in short stories from the first half of the century include Pushkin, Gogol, and Chekhov, with Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy also contributing significantly.

Anton Chekhov emerged as a leading figure in the latter half of the century, pioneering the short story genre. Romanticism dominated the early 19th century, with A.S. Pushkin (1799-1837) representing both romanticism and realism. Pushkin is considered the founder of modern Russian literature, known for his innovative narrative techniques and influential characters. M. Epstein notes that Pushkin completed the secularization of Russian culture initiated by Peter the Great. [2]

Pushkin's stories can be grouped into traditional prose and poetic forms ("poema"). Notable poetic works include "Caucasian Prisoner," "Gypsies," and "Bahçesaray Fountain." His prose works, such as "The Tales of Belkin," "Little Tragedies," and "The Captain's Daughter," were pivotal in developing the story genre. "The Tales of Belkin" is seen as a transition from romanticism to realism, with the character Belkin serving as a modest narrator.

Pushkin's historical stories, like "The Captain's Daughter," were influenced by Walter Scott, and Karamzin's work also reflected historical themes. These stories brought Russian literature closer to contemporary life. N.V. Gogol (1809-1852) was the first prominent short story writer, with his collection "Evening Meetings on a Farm Near Dikanka" marking a transition from poetry to prose and from romantic stories to realistic novels. [6]

The psychological distress and eventual self-destruction of the "little person" in the big city are common themes in Gogol's Petersburg stories like "Portrait," "Memoirs of a Madman," and "The Overcoat." In these works, the narrator is typically close to the characters, occasionally sharing thoughts about events and people. In "Diary of a Madman," the main character narrates events through letters. [7]

In the 19th century, writers like Griboyedov, Pushkin, Lermontov, Goncharov, Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy addressed socio-cultural issues and World War II, influencing reforms like the abolition of serfdom in 1861. Gogol, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy also explored religious themes from diverse perspectives. Chekhov, a pinnacle of secular literature, also touched on religious subjects.

During this period, some writers, nostalgic for the past and with a particular religious outlook, faced severe criticism from progressive intellectuals and literary circles, who even attempted to suppress their work. One such writer was Nikolay Semyonovich Leskov (1831-1895), known for his stories. Despite recognition from Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Gorki, Leskov was marginalized during the Soviet era due to his religious views but was revived in literary discussions after the perestroika period. [7]

In 1861, Nikolay Leskov moved to Petersburg and began working in periodicals, quickly gaining attention in literary circles. However, his career took a turn due to an unfortunate incident. In 1862, amidst rumors that

students opposed to the tsarist system were causing fires in Petersburg, Leskov published an article in "Severnaya Pchela" urging the police to either confirm the students' guilt or dispel the rumors. This article led to backlash, and despite his clarifications, he was blacklisted by progressives as a conservative journalist.

Leskov's conservative identity was also shaped by his disappointment with the social and cultural changes following the abolition of serfdom, which he found unsatisfactory compared to the old order. Additionally, his religious upbringing influenced his perspectives. Known for his oppositional nature, Leskov engaged in fierce debates with both the revolutionary democratic journal "Sovremennik" and the Slavic nationalist magazine "Den".

Leskov is praised for capturing Russian life through his short and long stories rather than novels (Vedutskaya, 1996:21), a feat similarly attributed to Chekhov in later years. His stories "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk" (1865) and "The Enchanted Wanderer" (1866), now considered masterpieces, were largely ignored at the time. In "Laughter and Grief" (1871), Leskov employs satire, continuing Gogol's tradition of self-criticism of local traits. His religious-themed stories like "The Sealed Angel" (1872), "The Enchanted Wanderer" (1873), and "Lefty" (1881) feature personal narration. Some of his works, such as "The Hare's Fur Coat" (1894), resemble Aesopian fables.

The critical environment of the 1860s was complex. Leading writers like Leskov, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Goncharov, and Dostoyevsky rejected the authority and intellectual basis of realistic criticism, according to Pecherskaya. [3]

In the realm of 19th-century short story writers, A.P. Chekhov stands out prominently. Known for his stories and dramas, Chekhov initially employed pseudonyms like "The Man Without Spleen" and "Antyosha Chehonte." His early works exuded humor but gradually evolved into a melancholic tone. Despite his initial narrative approach, Chekhov maintained an impartial stance toward his subjects, often describing events with ironic detachment. He adamantly defended this impartiality when questioned about subjective elements in his stories, emphasizing his focus on readers' interpretation. [1]

Chekhov's stories often contain narrative gaps, inviting readers to fill in the blanks. In the context of the flourishing Russian novel spearheaded by Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy in the latter half of the century, Chekhov's success is notable, particularly considering the brevity and conciseness of his narratives, a departure from the verbose style of his contemporaries. Chekhov himself acknowledged the effectiveness of leaving certain details unsaid, expressing uncertainty about the rationale behind it. [8]

In his works, Chekhov delves into the inner transformations of his characters, featuring individuals from diverse social backgrounds and occasionally incorporating animals like in "Kashtanka." Despite his focus on contemporary life, Chekhov eschewed historical subjects, unlike many of his Russian peers who found inspiration in Russian history.

The period between 1890 and 1917 marked a complex phase in Russian literature, characterized by polyphony and diverse literary movements such as symbolism, acmeism, naturalism, realism, expressionism, socialist realism, and futurism. Figures like M. Gorki and V. Mayakovsky played pivotal roles in shaping the literary landscape and societal future, while others vehemently opposed the establishment of the Soviet Union.

The year 1917 marks a significant turning point in Russian history, symbolizing the commencement of profound political, social, economic, and cultural restructuring. This period witnessed the exodus of dissident writers, known as the "first wave of immigration," who left Russia between 1917 and 1920 due to the upheaval caused by the restructuring movement. For the first time, a substantial number of literary figures departed from their cultural homeland for political reasons, leading to the division of 20th-century Russian literature into two categories: "Soviet literature" and "Russian literature abroad." [6]

Soviet literature, spanning from 1917 to 1991, was shaped by a distinct worldview influenced by the new political structure. Although many writers from the 19th century continued to contribute, the Soviet era introduced unique dynamics. Literary groups were disbanded, and the Writers' Union was established to centralize writers. Policies aimed at nationalizing literature and promoting socialist realism as the state's official literary movement were implemented. Publishing practices evolved with the emergence of terms like "gosizdat," "samizdat," and "tamizdat." Suspicious deaths of prominent writers, including suicides of Yesenin, Blok, and Mayakovsky, raised questions in literary circles.

Efforts were made to translate literature from Soviet ethnicities into Russian under the banner of "brotherhood of peoples," enriching Russian literature with diverse content. Conversely, Russian literature's strong influence on Soviet literature prompted shifts in their respective values. Soviet writers predominantly wrote in Russian to reach a vast readership. Contemporary writers like Cengiz Aytmatov and Fazil Iskender transitioned from Soviet to Russian identities, reflecting the evolving landscape of literature amidst political transformations.

The Soviet period saw the emergence of five Nobel Prize-winning Russian writers and poets: I.A. Bunin (1933), B.L. Pasternak (1958), M.A. Sholokhov (1965), A.I. Solzhenitsyn (1970), and I.A. Brodsky (1987). With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russian literary scholars adopted new approaches to evaluating 20th-century literature, fostering a more objective perspective. This shift is exemplified in contemporary assessments of M. Gorky, a key figure of the era, where scholars aim to uncover previously overlooked aspects of his work. [5]

Gorky initially aligned with romantic traditions before becoming a prominent advocate of socialist realism. This movement, prevalent in Soviet literature, tasked writers with educating society through portrayals of socialist ideals and heroic characters. Socialist realism blurred the lines between fiction and reality, often depicting the sacrifices made for the collective good,

particularly during World War II. Postmodernism emerged in the 1970s, challenging established literary norms and introducing unconventional narrative techniques.

Sasha Sokolov and Vladimir Nabokov are notable figures in the postmodern movement, characterized by their experimentation with narrative structure and rejection of traditional storytelling conventions. Postmodern literature encourages reader engagement, blurring the boundaries between author and audience. Works in this genre often feature fragmented narratives, unconventional use of language, and intertextuality, reflecting a departure from conventional literary forms and a rejection of established values. [4]

Following the introduction of Western literary values into Russian literature, authors continued to innovate in the story genre while building upon the foundation laid by their predecessors. Pushkin's "Stories in the form of poems" expanded the classification of story genres in Russian literature, incorporating elements of Western prose alongside unique Russian poetic traditions. These works, rooted in Russian culture and history, infused folklore and fairy tales into their content, lending originality to epic poetry and prose stories. Despite their traditional appearance, stories in the form of poems diverge from conventional story genres by blending poetry with prose and drama elements. [4]

Gogol's "Dead Souls" notably exemplifies this departure from established literary norms, employing prose in a poema format derived from his "Komedia". Recent Russian literature reflects a trend towards democratization and a rejection of Soviet literary values and traditions. While further analysis is required to fully characterize stories from this period, it is evident that Russian literature is undergoing a transformative phase.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, this historical overview underscores the dynamic evolution of storytelling within Russian literature across centuries. Commencing with the assimilation of Western literary norms by sentimentalists in the 19th century, Russian storytelling flourished through the contributions of iconic figures like Pushkin, Gogol, and Chekhov, solidifying its place among global classics. However, the 20th century ushered in a period dominated by socialist realism, where the state's ideological dictates steered literary expression, including the genre of storytelling.

Despite the constraints imposed by socialist realism, noteworthy storytellers persisted, demonstrating resilience and artistic prowess within a restrictive environment. Nevertheless, with the disintegration of the USSR, Russian literature embarked on a journey of democratization, reflecting broader societal shifts. Postmodernism emerged as a prominent literary trend, challenging traditional narrative structures and inviting reader participation in meaning-making.

This historical trajectory underscores the adaptive nature of Russian storytelling, which has continuously responded to shifting cultural, political, and social landscapes. From its inception as a vehicle for Western literary influence to its role as a tool for ideological conformity during the Soviet era, storytelling in Russian literature has weathered various upheavals, demonstrating both continuity and innovation.

Looking ahead, the democratization of Russian literature presents opportunities for diverse voices and narratives to flourish, transcending the confines of ideological constraints. As postmodernism continues to shape literary expression, Russian storytelling is poised to explore new frontiers, embracing experimentation and plurality.

In summary, this overview illuminates the multifaceted journey of storytelling within Russian literature, highlighting its resilience, adaptability, and capacity for renewal. As the literary landscape evolves, storytelling remains a powerful medium through which Russian authors navigate the complexities of their cultural heritage while engaging with contemporary global discourses.

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