

MYTHOLOGIZING OF V. NABOKOV IN THE MEDIA SPACE AND AMERICAN CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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The article touches upon the personality of Nabokov, as it is portrayed in the mass consciousness of American readers mainly. The researcher elaborately analyzes the factors that contributed to the imprint of the writer's mythologized image in the media and popular culture after Nabokov's success in the literary field. The paper examines how Nabokov himself contributed to the formation of his popular media image and to what extent the mythmaking of the author's biography influenced the journalists and readers' perception of his figure. In conclusion, it is resumed how the image of Nabokov the mythical character relates to Nabokov the human.

Keywords: Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, myth, mythologeme, pop culture, mass literature.

Nabokov's active functioning in the media space and cultural consciousness of the Western audience began after the publication of the novel *Lolita* in 1955. The novel's scandalous success brought about the interest of the public and the press. Such prominent American authors as William Styron, Lionel Trilling and others drew attention to Nabokov, and many leading magazines as *Life*, *Playboy*, *Esquire* competed to interview him. Positive reviews from some widely respected publishers and critics helped to suppress the accusations of revealing the forbidden topics that Nabokov was exposed to, but public resentment about the publication and distribution of the novel did occur [Boyd 1991: 442].

Nevertheless, the circumstances favored Nabokov. As a result, in the 1960s, the author was in the spotlight as the author of *Lolita*, and his subsequent novels *Pnin*, *Pale Fire* etc. were discussed and studied mainly in academic circles. Almost a year and a half after its publication in the United States, *Lolita* remained on the New York Times bestseller list. "*Lolita* was that rare cultural phenomenon that left its mark in public consciousness from

the most austere member of the intellectual community to sweaty-palmed adolescents in small-town America” [Barton Johnson 2002: 139]. Nabokov's face appeared on the covers of magazines, the circulation of his books increased greatly, new translations of his novels appeared, including Russian-language ones, written earlier. From 1962 to 1972 the author of *Lolita* managed to give more than thirty interviews, his quotes were snapped up by American editorials, his name was set as an example for young writers, his novels bore a “certified” quality mark.

The success was furthered with the release of *Lolita*'s screen adaptation, directed by Stanley Kubrick in 1962. Despite the fact that the film was negatively reviewed by many critics, and Nabokov himself expressed disappointment that the director had changed his script beyond recognition, the film gained popularity later, in the 1980s, becoming a cinema classic at the expense of Kubrick's other films and his respected persona. Moreover, by the 1980s the scandalous novel was evaluated by the average American and European readers not in terms of its sensational material, but regarding its artistic merit [Vickers 2008: 120].

Despite all the successes and failures related to the publication, acceptance and adaptation of the novel, it became a phenomenon of American culture, raising its author up to the level of a pop star. Nabokov's popularity, his influence on the next generation of American literature, the incorporation of *Lolita*'s image into the cultural system of the 20th and 21st centuries created a space for the mythologizing of Nabokov, so that the figure of a largely odious and wayward author would be more consistent with the modern pop-cultural discourse.

Nabokov became an icon of the new American literature, and his popular novel is among the front-rank texts on which American youth like beatniks, hippies and other non-conformist movements of the 60s and 70s were brought up. *Lolita* is included in the American almanac *Classic Cult Fiction: A Companion to Popular Cult Literature*, well-known in those years, along with such cult modern classics as *Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger or *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac [Stringer-Hye 2002: 153].

Comparison with Kerouac's novel is especially symptomatic, because *the road* is one of the prime toponyms in both works. A prairie-lined road with roadside motels and eateries is a fundamental image not only of mid-century American novels, but also the main symbol of American pop culture, the scene of many pastoral stories, songs that migrated to larger spheres of art afterwards. It is worth mentioning the famous story of the musician Robert Johnson, who sold his soul to the devil at a magical desert crossroads in exchange for the ability to masterfully play the blues. The road is a plot-forming element in one of the most frequently read American novels – *The Adventures*

of *Huckleberry Finn* by M. Twain. The category of the road, travelling on the American southern prairies, is firmly imprinted in the American cultural consciousness and has turned into a clear mythologeme which encompasses a certain paradigm of myths.

The image of the road is significant for many literary texts, and the more often it occurs in fiction, the more deeply it is imprinted in the reader's mind. Therefore, Nabokov, as a devoted reader of world classical literature, consciously or not, deduces this image, and turns it into an independent unit of the text, which acts along with the characters. The peculiarity of the road, as a mythologeme, was emphasized by the Russian philologist Vladimir Toporov: "In the most significant literary texts of modern times, a genuine mythopoetic and self-sufficient space is generated again and again, which acts as a counterbalance to the falling away and technicized images of space. This new conquest, the spiritualization of space, takes place in different directions and in different ways. Among them is the creation of new mythologemes about space, which sometimes become the leitmotif of entire texts and are *played out* not only at the level of images and ideas, but also at the actual linguistic level" [Топоров 1983: 272].

This is a fairly accurate resume, and if we apply it to Nabokov, we can trace a certain fictional continuity: from the *space* that acts in ancient and classical texts to the *road* of Kerouac and Nabokov, which organizes the characters' lifestyle. The image of the road, or space in general, is an ancient and complex foundation for the construction of many plots, because even one of the first literary monuments – Homer's epic *Odyssey* – is based on the hero's journey. The road becomes a kind of symbol of unpredictability, mystery; launches the mechanism of movement backward, returning to the origins (after all, Odysseus journey is a journey back home, where he belongs to). It is worth remembering Humbert's perception of the road: "Gently, dreamily, not exceeding twenty miles an hour, I drove on that *queer mirror side*. Traffic was light... Passing through a red light *was like a sip of forbidden Burgundy when I was a child*" [Nabokov 2011: 349].

So, actualizing the elements of American mythological consciousness, Nabokov himself becomes a part of the mythology of the country, which sheltered him after fleeing from occupied France and gave him a fertile ground for art. Having appeared on the covers of glossy magazines, Nabokov attracted the attention of young nonconformist people, the main troubadours of American independent pop culture. *Playboy* magazine put him on a par with such celebrities as Frank Sinatra, Malcolm X, Jean-Paul Sartre, Timothy Leary and The Beatles [Stringer-Hye 2002: 151].

The construction of myths by the media was vividly illustrated by the Romanian culturologist Mircea Eliade. He described how personalities are mythologized with the involvement of mass media: “Biggie Muldoon, a Yankee City policeman, becomes a national hero, as he turns out to be such a vivid spokesman for the opposition ... that the press and radio make him *a demigod*. Then, when the public gets tired of this image, the media turns Biggie into a scoundrel, a corrupt policeman who profits from the troubles of the people” [Eliade 1963: 172].

It can be delicately said that Nabokov turned out to be a puppet in the merciless media world as well as Eliade’s Biggie Muldoon. Journalists paid close attention to Nabokov’s figure, when they realized the resonance, the book had caused among literary critics and what controversial reputation it could have among readers. 15 years before *Lolita* was published in the *Olympia Press*, Nabokov was an unremarkable professor of Russian and European literature at Cornell University, and his literary merits were appreciated only by a small circle of writers and literary critics. Once in the mass media spotlight, Nabokov was mailed with contracts from different foreign editors who looked forward to the translation and publication of *Lolita*. He received invitations to lecture at six universities and the Library of Congress, students lined up outside his office waiting for him to sign the copies of *Lolita* [Boyd 1991: 375].

Of course, the main phase of Nabokov’s mythologizing was his participation in the screen adaptation of *Lolita*. This is how Nabokov describes himself during the collaboration with Kubrick in the foreword to the screenplay: “Crowds awaiting the limousines that drew up one by one, and there I, too, ride, as eager and innocent as the fans who peer into my car hoping to glimpse James Mason but finding only the placid profile of a stand-in for Hitchcock” [Nabokov 1997: 29]. It is noteworthy that Nabokov himself was not averse to being on the same list with long-time mythologized characters, naturally between the Hollywood star James Mason and the author of commercially successful thrillers Alfred Hitchcock.

The longer Nabokov was in the limelight of the press and publishers, the more he tried to live up to his controversial pop star image. The writer was always inclined to assess his talent idealistically, but the perception of his own popularity formed a mythological self-awareness. Here we are dealing with *mythological consciousness*, which was characterized by a famous researcher Alexey Losev. In *Dialectics of Myth*, he wrote that mythological consciousness structures things, objects, personalities, including one’s own *ego* into dialectically necessary categories of being. Therefore, when a person dialectically approaches self-awareness, it becomes an object of mythological consciousness’s reflection [Лосев 1994: 441].

Dialectical awareness of Nabokov's own *ego* is formed under the influence of the popularity that took its toll on him. Over the years he fought his way into literature, as a result he “became infamous overnight” regardless of his exceptional talent and dedication, but due to the coincidence of certain circumstances that synthesized from the innovative subject revealed in *Lolita* and the influence of the media on modern mass consciousness. Of course, the positive perception of his previous novels in Europe and the United States confirmed the author's self-confidence, but only after the success of *Lolita* did he encounter the machinery of marketing and promotion. This was not only a vastly larger public stage than Nabokov had previously known, but it was one growing by the year [White 2017: 97].

Over time, the writer created a grotesque mythical halo around his personality. He made up stories and genuinely believed in them himself, supplementing his mythological biography in this way. Nabokov's biographer Brian Boyd described how, after the release of *Lolita* film, the writer recalled a dream he had had after the death of his uncle Vasily Rukavishnikov in 1916. In a dream the uncle said to the growing Volodya: “I shall come back to you as *Harry* and *Kuvyrkin*””. Forty years later Nabokov was approached by producer *Harris* and film director *Kubrick*, whose surnames were consonant with the names of circus clowns, whose names were allegedly pronounced by his uncle in a dream [Boyd 1991: 366]. It can be assumed that here Nabokov fanatically endows his personality with the magical ability to divine and predict the future retroactively composing events that supposedly have a transcendental connection with his present. Endowing the myth with something magical or *queer* is a completely justified move from Losev's perspective, for whom *myth* was a *magic name*. Boyd prudently declares that the names *Harry* and *Kuvyrkin*, as well as circus clowns, did not exist in reality [Boyd 1991: 366].

In his interviews with various journalists, which we can read in the collection *Strong Opinions* and the fictional autobiography *Speak, Memory* Nabokov actively continues to create a suitable mythology around his artistic destiny. Like any mythical character, Nabokov must have an appropriate genealogy. His prominent lineage is not limited to the famous father *Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov*, who was a secretary of the Russian Provisional Government after the February Revolution and helped draft the document for Grand Duke Michael's refusal of the throne. Historians also know the name of his grandfather D. N. Nabokov, who was the minister of justice under Alexander II and Alexander III. But what is not confirmed by any documents is that one of the rivers on Novaya Zemlya is named after his great-grandfather Nikolay Nabokov.

In *Strong Opinions* Nabokov writes that his cousin Sergei told him about their great-grandfather Nikolay, “a young naval officer” (rank is not specified) who participated in the expedition of the famous Admiral Golovnin to Novaya Zemlya, and after whom his colleagues named “a little river winding between wet rocks” [Nabokov 1999: 36]. Here is a quote from a letter to his brother Sergei provided by Boyd: “When I think that my son Dmitri is an alpinist (and has climbed an unclimbed peak in British Columbia) and that I myself have discovered and named a number of butterflies... the Nabokov River in Nova Zembla acquires an almost mystical significance” [Boyd 1993: 17]. Mythological consciousness tells Nabokov that this event is mystically connected with the discoveries of Nabokov and his son, Dmitri Nabokov, in various research areas.

Unfortunately, Nabokov never found out that his cousin's guess did not match reality. Boyd continues: “Nikolay Nabokov was no intrepid explorer, and his name graces that remote river only because his friend Count Lütke chose to commemorate his Naval Corpse colleague in the course of his 1821-18244 expeditions in this region. In fact, the military career of Nikolay Nabokov was bland and brief” [Boyd 1993: 17]. However, the myth of the great-grandfather-discoverer organically fits into the *royalish* bloodline of three subsequent unconditionally successful Nabokov, descendants of the *mystical* navigator.

In Nabokov's biography there are some other eye-catching episodes, the refutation of which, in contrast to the story with the great-grandfather, is conditional, but this does not make them less mythical. There is a well-known story, mentioned by Nabokov in a conversation with the publisher Alfred Appel about the alleged meeting with Franz Kafka in Berlin: “I used to ride in the Berlin Elevated [train] with Kafka, in 1922 or '23... Often he sat across from me. Of course, I didn't know it then, but I'm certain it was Kafka... One could not forget that face, its pallor, the tightness of the skin, those most extraordinary eyes, hypnotic yes glowing in a cave... Years later when I first saw a photo of Kafka I recognized him immediately. And more recently I learned from [Max Brod's] biography, or Kafka's letters, that he and his mistress lived in the district where that man departed each time” [Appel 1986: 19–20].

For greater certainty Nabokov lists facts that seem indisputable, as proof that it was Kafka who was his fellow traveler. The skeptical Brian Boyd argues that if these meetings did take place in 1922 or even in the first half of 1923, Nabokov could not meet Kafka at all, because the German-speaking writer with his beloved Dora moved to Berlin only in September 1923. In addition, Boyd's doubts were shared by Nabokov's wife, Vera, who insisted that this memory “was born many years later” [Boyd 1993: 227].

During the American and Swiss period of his life Nabokov was inclined to speculate on the topic of the “Russian-speaking” stage in his art. His inclination to reassess the artistic path in *Sirin*’s period (*Vladimir Sirin* – Nabokov’s alias in 1921–1940) was noted by the literary critic A. Dolinin: “... another component of the myth he created about his Russian prehistory was the assertion of his own exclusiveness and exclusion from any modern literary context” [Долинин 2004: 24].

A. Dolinin’s statement is confirmed by the words of Nabokov himself about his alienation from the world of German and French “aborigines” and denial of belonging to the community of Russian *intelligenti*. Nabokov of the American period is distinguished by a very arrogant attitude towards the inhabitants of France and Germany, calling them “a formless and faceless mass of natives” [Nabokov 1994: 216]. This arrogance extends to the Russian-speaking fellow writers whom he had to deal with in Berlin and Paris. In his interviews and autobiography he does not expand on his active participation in Berlin literary circles and in the meetings of the Paris discussion club *Krug*.

However, in *Speak, Memory* Nabokov describes in detail his discouraging meeting with Ivan Bunin, whom he considered his poetic predecessor in the youth, in one of the Parisian salons: “Toward the end of the meal we were utterly bored with each other” [Nabokov 1994: 224]. The book also contains some other descriptions of his contacts with Russian emigrants, which did not bring him much pleasure. Nabokov did not seem to be like this to Alfred Appel, to whom he told about the imaginary meeting with Kafka that inspired him.

It is not surprising that almost all researchers, publishers and journalists who managed to communicate with Nabokov are unequivocal about his snobbery. This was noted by Nabokov himself: “...[people] accuse me of snobbery in reverse, when I maintain that in the course of almost one-fifth of the century spent in Western Europe I have not had... more than two good friends all told” [Nabokov 1994: 217]. Nabokov’s irreconcilability with many attributes of popular culture, alien Parisian salon traditions, a crowd of “aborigines” and many other factors of everyday life complement his mythical image in a glaze of Western readers’ cultural consciousness. As a representative of *intelligentsia* claiming the unique and inimitable taste, Nabokov ex post facto denied the desire for recognition in society. He also denied any influence and any connections that helped him climb to the literary pedestal. But it all was said after he no longer needed anyone’s help.

Nabokov was not taken aback after the press and readers’ attention surrounded him, but, on the contrary, contributed to the formation of his contradictory image with various provocative statements: “I pride myself on being a person with no public appeal... I have never belonged to any club or group. No creed or school has had any influence on me whatsoever” [Nabokov 1990: 3].

Closer to the end of his life Nabokov achieved what he aspired to, unconsciously or not. His image of a snob, irreconcilable with the modern cultural discourse of an intellectual was introduced by his mythological self-awareness into the Absolute. His later novels were sold not only on *Lolita*'s commercial streak, but also thanks to the formed image of a mythical character that struggled with the conjuncture all his life, and then left for the far corners of Switzerland to catch butterflies. It is also worth noting elitism in his interests and tastes, a piquant choice of hobbies, the inimitable synthesis of which emphasizes his uniqueness, saturates his mythological biography with colorful images. "My pleasures are the most intense known to man: writing and butterfly hunting" [Nabokov 1990: 3]. "In the course of my twenty years of exile I devoted a prodigious amount of time to the composing of chess problems" [Nabokov 1994: 226].

In recent years Nabokov, putting aside writing matters, maintained his mythologized image by communicating with interviewers and telling them stories from his past, the mythological one though, which the writer himself stuck to. Perhaps behind the figure of a "demigod", the author of elitist novels and stories hid the vulnerable Vladimir Nabokov-Sirin inside, who actually had had to endure many difficulties in his youth, and who had spent a lot of time and effort for the sake of universal recognition his unique talent.

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МИФОЛОГИЗАЦИЯ В. НАБОКОВА В СРЕДСТВАХ МАССОВОЙ ИНФОРМАЦИИ И АМЕРИКАНСКОМ КУЛЬТУРНОМ СОЗНАНИИ

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В статье анализируется личность Набокова, какой она рисуется в массовом сознании преимущественно американских читателей. Предпринята попытка детально разобрать те факторы, которые способствовали укреплению мифологизованного образа писателя в СМИ и популярной молодежной культуре после завоевания Набоковым успеха на литературном поприще. В работе рассматривается, как сам Набоков способствовал формированию своего популярного медийного образа и в какой степени мифотворчество в биографии автора повлияло на восприятие его фигуры журналистами и читателями. В заключении сделан вывод, как образ мифического персонажа Набокова соотносится с Набоковым-человеком.

Ключевые слова: Владимир Набоков, «Лолита», миф, мифологема, поп-культура, массовая литература.

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