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TRANSFORMATION OF THE IMAGE OF «TURGENEV'S GIRL» IN MODERN RUSSIAN PROSE.

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Abstract

The goal of the article is to carry out an intertextual analysis of a number of modern prose texts and their fragments written in the end of XX and the beginning of the XXI centuries. Such an analysis allows to determine if the general understanding of the female image has changed in literature and to show the differences in description of a female character in the works of the writers of the end of XX and the beginning of the XXI centuries. V. Erofeev presents for the Russian reader a new kind of strong deep female image. His heroine bears the features of sacrifice and self-denial employed by the writers of the XIX century. L. Ulitskaya significantly changes Turgenev's Asya; introducing into her story a secondary character with a similar name she adds to the image of the «Turgenev's girl» a thirst for material prosperity and absolute spiritual rigidity. S. Streltsov explores the problems of becoming an ideal: he shows the possibility of any person, even orphans from America, to achieve a standard image praised by Turgenev. Post-modern writers V. Kuritsyn and E. Popov in their texts show skeptical attitudes towards Turgenev's heroines, poke fun at them considering them completely obsolete and unnecessary here and now. A deep study of the classical literature and its remake make contemporary authors once again emphasize the «museum nature» of the classical literature and its isolation from the life of the XX–XXI centuries.

Keywords: intertexts; modern Russian literature; literature images; female images; reconsideration.

The intertextual approach to textual interpretation—one of the most sought-after methods in contemporary literary studies—is especially productive for the analysis of modern Russian literature. Any claim to novelty presupposes a comparison between what is being articulated "now" and what has already been said in earlier cultural and literary traditions. The ethical and aesthetic triad of Good/Truth/Beauty formulated in canonical works constitutes a foundational layer in the worldview formation of later readers, including today's writers. This explains the persistent impulse of contemporary authors to "think through" inherited themes, revisit unresolved problems, and rework plots and images belonging to the national literary canon. One such cultural construct is the figure of the "Turgenev girl," more precisely, the "mythopoetic stereotype" (Tolstay 2014: 294) that emerged through readers' long-term reception of Ivan Turgenev's texts.

Over time, the female characters created by Turgenev attained a fame that arguably surpasses that of many other Russian literary heroines. Though these images often share similar features, they stand out within the broader gallery of Russian women characters. For this reason, "Turgenev girls" acquired a generalized name and came to function as a cultural phenomenon,

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socially meaningful and recognizable as a stereotype of the "Russian woman." Vladimir Nabokov wrote about Turgenev's heroines that each contains "enormous moral strength," kindness, and not only the capacity but even an intense desire to sacrifice all earthly hopes for what they consider duty—whether that means renouncing personal happiness for higher moral ideals (Liza) or relinquishing worldly well-being for the sake of pure passion (Natalia). Nabokov also emphasized that Turgenev envelops his heroines in a distinctive beauty—soft, poetic, and deeply attractive to readers—which helped create an elevated image of Russian womanhood (Nabokov 2015: 99).

In shaping the "Turgenev girl," the author significantly reworks earlier Pushkinian models, grounded in natural, vivid emotions. Traits associated with Pushkin's "faithful ideal" (Pushkin 1986: 336)—Tatiana Larina's calmness, confidence, honesty, sharpened sense of responsibility, and inner balance—are transferred into Turgenev's harmonious female characters, marked by spiritual beauty. While the cultural model of the heroine changed over time, strength of spirit and will, inner separateness, and independence remained key features of the "Turgenev girl." Turgenev's contemporary Gustave Flaubert highlighted the writer's mastery of female characterization: "One of your qualities is the ability to create women. They are ideal and real at the same time. They possess an attractive power and are surrounded by radiance" (Flaubert 1984: 423). G. B. Kurlyandskaya similarly notes that Turgenev's heroines, drawn through romantic idealization and an accentuated ideal content, carry a powerful potential for moral influence on the reader (Kurlyandskaya 1994: 308).

At the same time, critics have long noted an ambiguity in these portrayals. A. N. Ostrovsky, for instance, perceived excessive affectivity in Turgenev's "ideal" heroines. Writing about *A Nest of the Gentry*, he remarked: "Liza is unbearable to me: this girl seems to suffer from scrofula driven inward" (Ostrovsky). The heroines struggle to manage their emotions, which results in heightened sensitivity, deep inner turmoil, a sense of doom, and the impossibility of happiness. One may assume that Anton Chekhov recognized this quality and further developed it in his own women characters—arguably the next stage in the evolution of the "Turgenev girl," with greater decisiveness and freedom of action.

E. D. Tolstaya, in her study "'Turgenev Girls': the post-romantic portrait and mythopoetics," argues that Turgenev's girls became models for an entire gallery of "new women," especially in European and American literature (Tolstaya 2014: 305). Following this view, it can be suggested that contemporary Russian prose, drawing on the socially established stereotype of the "Turgenev girl," continues to produce images of "new women," though in altered historical and cultural conditions. In the 1990s, a new type of heroine comes to the fore: a young woman whose primary goal is survival amid the harsh realities of a transforming market society. A representative example is Irina Tarakanova in Viktor Erofeev's *Russian Beauty* (1989), one of the most notable works of Russian postmodernism. The title itself frames a national discourse and points toward yet another variation of the "Russian theme." The heroine-narrator "always searched for love… wanted to love and be loved" (Erofeev 2005: 120). Yet the only way to endure the cruelty of the contemporary world is to become a "priestess of love." Tarakanova is linked to the "Turgenev girls" by a readiness for self-renunciation and sacrifice in the name of an imagined moral ideal and happiness. However, as a postmodernist writer, Erofeev deliberately ironizes this yearning for an idealized correction of reality. The heroine imagines herself as "a Russian Joan of Arc" (Erofeev 2005: 303), ready to sacrifice

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herself to an Usurper in order to "fix" Russia and to enter the realm of sainthood—"I'll die, but I'll become a saint… they'll sing of me for ages" (Erofeev 2005: 303).

Another female figure appears in Lyudmila Ulitskaya's novella *Sonechka* (1992): a heroine whose life "seemed to predispose her to become a professional prostitute, but it did not happen" (Ulitskaya 2006: 250). The title enters into dialogue with Russian classical literature, evoking a broad chain of cultural references; moreover, the protagonist's name opens a rich intertextual field. Not only does the etymology of "Sofia" ("wisdom") matter, but the name also "unlocks" a layer of classical texts, enriching the image and prompting the reader to trace the "threads" that extend beyond the boundaries of the novella. Ulitskaya continues this "game with the classics" beyond the central heroine: secondary characters, too, are constructed through direct allusions to literature and history. For the purposes of this article, the crucial figure is Yasya, a Polish orphan who becomes part of Sonechka's small family. Here we encounter an explicit intertextual echo of Turgenev's *Asya* (1857). In Turgenev, naming is semantically charged: Anna is transformed into Asya, and later another woman appears—Anna Nikolaevna—so that the narrative's "name-play" becomes a meaningful device. Ulitskaya develops a comparable strategy. First, Ulitskaya changes only one letter: *Asya* becomes *Yasya*. This shift is significant: the initial "Ya" ("I") foregrounds an ego-centric impulse. Yasya's priorities are basic and pragmatic—food, clothing, warmth; her behavior is motivated by immediate self-preservation. At the same time, her name connotes "brightness" and "clarity," and her presence can be described as illuminating the space around her. Second, the transformation of Yasya into "Yasenka" occurs when she begins living with Robert Ivanovich, while "Sonechka" loses her diminutive suffix and becomes "Sonya," and by the end of the novella the reader sees "the thick, mustached old woman Sofya Iosifovna" (Ulitskaya 2006: 278). The replacement of women in Robert Ivanovich's life is mirrored by changes in name-forms. These shifts also mark life stages: youth (Sonechka), maturity (Sonya), old age (Sofya Iosifovna). Because Yasya lived an "adult" life from early adolescence, she appears "adult" at first; once she enters the family sphere, she is re-infantilized—Yasya becomes Yasenka. The motif of lost or damaged childhood runs through Ulitskaya's narrative, especially in Yasya's storyline.

The contrast with Turgenev is sharp. In *Asya*, life is only beginning: the heroine finishes a boarding school and travels. Ulitskaya, by contrast, depicts a weary adult consciousness in a young body, craving domestic comfort and stability. For Turgenev's Asya, "adultness" is not external behavior but emotional depth; for Ulitskaya's heroine, "adultness" is early forced maturity and a materialistic understanding of life rather than a spiritual one. Both heroines are burdened by the secrecy of their past and hide it in shame. Both experienced a disruptive break at around twelve or thirteen—an especially fragile stage of psychological development. For Asya, the rupture involves being sent away to a boarding school; for Yasya, placement in an orphanage. This shift destabilizes not only their environment but their emotional and psychological baseline, producing a lasting fracture and a confusion of "adult/child" roles. Their outward descriptions include childlike features, which reinforces their vulnerability and invites protection.

Their education is incomplete and fragmented. Asya receives instruction from her father and then at the boarding school; Yasya drops out of school, later does not complete evening education, yet reads extensively—though this shapes imitation rather than intellectual

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development. Her gestures resemble those of a "book heroine," and she invents an aristocratic past (Ulitskaya 2006: 252–254), "trying on" roles much as Asya does. Yasya's speech is short and abrupt ("Just once, quickly"; "Oh, Aunt Sonya! It was so tasty. I ate too much again" [Ulitskaya 2006: 251; 256]), forming a speech portrait of linguistic and expressive underdevelopment. This is set in deliberate contrast to Sonechka's reflective discourse. The heroines also differ in their physical symbolism. Turgenev's Asya is dark-skinned with short black hair; Ulitskaya's Yasya has marble-white skin and long fair hair. In Turgenev, such features mark difference and hint at simplicity and a peasant past; in Ulitskaya, Yasya's appearance resembles an imagined "past" shaped by reading. The "glass" metaphors reinforce her specialness—transparent, delicate, "like an аптечный пузырёк," "a small glass," with a "thin waist" (Ulitskaya 2006: 252). This transparency may signal both alluring fragility and inner emptiness: form without content. Coldness and emotional distance are amplified through comparisons to the moon and metal. Hair becomes a meaningful marker: in many cultures it symbolizes vitality and strength. When Yasya wants to charm or persuade, she loosens her thick hair. Asya's boyish short curls, by contrast, suggest a rebellious, ungovernable temperament. Both heroines exhibit theatricality and role-playing. Yet Asya's performativity is not materially motivated, whereas Yasya uses performance strategically—to appear better than she is and to "capture" a goal.

The "mythopoetic stereotype" of the "Turgenev girl" emphasizes Asya's independence and moral strength revealed during the "test of love." Nobility, spiritual power, and self-sacrifice emerge as defining qualities. In Ulitskaya's text, however, Yasya lacks a history of love; she first reads sincerity as pretense and only gradually begins to understand self-renunciation and altruism. She is unfamiliar with genuine emotional intimacy; moral criteria in relationships are opaque to her. Both heroines are solitary and socially detached. Asya does not find kindred spirits; Yasya does not understand why friendship is needed—she permits herself to be loved rather than reciprocating. The recurring comparison of Yasya to a cat foregrounds independence, self-regard, and a refusal of deep attachment. A century later (Ulitskaya's Yasya-centered storyline unfolds in the 1950s), the "Turgenev girl" undergoes substantial transformation. Despite superficial similarity, the heroines diverge on the essential level: the ability to transcend convention, to see content behind form, to experience the depth of human relations, to devote oneself to love, and to sacrifice for the beloved—these are precisely the capacities the twentieth-century "Turgenev girl" can no longer realize. The revolutionary moral energy and clear ethical coordinates have diminished.

Sergey Streltsov's story "A Turgenev Girl" (2008), published in a jubilee issue of *Neva*, offers a further transformation of the image in the early twenty-first century. Streltsov, not primarily a professional writer, became known for producing a multimedia English textbook for children. His story is structurally straightforward—exposition, complication, development, climax, and an open ending that invites the reader to complete it. The dialogic composition strengthens the text's representational function by foregrounding emotional narration, character reflection, and perspectives on contemporary reality. A telling exchange occurs between Susie and "Lenin" (a character whose identity is gradually reframed): the heroine's perception shifts from "Lenin" to physicist to scientist, and this semantic dynamism facilitates her understanding of the unfamiliar world of Russia. Streltsov's plot is notably dynamic, constantly shifting across spatial and temporal layers. Each new character opens a "portal" into a different historical and cultural register: Susie embodies twenty-first-century America, the reading of Turgenev, and

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the desire for literary identity; the multiple Nikolai Nikolaeviches evoke former gentry life and nineteenth-century Russia; references to Marx and Lenin point to the Soviet period; a disabled son of the Chechen war points to the Russia of the 1990s; the "scientist-as-street-performer" evokes the 2000s. The narrative contains multiple potential storylines that appear in dialogue but remain unexplained and undeveloped. Umberto Eco describes this kind of writing as inviting the reader to fill textual gaps and to make predictions about the plot by using intertextual frames and undertaking "inferential walks" (Eco 2016: 502).

The protagonist Susie is an orphan, an American, and a poet who has achieved early recognition but still dreams of becoming a true writer. She is captivated by the "sadly carefree, strange" texts of Turgenev and especially by the image of the "Turgenev girl." Although her physical portrait is absent, her fragility is implied through references such as her "light palm." Susie's character combines resilience and optimism: despite growing up in shelters, she does not despair; she learns letters early and begins writing poems (Streltsov). Dreaminess and faith in miracles coexist with decisiveness and work ethic—she teaches herself Russian by fifteen and wins online recognition. She resembles Turgenev's heroines in her readiness for action and her ability to transcend convention. She is willing to marry a disabled man and live in a cramped Moscow apartment in order to realize her dream of becoming a "Turgenev girl." Importantly, she is not "naturally" such a heroine; she *chooses* the ideal. Streltsov suggests that striving for an ideal is what makes its attainment possible. The heroine's nationality matters: if in Turgenev the moral power of the heroine is read as a national trait, Streltsov shifts attention toward personal agency and the necessity of overcoming stereotypes. The struggle with typification and social stereotypes was already articulated by Sasha Chorny in 1926, who called for attention to the present rather than continuous interpretation of the past. His poetic line—"Turgenev girls are in the grave… Romeo and Juliet are a sweet delirium…" (Chorny)—urges a turn toward the contemporary world. Postmodernism takes an even sharper stance: it seeks to overcome or even erase inherited representations. A striking example is Vyacheslav Kuritsyn's story "Dry Thunderstorms: the Zone of Flickering" (1992), a remake of *Asya*, which demonstrates the postmodern view.

Kuritsyn's Parasha resembles Turgenev's Asya, yet the author highlights how "poor upbringing" changes its connotations over a century. He emphasizes outrageous behavior and non-normative speech in a seventeen-year-old girl, who can stick out her tongue or "giggle" (Kuritsyn 2002: 171). The narrator describes her as having "defective, village upbringing," being "somewhat wild," full of pride and distrust, driven by an awkward desire to be no worse than others, burdened by "Freudian complexes" and "Marxian conditions of upbringing," living "very inadequately," and unable to motivate herself (Kuritsyn 2002: 175). The detailed classical portrait is not preserved; only "pretty" remains. The double suicide of Parasha and her brother reinforces the postmodern verdict on the "museum-like" status of the classics, viewed as unnecessary for contemporary life. As V. B. Kataev argues, postmodernism issues a sentence on the classics: either place them in a museum or actively dismantle them (Kataev 2002: 101).

Evgeny Popov's novel *On the Eve of the Eve* (1993) offers another postmodern remake that reconfigures the "Turgenev girl" at the end of the twentieth century. The heroine, Rusya Nikolaevna, bears a "speaking name" tied to national history, making explicit the metaphor encrypted in Turgenev's text. In *On the Eve*, Elena Stakhova symbolizes Russia and chooses the kind of future she needs; her choice of Insarov—practical, decisive, devoted to civic duty—

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corresponds to the needs of the 1860s and, by Popov's logic, to the needs of the late 1980s and early 1990s as well. Popov employs literal repetitions from Turgenev to produce postmodern irony. In addition, Popov's heroine's speech is saturated with profanity and slang (Popov 2001: 326), which functions as an ironic marker of modernity while still allowing the novel's philosophical subtext—conflict between happiness and duty—to remain visible. Civic duty and personal feeling appear incompatible, producing ethical torment. The shrinking and disappearance of the Insanakhorev figure and the dramatic disappearance of Elena and Rusya embody this tragic logic. Paradoxically, by rewriting the classic, Popov's novel itself acquires a quasi-canonical aura, since it articulates enduring human quests. In sum, the texts examined here—belonging to different literary tendencies and varying in artistic level—demonstrate the functioning of the Turgenev intertext through creative reception of the classic. Contemporary authors transform the "Turgenev girl," modernize her, and relocate her into a different chronotope. The heroine of today must not only live and reflect on meaning but also survive, adapt, and find a place within unstable market relations. Yet certain traits—self-sacrifice, strength of will, detachment, and emotional "purity"—continue to mark these heroines and make them recognizable across time. The combination of external fragility and a clear, sober mind persists even after a century. Realist writers (Ulitskaya, Streltsov) employ Turgenev's features to represent reality with greater precision, projecting a nineteenth-century image into the future. Ulitskaya stresses the erosion of moral orientation in the mid-twentieth-century "Turgenev girl," whereas Streltsov suggests that anyone may reach the ideal through will and persistence. Postmodernists (Erofeev, Popov, Kuritsyn) deliberately "play" with the classic image, dismantling it into components to examine how it is made, then reassembling and inserting it into their own textual fabric—thereby demonstrating that "tradition cannot be destroyed" (Kataev 2002: 100).

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