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Loneliness in Eternity: Infernal Existences of Mythical Heroes

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In this article the author continues the research of basic elements of the notion “religious mythology”. This refers to the “monads”, which are culture heroes and the origins of their popularity among youth subcultures. Is religious fantasy really a modern fairytale for adults? Do infernal heroes start young people thinking about the bottom line of their life? The author of this article tackles these and many other important issues through hermeneutic analysis of S. Meyer’s “Twilight” and “The Vampire Diaries” by L.J. Smith.

Keywords: myth, religion, religious mythology, fairytale, faith, youth subculture, culture hero, mythological meaning-making.

Introduction

There are various culture heroes in contemporary religious mythology. In postmodern cinema and literature much attention is paid to infernal heroes – vampires, witches, werewolves, “shadowhunters”, zombies, mages, etc. However, it is interesting to note that “no man is a hero in his own land” – these infernal heroes are fostered by westernization and Americanization, while Slavic Baba Yaga, Koschei the Deathless and other fairytale characters remain the archaic heritage of ancient Russian paganism and are by no means popularized in modern Russian mass media.

So who exactly is a hero? In the context of religious mythology it would be most appropriate to mention the viewpoint of the researchers of ancient religion and mythology. Let us focus on the notion by F.F. Zelinsky, a prominent

European researcher of the ancient world and a classical philologist. He considers heroes to be “chosen among the dead, who became the objects of not only family, but also public and national culture” (Zelinsky F.F., 2010, p.248). Hereafter the author points out the stages of hero-making in cultural history. The first stage was when the dead monarchs became heroes. The second stage was during post-Homeric times, when “it was commonly believed that heroes were the people, who rendered distinguished services to community. These were the community elders – in ancient communities they had to be viewed as people of the old ages” (Zelinsky F.F., 2010, p.248). The third stage was mythologization of saviors (such as lawmakers) or warriors, who died fighting for their homeland. The fourth was when priests, poets and famous people became heroes. F.F. Zelinsky concludes that during all four stages

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hero cult was accompanied by cult of the dead. A pagan temple was raised over the grave of a hero, and if the remains could not be found then it was an “empty grave” or a cenotaph, into which the soul was summoned through sacred rituals (Zelinsky F.F., 2010, p.251). However, sacrifices to the heroes were fundamentally different from sacrifices to the Olympic gods. These chthonic rituals took place in twilight with black animals used for the offering. The hero, upon whom the honor was bestowed, in return served as a medium between mythical worlds of gods, men and spirits of the underworld. Besides, it was thought that after death hero underwent transformation, both physical and spiritual. He gained supernatural size and beauty as well as prophetic powers. Later on this transformation in collective consciousness divides heroes into “saints” and “ghouls”. As the result the binarity of religious mythology starts to divide the whole world into two parts – light and darkness, good and evil, thus giving birth to infernal mythology (Ivanova E.V., Farkhitdinova O.M., 2013, p.69).

Contemporary myth-making in the sphere of popular culture offers a wide range of role models – “new heroes”. The meaning of culture heroes as “bearers of cultural goods” has shifted to veneration of idols and the means of identification with them in one’s own real-life experience. Culture hero appears in new meaning-making aspects – he becomes a tool of social control and manipulation of the masses. The image of a hero in contemporary mythological meaning-making corresponds with the need for ideals, which are vital to any man. Contemporary “positive” mythical hero creates a certain conceptual framework of human values. So why is it that in the XXI century mass culture the image of infernal mythical hero is given preference over a “superhero”, defender of the good? As J. Stevenson puts it in his research on infernal heroes: “Vampires fascinate us with their

weirdness and, mesmerized, we bask in their mysterious presence... They become popular characters of good books and movies, then – of the worse, and then of quite bad ones, but after that – good again. They appear in pieces of art and commercials. They are almost visualized and you are about to spot one in the crowd” (J. Stevenson, 2011, p.76). A natural question to ask is why these infernal heroes are now endowed with positive meaning-making loci?

Materials and methods

So in most cases modern infernal heroes are not negative, foul or repellent. On the contrary, as the result of inversion as one of the methods of religious mythology they became attractive role models for many admirers and movie fans as well as readers of novels, on which these movies are based (Ivanova E.V., 2013, p.197-198). The bipolarity of attitude towards these heroes is also expressed in many books on “vampirology”, “vampiremania”, “lycanophobia” and “lycanomania”. The causes of such inversion, in our opinion, are the following: 1. Secular culture. In society there are both people who believe and those who do not believe in the existence of supernatural beings. Heroes are given the opportunity to live their own lives “among people” and try to coexist in harmony; heroes do not discuss religious topics like salvation or what awaits them after they have been killed, which is rather hard, however possible. 2. Feminization. The development of women’s rights and freedoms allows them to express their feelings more openly, to search and fight for love, even if the beloved “is not like all the others”. 3. Disenchantment of the world. This is the reason why infernal hero is a person next door. Nobody longer believes in fairytale and mythical creatures. This is how L.J. Smith, the creator of “The Vampire Diaries” and many other novels about infernal culture heroes describes “the other world”: “The Realm of the Night is

not indicated on any geographical map, though it exists in our world. It is all around us. This is a secret society of vampires, werewolves, mages, witches and other spawn of darkness that live among us. They are beautiful and dangerous, fiercely drawn to humans, and no mortal is able to resist them. Your school teacher or your soul mate may turn out to be one of them” (Smith L.J., 2010, p.5). 4. Popular culture, which is based on “the hierarchy of needs thesaurus”. The followers of thesaurus approach in psychology underline seven levels of such a hierarchy. Each level offers solution to a certain fundamental problem, which a person faces in the course of his or her life. The following are arranged in the order of occurrence: a) the problem of survival (concerns everyone primarily as a biosocial problem); b) the problem of propagation (giving birth to children, creating a family, material and social wealth); c) the problem of power (social ranking, inequality); d) problems of communication at the level of feelings (love, friendship, cooperative relationship building, care, etc.). The first four levels are at the basis of the popular culture of consumption. The higher levels are of prime importance only to a few people, including relationship building based on a message or a statement; the problem of theoretical interpretation of reality – searching for the meaning of life, etc.; problems of faith, intuition, idols. Infernal religious mythology offers solution to all thesaurus problems, which makes its characters appealing to viewers and readers as well as author analysis. 5. By the end of the XX century a term “popular culture icon” emerges in the theory of mass culture. According to several authors, the most adequate term capturing the essence of mass culture is “icon” rather than “image” or “gestalt” which is a German word for “image”. “This term characterizes the type of artistic reflection, which is symbolic and fundamentally unrealistic. It is the object of faith and worship rather than the tool for reflection and

perception of the world” (Shestakov V.P., 1988, p.77). Moreover it is emphasized that instead of the holy icons popular culture shapes secular ones, which leads to the veneration of imagery and the creation of fan clubs dedicated to a particular artist, superhero or both. As reported by “Forbes” magazine, movies about vampires have gathered about 1.3 billion US dollars in the last 30 years, with an average of 15 million in the first week after a movie’s release. The same magazine, which is known for its lists of the world’s wealthiest people, made a similar list of the world’s most influential vampires. Among others, it includes E. Cullen from the “Twilight” series, Count Dracula from the movie “Van Helsing”, Lestat from “Interview with the Vampire” and another Dracula from the homonymous movie by F. Coppola (Cherednichenko O.V., 2010, p.5).

Let us trace these connotations by comparing two writings: S. Meyer’s “Twilight” tetralogy and “The Vampire Diaries” series of novels by L.J. Smith. Both texts have their cinematic adaptations, in which characters live their own “cinematic” lives that do not always coincide with the original version. However, general tendency of religious myth-making can be traced (Ivanova E.V., 2013, p.200).

We have already mentioned the literary device of inversion – alteration of thoughts and meanings of a character the other way around. Inversion is applied to both inner and outer characteristics of characters – they are young; have no fear of the cross, garlic and Holy water; they can enter a church; they reflect in mirrors, show up in photographs, walk by daylight; they do not sleep in coffins, value comfort and, in most cases, strive to live in harmony with humans. Among a few “old” classical mythemes there are: a) “agony”– despite the acquired qualities of strength, immortality, ethereal beauty, omnipotence, etc., supernatural creatures would love to turn back into humans; b) “dying” – they

can be killed, though in a specific kind of way: either by putting a wooden stake in the heart or by capitation; c) appearance – fangs, superb strength and speed, color of the eyes, being able to hypnotize the victim or, as heroine of S. Meyer's book has put it, "dazzling" it. Fog as well as transformation into bats, crows or wolves as attributes of the "evil forces" is viewed either ironically or as a tribute to Gothic culture. Whereas in a "classical" version by B. Stoker *Dracula* is a demonic hero, and in a modernist book by A. Rice *Lestat* is a weary hero, postmodernism provides us with an image of a romantic hero. Let us seek evidence within these historical infernal heroes.

We agree with J. Stevenson's opinion that "*Dracula*" has not only laid foundation for further absorption of vampire myths by literature and cinematography, but also brought to light the earlier legends about vampires and used them in a quite effective way" (J. Stevenson, 2011, p.245). Another researcher of the writings by B. Stoker describes Count *Dracula* as follows: "in this image B. Stoker brought together a beast, aristocrat, immortality and a creature with hypnotic power over women" (Dunn-Mascetti M., 2011, p.197). Now we can point out the basic loci that the image of *Dracula* is composed of: he can influence weather with a particular fondness for thunder storms; he can read minds, see in the dark but cannot enter a house without an invitation; he neither casts a shadow nor has a reflection; his powers weaken by daylight, he is pale and hypothermal. Let us provide another quote by the same researcher of the writings by B. Stoker: "*Dracula*" can be interpreted as a novel about the fight of good and evil, despite the fact that the evil has its attractive sides in it, while the good is too good to be true" (Dunn-Mascetti M., 2011, p.255).

The myth was further developed by A. Rice. "*The Vampire Chronicles*" is the ambivalent existence of the curse and the blessing at the

same time. According to the author herself, the existence of the dark gift involves losing humanity and rigorous search for something to substitute this painful and disorienting loss – power, strength, rivalry, evil deeds, etc. The lead character is a vampire named *Lestat*. He is self-centered, arrogant and impulsive, though he also suffers and often falls into depression.

What are the components of the infernal world in the writings by S. Meyer and L.J. Smith? We can use the method of V.Y. Propp, who outlined several "functions" serving as permanent elements of a fairytale "setting".

Let us specify the "functions" of romantic religious fantasy in the writings by S. Meyer and L.J. Smith: 1. a hero or a heroine arrives in a small town; 2. a girl meets supernatural creature; 3. romantic relationship between these characters; 4. supernatural creature breaks up with the girl and she falls into misery; 5. relationship continues; 6. the protagonist (lead heroine) turns into a vampire. We can also add the "functions" offered by S. Meyer – marriage and the birth of a child. 7. Happy end. Let us conduct the comparative analysis of how these functions appear in religious fantasy worlds of both authors and present the results in a table.

Therefore, we can see that no matter how unlike the books may seem, they do have much in common in terms of the storyline, which makes their authors the creators of contemporary religious mythology through similar functions. The functions compose mythemes. And mythemes act as carriers of a content-related symbolic message, a sort of symbolic "knots" which tie together the functions and mythological storylines (Ivanova E.V., 2012, p.60).

The mythemes include: 1. **Space**. The setting is usually an isolated small town located on the periphery far from metropolitan cities. In the books by S. Meyer it is the town of Forks in Washington State, USA. S. Meyer spent a long

Mythical world of L.J. Smith	Mythical world of S. Meyer
Main characters: vampires, witches, werewolves, humans	Main characters: vampires, werewolves, humans
Heroine's problem of choice: choice between two Salvatore brothers	Heroine's problem of choice: choice between a werewolf and a vampire
Does a heroine want to become an infernal creature? Elena Gilbert does not accept the transformation, denies it and spends a long time adapting to her new essence.	Does a heroine want to become an infernal creature? In order to spend the eternity with Edward Bella is willing to become a vampire and planning how to become one.
Did male romantic heroes choose such a fate? Salvatore brothers entangle themselves in a love triangle with Katherine, who is a vampire; the elder brother Damon did want this, the younger Stefan rejected it.	Did male romantic heroes choose such a fate? Edward did not want it and would give anything to turn back into a human.
Main characters' attitude to religion: reserved. However, there are scenes of witch-hunts in the XIX century and the descendants of persecutors show resentment towards such creatures. Rituals are not being conducted; the world is mystical, though still secular.	Main characters' attitude to religion: reserved. There is a cross in the Cullen's household left from an ancestor, who was a Presbyterian minister. However, religious issues are not discussed. Bella Swan also does not bother to think about religion.
Is there life after death? The dead live beyond the veil as spirits. They watch the living and empathize with them. The witches are able to see the spirit world. They can lift the veil and get the spirits into our world. There is also such thing as "recumbence", which the characters can come to. However, nobody knows exactly what it is.	Is there life after death? The afterworld is mentioned one single time, when Edward assures that the souls of vampires are cursed.
The origins of vampires: there are references of the first ones, who were humans. These are the Firstborn, who were turned into vampires by the witches.	The origins of vampires: not revealed

time searching the map of the United States for a small town, where it often rains and the sun comes out quite rarely. "In the Olympic Peninsula of northwest Washington State, a small town named Forks exists under a near-constant cover of clouds. It rains on this inconsequential town more than any other place in the United States of America. It was from this town and its gloomy, omnipresent shade that my mother escaped with me when I was only a few months old" – this is how the lead heroine Bella describes this place (Meyer S., 2010, p.8).

In the books by L.J. Smith Mystic Falls (Fell's Church) is a small town in Virginia founded in 1860. Among the founding families were Forbes, Lockwood, Gilbert, Fell and Salvatore, the

representatives of which were keeping diaries writing down the obstacles that they had to face. And while in Europe the witches burned on bonfires, here the emphasis was the fight against vampires and werewolves.

In terms of social philosophy a town here serves as "the most intensive ground of social change, the particular space and time of human relations" (Kochukhova E.S., 2013, p.14). Indeed, the spatiotemporal parameters of the setting cover a school year, during which social space is filled with the multitude of events in the lives of humans and supernatural creatures. Space splits in two: humans live their usual temporal lives while infernal creatures live their timeless ones, until love intervenes and unites characters

in its romantic embrace. Supernatural descends upon the protagonist all at once and this is the author's intention – either to put a human in such conditions, or to return a supernatural character back to a certain mythical spatial point in order for him to meet a human and fall in love with her. The mytheme of “eternal return” interlaces with the narrative thread, thus creating the space where the sacred and the profane are ambivalent.

The second mytheme is “**Cinderella**”. This is a usual modern girl, a teenager, who lives a fulfilled life – friends, school, first experience of communication with the members of the opposite sex, to which she appears to be very attractive. Her interior life is filled with stress because she is concerned with how things are going in her family. The lead heroines of S. Meyer and L.J. Smith are completely unlike on the outside. Bella Swan (S. Meyer) is clumsy and withdrawn. But she has a rich inner world – no wonder that the author has given her the last name “Swan” pointing out the possibility that the depth of her inner world will yet reveal itself in sacrifice, heroism, being able to fight for her love. Elena Gilbert (L.J. Smith) is aware of her beauty and knows how to handle the wooers. But she also feels sorrow because she thinks the car accident in which her parents died is her fault and this causes her great distress. However, she is a “Cinderella” too – she is yet to show her character traits: care, compassion, commitment and also being able to fight for her love. The heroines do not dream of princes and marriage, they want to love and build their relationships here and now. One thing they have in common is that after meeting a “mysterious young man” they try to unravel his secret, watch him closely, gather the facts and in the end come to a conclusion that he is not a human. However, this fact does not change their mind about being together with this creature. Pondering over the romantic relationship with immortal creatures girls doubt themselves – is such love possible?

S. Meyer does not give her heroine an alternative choice. Bella Swan decides she wants to be with Edward, therefore she is willing to abandon her human life. L.J. Smith, on the contrary, does give her heroine a choice. She does not want to be like Stefan but the circumstances force her into becoming a vampire.

The third mytheme is **Trickster**. Trickster as a culture hero is often the object of regard of mythologists and culture studies experts. This culture hero dwells in between two worlds – he is alive and dead at the same time. But in the writings by S. Meyer and L.J. Smith trickster is more of a **male romantic hero**. Young heroine meets this hero but certain life circumstances or hardships part them, till after having experienced lovesickness and emotional stress they unite to live happily ever after. This storyline corresponds with the archetypal desire to experience true love.

The conclusion is that there is no shame in loving a vampire, since it is just a fairytale, a fantasy world created by female-writers. And one is sure able to afford more in an imaginary world than in a real one.

Let us add that infernal heroes are much alike the fairytale ones – socialization of a hero takes place in the course of the myth (even though as long as centuries). Both protagonists and antagonists deal with their own problems, without tackling heroic social ones. Regardless of whether they are on the bad side or the good side, they pursue their personal interests.

The fifth mytheme is the **search for meaning**. What is it that infernal heroes crave to get at any price? The answer is to be human again and live the lives they once lost. Infernal heroes have subtle senses – smell, touch, vision. But they also have subtle emotions. They are able to turn them off and remain cold-blooded beasts. This exactly happens with vampires and werewolves in traditional classics. But our heroes,

while suffering, try to retain what is left of their “humanity” by agonizing and protecting their beloved ones. Pondering over the values of human life they tackle vital issues – what was eternal life given them for? This problem was raised as far back as in the ancient Greek myths – a nymph named Callisto offered Odysseus eternal life in exchange for her love but he chose earthly life with Penelope. Is eternity a blessing or a curse in terms of postmodernism culture? S. Meyer answers this question through the characters of her book. Carlisle Cullen dedicates his life to work being a doctor and helping people. Having just turned into an immortal Edward adopts the role of a lawman – he personally punishes murderers but then realizes this is still not a solution. Having turned into a vampire Bella Cullen wants to spend the eternity loving her husband. Family is all the immortals have. It is about care, communication and memories. Family releases from loneliness.

Results

As can be seen from the above, the analyzed mythemes represent general original schemes underlying mythological space of narrative events in the religious fantasy myth-making of the given authors. The mythemes make up a pattern of monads, dyads and triads. A monad in this case is the unique fate of a protagonist. S. Meyer and L.J. Smith provide a thorough background for every infernal character including the tragic circumstances of him or her becoming a vampire. One thing that romantic heroes have in common is that they suffer and do not want such lives for their beloved ones. Suffering connects Edward Cullen (“Twilight” character) and Stefan (“The Vampire Diaries” character). And the point here is neither the visual appeal in the image of

a vampire nor its superpowers, but the agony and the search for humanity as a remedy for “vampirism”. We have already analyzed dyads (Ivanova E.V., 2013, p.196) as opposite lines in mythological writings by the given authors. These can be exemplified in competition between two Salvatore brothers for Katherine and later for Elena (Katherine’s mythological counterpart), rivalry between counterparts (Katherine-Elena), clash of werewolf and vampire clans in “Twilight” competing for Bella and protecting humans from the spawn of darkness.

While dyads split and antagonize the opposites, triads connect, and sort out differences between them. The following types of triads can be pointed out: 1. Mythical origins of infernal creatures (according to L.J. Smith): witches as creators and balance keepers between Good and Evil; Children of the Moon (afraid of daylight) though not all of them are vampires; Children of the Sun (turning into werewolves at full moon). 2. Romantic triad: Bella (human); Jacob Black (werewolf); Edward (vampire) – in the books by S. Meyer. In “The Vampire Diaries” it is Katherine (vampire) and Salvatore brothers (humans) and after 165 years – Elena Gilbert (human) and the same brothers (as vampires).

Conclusions

Thus everything demonic in contemporary popular culture becomes far from being evil and repellent but attractive and iconic. Of course, a certain contribution to this is made by the actors but the main issue involves profound archetypical images of a culture hero, mentioned by F.F. Zelinsky, in new women’s mythology, searching for a new romantic hero for modern women.

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Одиночество в вечности: экзистенции инфернального существования мифических героев

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В данной статье продолжается исследование Е.В. Ивановой основных элементов понятия «религиозная мифология». Речь идет о «монадах» – культурных героях, причинах их популярности в молодежных субкультурах. Является ли «религиозное фэнтези» современной волшебной сказкой для взрослых? Заставляют ли инфернальные герои задуматься молодого человека над ключевыми моментами своего существования? В чем привлекательность данных героев для женской аудитории? Эти и многие другие актуальные вопросы автор статьи решает на примере герменевтического анализа произведений С. Майер «Сумерки» и Л.Д. Смит «Дневники вампира».

Ключевые слова: миф, религия, религиозная мифология, сказка, вера, молодежная субкультура, культурный герой, мифологическое смыслообразование.
