

**PERAET 2021****International Scientific Conference «PERISHABLE AND ETERNAL: Mythologies and Social Technologies of Digital Civilization-2021»****TRANSFORMATION OF FOLK MYTH: FROM LEGENDS TO  
INTERNET MEMES ABOUT PUSHKIN**

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**Abstract**

The article examines the specificity of folk myth-creation in the 20th century and in modern times, using the image of Alexander Pushkin as an example. In particular, the period of the emergence of ideas about Pushkin in the popular consciousness, their characteristics and range of plots, the difference between the popular perception of the poet and the literary Pushkin myth, the connection with the traditions of folk culture and the mass collective consciousness have been determined. In this paper, the authors have made a comparative analysis of the functioning of the myth in the collective consciousness orally and in the digital environment. The study compares the folk legends about Pushkin, recorded by researchers in different years of the 20th century on the territory of the Pskov region, which in the popular consciousness is one of the sacred Pushkin loci, with popular Internet memes about the poet. For the first time, three short stories about Pushkin, recorded in the post-Soviet period in the Pushkinogorsk district of the Pskov region and currently stored in handwritten form in the folklore archive of the “Socio-humanitarian Regionics” department of the Pskov State University, have been put into scientific circulation. The conclusion has been made on the structure of the folk myth about Pushkin and its transformation in the collective consciousness following the changes of the value orientations of the eras.

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## 1. Introduction

Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin is not only a poet, writer, and playwright, but also a myth, that is, an image well known to the collective consciousness and giving rise to an infinite number of interpretations, from the 19th century to the present day, since the process of myth creation is common to people at all times.

In literary criticism, there is a theoretically grounded and recognized concept of the Pushkin myth, which means “a set of reactions on a national scale to the work and personality of Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin, which are based on his recognition as the First National Poet” (Zagidullina, 2001, p. 9). The reasons for the emergence of the Pushkin myth, like any other myth, as noted by Zagidullina (2001), are two major needs of any nation: 1) the need for self-identification; 2) the need for the embodiment of the sacred. The Pushkin myth meets both of these needs: firstly, Pushkin is a national symbol, a voice of the Russian mentality, and, secondly, Pushkin is a poet-prophet.

The creation of myths about Pushkin, as proved by researchers, has emerged and is developing according to the general laws of the functioning of a myth. In particular, in connection with Pushkin, cult practices are carried out (such as celebrations of memorable dates, sacralization of museums, descendants, Pushkin places). Pushkin is held sacred at the national level and is perceived as an image of the unity of the nation. Finally, Pushkin has become a tool for manipulating the collective consciousness: chocolate, hotels, Café Pushkin as a marketing ploy, and other examples.

Internet memes about Pushkin reflect the collective consciousness as well. An Internet meme is to be taken as a creolized viral sign that spreads from one Internet user to another (Yagodkina, 2019). An Internet meme is based on a system of value orientations (Molchanova, 2019); it reflects society stereotypes. (Dementieva, 2018) and acts as a media text, possessing such characteristics as hybridity, intertextuality, pattern nature, and interactivity. For an Internet meme, the precedence of the image used is important, it is this that forms a certain cognitive field (Kanashina, 2018). The popularity and spread of a certain meme depend both on the personal qualities of the person spreading it and on the socio-cultural environment (Anikin, 2021; Kustovaya & Mikhailovskaya, 2020).

## 2. Problem Statement

Initially, the Pushkin myth began to form as the image of a national poet in the literature of the 19th century during the celebration of Pushkin's anniversaries. Then, the sacralization of the poet took root in the works of the Silver Age (Tsvigun & Chernyakov, 2020). In the period from 1937 to 1949, Pushkin was interpreted as a state poet, a “comrade”. During the Thaw, Alexander Sergeevich began to be perceived more intimately. In the post-Soviet period, the process of demythologization of Pushkin took place. Contemporary literature is again trying to “resurrect” the poet (Zagidullina, 2001). In the modern social and cultural space, the Pushkin myth has a value comparable to the poet's work itself. In the literary space, the Pushkin myth is largely based on the poet's biography. Literature actively uses the mythologemes of the miracle child, the cricket (Pushkin's nickname), the descendant of black people, the prophet, etc. Pushkin's biographical myth is also widespread in European cultural practice (Kalavsky &

Urakova, 2020), especially in Italy (Golubtsova, 2017). Pushkin's work has cultural significance for contemporary literature in the United States of America (Butenina, 2017).

The folk myth about Pushkin is a unique phenomenon. In 1899, during the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the poet in Sviatye Gory (Holy Mountains; the name of the village of Pushkinskiye Gory in the Pskov Governorate in the pre-revolutionary period), the peasants did not understand why people were coming here, and put forward a variety of assumptions, right up to the outbreak of the war with China (Annenkova, 1996). In 1924, in connection with the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the poet's exile to Mikhailovskoye, the Pskov ethnographer F. A. Vasilyev-Ushkuyunik wrote: "In conversations around Pushkin's corners, the complete ignorance of Pushkin by the peasants can be especially indicative... For the Svyatogorsk peasants, Pushkin, as a person, died long ago and has been forgotten, and Pushkin, as a great writer, has not been born yet" (as cited in Annenkova, 1996, p. 67).

### **3. Research Questions**

- 1) What appeared first: the literary myth about Pushkin or the popular perception of the poet?
- 2) What are the reasons for the formation of the popular Pushkin mythology?
- 3) What is the development path of the folk myth about Pushkin?
- 4) What is the peculiarity of the current state of the folk myth about Pushkin?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this paper is to comprehend the peculiarities of the popular perception of the Pushkin myth using the example of the legends about Pushkin in the sacred locus — the Pushkinogorsk district of the Pskov region — and in the digital space, as well as to identify the patterns of changes in the popular Pushkin myth throughout the XX and XXI centuries.

### **5. Research Methods**

In the study, the structural-descriptive method, that allows to select, consistently describe the selected material and to define stable and labile elements in the folk myth of Pushkin, has been used. By the use of discourse analysis and the comparative historical method, the evolution of the Pushkin myth in the folk environment (in oral discourse and digital space) is traced, and the stages of its origin and development in the collective consciousness are compared.

### **6. Findings**

The first person who documented folk stories about Pushkin in the Pushkinogorsk district of the Pskov region was V. I. Chernyshev, a corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR and a member of the Fairytale Commission of the Russian Geographical Society. On assignment for the Russian Geographical Society, on June 22, 1928, he traveled to the Pskov region and visited the Devyatnik (the name of the fair in Pushkinskiye Gory, which was held on the ninth Friday after Easter).

On this trip, Chernyshev (1928), in addition to the everyday life and superstitions of the peasants, purposefully studied the popular perception of the image of Pushkin.

In the work of V. I. Chernyshev, the popular image of Pushkin is as follows: a man in a large black straw hat, corduroy trousers, shoes with “sparkles” (buckles) or bast shoes and with a black stick in his hand. In his house in the village of Mikhailovskoye, as well as in peasant houses, there lived a domovoy. Pushkin personally saw local mermaids, about which he wrote in the famous prologue to the poem “Ruslan and Lyudmila”. In the popular worldview of that time, Pushkin had much in common with the peasants themselves, for the people he was an insider.

In the legends about Pushkin, retold by Chernyshev, several plots can be distinguished:

1) Pushkin walked a lot around the neighborhood, thinking, and read and wrote all the time.

2) Pushkin is a villager who did not like to live in the capital but preferred to swim in a rural lake. His wife, on the contrary, was cold about the village and preferred to live in Petersburg.

3) Pushkin was in Mikhailovskoye rather rarely. He lived in a “white bathhouse” in Trigorokoye and wrote there.

4) Pushkin loved Evpraksia Nikolaevna Wulf (Zizi), went on secret meetings with her, and offered Zizi, when she was already married and had children, to leave her husband and go away with him, but she did not agree.

5) Pushkin was witty.

6) Pushkin visited fairs in the clothes of a commoner, gathered around him blind beggars who sang “poems” to him. On the ninth Friday after Easter, Pushkin in a straw hat, in a French shirt, in high boots, and sometimes even in bast shoes walked among the people, stood near the blind beggars, listened to their singing, and at the same time “wrote poetry”. Another option: “wrote down with his foot” what the elders sang. The third option: Pushkin stopped or sat next to the blind elders and sang along with them (Chernyshev, 1928).

7) Pushkin initiated the Emancipation Reform of 1861.

8) Pushkin challenged d'Anthès to a duel for an affair with Natalia Goncharova, exposing her lover through a kiss.

Chernyshev, having collected such a large number of legends about Pushkin, concluded in the spirit of Soviet folklore studies of the 1920s that the legends are distortions of biographical facts about the great poet as a result of the insufficient education of the peasants, therefore, greater enlightenment of the peasant masses is needed. Today, it is obvious that, in the 1920s, the poet was discovered by the people, it was the time of Pushkin's popularity among the masses, hence the emergence of a living and rich mythology around his name.

Folklore texts in the later Soviet period (up to 1977) were studied by Annenkova (1996) based on materials published in various sources. It is noticeable that, during the Soviet period, the people perceived Pushkin mainly as a positive image. For them, he was a person close to the peasant world, opposing the authorities, angry with the tsar, and persecuted by the authorities. Pushkin was the defender of the peasants, who took death for the people. The poet was both a protector of women and a loving figure. Pushkin of the Soviet period was often equated by the people with a saint. Legends about him were built according to the canons of hagiography. In them, the poet appears in the form of a hermit, a holy fool, and

takes upon himself the cross of Christ. But also, the image of Pushkin was in parallel in the popular consciousness adapted to the system of ideas about evil spirits (he did not cut his hair and nails, he knew the places of treasures, he could be found in the forest, he was buried without observing the funeral rite). Annenkova (1996) rightly speaks about the self-sufficiency of the popular biography of Pushkin, the colorfulness of the Pushkin folk image, its correspondence to popular culture, and says that the myth of Pushkin is a phenomenon that requires a separate study.

The spectrum of folk stories about Pushkin is supplemented by materials from the post-Soviet period folklore archive of the “Socio-humanitarian Regionics” department of Pskov State University. There are very few of them. Of 38 notebooks dating from 1980 to 2007, information about Pushkin is present only in three. These three texts were written by students of the Faculty of Philology in 1997 in the Veleiskaya volost (located near Pushkinskiye Gory) in the Pushkinogorky region. The recordings were made during the expedition led by G. I. Ploshchuk.

The first text reflects the Pushkinogorye inhabitants’ perception of Pushkin as an incredibly talented person, a poet who constantly composed poetry easily and naturally. Even when he danced. L.V. Voronina and N. A. Zavyalova recorded a story about Pushkin by Zinaida Andreevna Vasilyeva (born in 1926), which one of the old-timers told her: “So, he is talking, he is dancing (quite well), dancing for a while, talking, then pulls a coin out of his pocket and while talking throws it on the floor, and he has already composed a song. While he is talking, it begins, having danced begins, then he takes the coin, continues to dance, and he has already composed a song, a chastushka” (Folklore archive of Pskov State University, 1997b, p. 10). Pushkin's dancing and chastushkas composed by him are images that convey the folk, national spirit of the poet. Pushkin's writing of poems in an instant, while he “throws a coin and takes it” is an indicator of Alexander Sergeevich's outstanding poetic gift.

The second plot, recorded in the folklore archive of Pskov State University, reflects the idea of the poet's lovability. Here is the dialogue of the collectors I. V. Vasilyeva and Yu. G. Grigorieva with Andreev Viktor Yakovlevich (born in 1921):

— I'm not really interested about Pushkin. This person for me was somehow depraved, half, half good. As for his quick thinking, yes it was all so. Other than that, his behavior was crook. Walk through those groves, there is a bathhouse where he met Osipova there. At that time, you know!

— Where is this bathhouse?

— Yes, in this grove. On the Hillfort.

— In Mikhailovskoye?

— Not in Mikhailovskoye itself, but on the Hillfort, there you walk along the Sorot where the landowner Osipov lived, all the notebooks were written there.

— Who did he meet there?

— Osipov's daughter. There is a bathhouse, there is a path, and everything was written. And you know, it is because of this that he was killed as well. Because he was a depraved person, that's why (Folklore archive of Pskov State University, 1997c, pp. 32-33).

If in the Soviet period Pushkin was an exceptionally positive hero of folk legends, then after Perestroika in the popular consciousness, as in the literature of this period, the processes of Pushkin's demythologization began. The image of the poet became contradictory: both high and low at the same

time. In the popular consciousness of this time, Pushkin was still a talent, a genius, but also a sinner. The dual character of the popular perception of Pushkin in the post-Soviet period is demonstrated by the story of Ivan Vasilievich Vasiliev (born in 1918), recorded by L. V. Voronina and N. A. Zavyalova:

— Have you heard any legends about Pushkin?

— There was, you know, now there is a direct road to Pushgory, there is a direct road to Novgorodka. But before, you know Velikaya river... You go over the bridge.

— What river?

— The Velikaya. So, you cross the river and in Pushgory, the roads go as different hooks, like this (shows zigzag movements). And so they said that Pushkin walked from the Velikaya, he was drunk. So, he walked drunk, and local people pegged the way he walked drunk with sticks, and so, according to these very sticks, the actual road was made, all winding.

— They say that, right?

— Yes, I heard that.

— Didn't they say that he passed somewhere around here or lived? No?

— Well, he lived in Pushgory.

— And here, in Velya, no?

— I don't know about Velya, I don't know, he was, he wasn't, I can't say, I didn't hear.

— Have you heard anything about the oak in Pushgory, a golden chain round it?

— Well, I was fond of it. I went every holiday, there, on the Pushkin day, well, I was interested.

Well, here in the villages, you know, I was not interested in this.

— Well, do you know anything about the oak? Tell us.

— Well, what can I, I just went and saw where this oak was, how, what, how the cat walked round this oak.

— And do they say anything? Where did this cat come from?

— No. Ask in Pushgory. So, the old people were illiterate here. They were not interested in this.

— Do they think that Pushkin was a poet or did anyone help him?

— Well, you know, from the press, from hearsay, of course, the entire population revered him as a great, great poet (Folklore archive of Pskov State University, 1997a, p. 7). The last phrase is indicative: in the popular perception, there is an official and understandable, recognized attitude towards Pushkin — reverence to the great poet. But at the same time, there is another unprintable truth, in which the myth of Pushkin as a folk poet is combined with another myth — about drunkenness as one of the essential qualities of a Russian person.

The process of demythologizing the textbook image of the poet has become a key direction of folk art in the modern digital space, including among representatives of the “digital generation”, in which “virtual communication prevails over natural face-to-face one and their communication is carried out mainly through various gadgets” (Petruneva et al., 2019, p. 49). Indicative are Internet memes about Pushkin, where the classical Pushkin portraits of O. A. Kiprensky and V. A. Tropinin, to which short humorous phrases reflecting modern realities are added. For example, a portrait of Pushkin with the inscription “Is it me who will do it for you?” plays with the speech cliché “Is it Pushkin who will do it for you?”. Plots of Internet memes, as a rule, comprehend stable collective ideas about the stages of the poet's

biography. The most popular is the dueling part, in which the image of d'Anthès plays the main role, jealousy and betrayal are ridiculed. In Internet memes, Pushkin is often depicted with objects that are popular today. For example, sitting at a laptop and saying “She liked d'Anthès’ post again”. Often, classical Pushkin's creativity is compared with the forms of modern culture. Pushkin is often called the first Russian rapper (he rhymed, had African roots, dissed (disrespected) authorities and died in a crossfire). These and other examples confirm the main thing — that for the modern mass consciousness Pushkin is alive and relevant.

## 7. Conclusion

The popular reception of Pushkin is a secondary phenomenon, later than the literary myth. The popular Pushkin myth began to form as a reaction to the educational work of the USSR in the 1920s.

Folk stories about Pushkin in Pushkinskie Gory began to appear as a result of Soviet mass education and the great educational work carried out in the country at that time, as well as a high print run of Pushkin's works. In the USSR, the image of A. S. Pushkin became a textbook case, which contributed to the development of folk mythology around the poet's name. Before the 1920s, the peasants did not particularly know about Pushkin in the Pskov region.

In the folk myth about Pushkin, as in the folklore text, there are both stable and labile elements. The stable elements of the mythology about Pushkin are mainly reflections on reliable facts in the biography of Alexander Sergeevich. Throughout its entire existence, the folk myth about Pushkin, like the literary one, by the way, is associated with the formula “Pushkin the Poet”. The people admire Alexander Sergeevich as a person of intense intellectual labor, a writer, and the author of a large number of texts, for whom poetry was the meaning of life. The fact of comprehending the poet's last duel can also be attributed to the stable elements of folk mythology about Pushkin.

The labile elements of the folk myth about Pushkin reflect the value attitudes that change over time in the worldview of the people. In Soviet times, Pushkin's closeness to the peasant life occupied an important place; in the post-Soviet era, the key was the destruction of the stereotype of him as a positive hero. Today, the myth of Pushkin is a test of classical truths by modern realities.

Transforming in accordance with the change in the value orientations of society, the folk myth about Pushkin becomes a kind of a marker, a voice of the masses’ mindsets. Through the attitude towards Pushkin, the attitude towards the world as a whole is expressed.

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