

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EPIC GENRE IN RUSSIAN PROSE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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**Navbatova Rano Khodjimuratovna**

Lecturer at the Department of Russian Language and Literature, Termez State Pedagogical Institute



**Abstract:** Russian literature refers to the literature of Russia and its émigrés and to Russian-language literature. The roots of Russian literature can be traced to the Middle Ages, when epics and chronicles in Old East Slavic were composed. This article discusses the Development of the Epic Genre in Russian Prose at the Beginning of the 20th Century.

**Keywords:** literature; Epic Genre; Silver age; novel; narration.

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Russian literature is developing in situation of permanent uncertainty and pluralism of ideas, crisis of hierarchies, «society of risk», which lead to transformation of narration means, blurring of literary phenomena and relativity of literary concepts, renovation of forms, styles, and genres. Nowadays genre becomes an experimental literary platform where polar conceptions of a human being and world, authors' aesthetic innovations are realized, change of ideological and ethical coordinates is marked. Today the leading role in Russian literature is played by narrative genres. It is easy to notice that there are more short stories, also like the texts of other small genres, than works of larger volume.

The beginning of the 20th century ranks as the Silver Age of Russian poetry. Well-known poets of the period include: Alexander Blok, Sergei Yesenin, Valery Bryusov, Konstantin Balmont, Mikhail Kuzmin, Igor Severyanin, Sasha Chorny, Nikolay Gumilyov, Maximilian Voloshin, Innokenty Annensky, Zinaida Gippius. The poets most often associated with the "Silver Age" are Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, Osip Mandelstam and Boris Pasternak. While the Silver Age is considered to be the development of the 19th-century Russian literature tradition, some avant-garde poets tried to overturn it: Velimir Khlebnikov, David Burluk, Aleksei Kruchenykh and Vladimir Mayakovsky. Though the Silver Age is famous mostly for its poetry, it produced some first-rate novelists and short-story writers, such as Aleksandr Kuprin, Nobel Prize winner Ivan Bunin, Leonid Andreyev, Fedor Sologub, Aleksey Remizov, Yevgeny Zamyatin, Alexander Belyaev, Dmitry

Merezhkovsky and Andrei Bely, though most of them wrote poetry as well as prose.

The late XX – early XXI centuries are marked in the post-Soviet area with the complexity of social processes, reconstruction of all life spheres. The collapse of communistic ideology and break-up of the USSR were followed by the ideological struggle, abolition of censorship, freedom of creativity. At the same time the crisis condition of spirit was revealed. Democratic and market experiments in political-economical and social-cultural spheres conditioned different searches and experiments in culture, which were expressed, in particular, in the plurality of the cultural landscape, the priority of individuals over collective, experimental over traditional. All these affected the literary process of the turn of the century spontaneously. The range of the literature of that period is rather wide: we can meet here both traditional social, domestic, psychological realism with the poetics of life-similarity and motley experiments of modernism, usage of different forms of convention, shift, and crookedness. The result of the survey allows verifying the fact that nowadays there is no unified recognized conception of the modern literary process, but we can admit the attempts of its creation. In the process of its construction, in our opinion, some general regularities can be seen.

During the Soviet period the epic as a genre was at the forefront of attention for many writers producing long novels, especially if the subject involved military combat. In Soviet literature, two related but distinct versions of epic were most germane. The first was the classical tradition, particular features of which were appropriated for ideological purposes and for the cause of national aggrandizement. The second was the specific model of the epic novel to be found in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1865–1869), itself an official model for Soviet literature. A complication here is that Tolstoy's novel is indebted to the classical epic (as his own diary entries attest), yet its Second Epilogue takes issue with certain fundamental assumptions of the 'epic' view of history. A similar ambiguity can be seen in the work of the four writers I will discuss here. Each of them produced epic novels which both challenge, and draw on, the kind of 'epic' exemplified by canonical Socialist Realism, and also both challenge and draw on the reworking of the epic tradition in *War and Peace*. I am treating in particular: Mikhail Sholokhov's *Quiet Flows the Don* (*Tikhii Don*, 1928–1940); Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* (*Doktor Zhivago*, 1957); Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward* (*Rakovyi korpus*, 1968), *The First Circle* (*V krughe pervom*, 1969), and *August 1914* (*Avgust chetyrnadtsatogo*, 1989); and Vasilii Grossman's *For A Just Cause* (*Za pravoe delo*, 1952) and its sequel *Life and Fate*. The novel is described as the history of mankind's artistic consciousness, one that is constantly changed and reformed as it travels towards

perfection, each with in own distinct stage. In contrast, an epic is seen as an older form f literature that reveals its primitive form of the society, while a novel is a reflection of the society within the times. These two are connected, as the novel may later become a part of the epic. The contents of the novel may eventually become a historical reference for future writings. It will become the standard from which other novels will look into. The concept of the novel sparked many debated, and the chapter provides a thorough narration of the critics and their arguments.

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