

RELIGIOUS FABULA AS A MEANS OF INCREASING THE MASS READERSHIP

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Abstract: The purpose of the study is to analyze how religious fabula is utilized in contemporary mass literature and find a link between the use of religious fabula and the commercial success of a literary work. The methodological framework of the study consists of conceptual provisions from different fields of science, such as history, the theory of literature, literary stylistics, and aesthetics. The study reveals that today's fiction writers employ a variety of strategies for exploiting religion in their works, among which creating a quasi-biblical chronotope; decoding religious symbols and scandalous pseudepigraphon, and retelling religious stories with postmodern twists. These solutions, seen in both Russian and non-Russian fiction, are to shift from mass/low literature to middle literature, attract more readers, and achieve commercial success. The results of this study may be useful in teaching literary disciplines in investigating the field of mass literature.

Keywords: mass literature, religious fabula, quasi-biblical chronotope, pseudepigraphon, literary reinvention.

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Introduction

Art for the masses is a recurrent phenomenon in the world history. It has been around during the Renaissance time period and it is can be seen popular today. It is interesting to point out that people in both eras gave strong attention to recreational activities. Note that the bourgeoisie of the past were as hungry for collecting products as the bourgeoisie of today and their artistic tastes are similar. The *Decameron* of Giovanni Boccaccio, for example, was created to entertain the women of higher class and the popularity of this writer stems not from the ideas in his works or the quality of the written text, but from having plot twists, juicy details, poetic lightness, etc. The artistic level of literature is directly

proportional to the cultural level of the readership and if the audience is massively replenished with neophytes (during Renaissance and today, these are people living in the growing urban areas) then the literature will become simpler to resonate with the readers.

It is important to note that modern literature is in a rather difficult situation where it is forced to compete with other forms of recreation, such as cinematography, television, the Internet (social networks), and glossy magazines. In this struggle for commercial success, mass literature uses both the means borrowed from younger alternatives (such as interactivity) and an arsenal of long-established techniques. The overflow and rethinking of images, plots, heroes and ideas from books to films and computer games, as well as fictionalization of the most



popular films and games, has become a regular phenomenon¹.

In the eyes of a mass reader, the value of the literary work increases if it contains references to celebrities, literary reminiscences, and aphorisms. In an effort to compete, modern literature reconsiders its theme offerings and develops new topics that may be of interest to the masses. The most popular examples include astrology, mysticism, occultism, and esotericism.

The common instrument in the struggle for commercial success, among other things, is a religious fabula, the global perspective of the story, which intentionally contains a biblical plot, motifs, or an image. This imposes a stronger effect on the readership. On the one hand, hidden messages and religious motifs make the audience more involved in reading the work: biblical plots need decoding, but they are well known enough to make the decoding process rather easy to accomplish (this act is somewhat similar to solving a crossword puzzle). By doing so, the reader will feel spiritual participation. In a sense, the literary work with a religious fabula is “rehabilitated” in the eyes of the audience, that is, it is perceived as a “serious” one. On the other hand, the author who uses religious fabula has the opportunity to disguise his/her piece of writing as an intellectual, aesthetically valuable work of art and produce something that would be labeled as high literature. The intentions of the author and his/her audience are consistent and this can explain the commercial success of mass literature with religious subtext.

This study deals with the comprehensive understanding of religious fabula in the Russian and global mass literature.

Literature review

The phenomenon of mass literature, which has recently been in the spotlight of scientific research, attracts the attention of many researchers worldwide. Mass literature is viewed as a cultural² or socio-cultural phenomenon.³ Literary studies deal with the typological characteristics of mass literature,⁴ the logic and practice of a literary field,⁵ genre diversity,⁶ reference work,⁷ and the systematization of the research on literature.⁸

The principles by which high and mass literature are distinguished remain blurred,⁹ which gives rise to other problems, namely there is no definition of either high or mass literature. Thus, R. Brown¹⁰ proposed to separate the two using the concepts of invention and convention. Literature that is inventive, according to the author, creates a unique image of the world, while literature that uses the conventional methods of writing drives on clichés and predictability.¹¹ In an attempt to move away from evaluativity associated with the words “mass” and “popular”, J. Cavelti (1976) divided the literature into mimetic and formulaic. These categories apply exclusively to poetics and do not focus on hierarchical relationships. According to the researcher,

“the mimetic element in literature confronts us with the world as we know it, while the formulaic element reflects the construction of an ideal world without the disorder, the ambiguity, the uncertainty, and the limitations of the world of our experience. Of course, the mimetic and the formulaic represent two poles that most literary works lie somewhere between.”¹²

Literary scholars consider the typological characteristics and genre diversity of mass literature, among other things, in the context of commercialization. Namely, Tsvetkova (2016) points out that

“through commercialization, a new category of popcorn literature emerged, interesting to read and easy to digest. The mass literature industry harnesses and drives on the interest of readers to things that are mysterious and enigmatic. The most popular genre is detective fiction. Also, a strong popularity of women’s fantasy novels arises. These pieces of literature do not bother shooting at complex social or moral dilemmas, which are commonly seen in “serious” literature, but sometimes they are more entertaining.”¹³

Today, however, the mass literature strives to enter the niche of high literature. Hayder (2017) notes that once marginal (from the perspective of literary and philosophical criticism) mass literature is now going through the phase of nobilization. This is a two-vector process. It is drawn up towards a new semiotic system of the modern cultural code, on the one hand, and has roots in the low culture (urban folklore, trivial novels, etc.), on the other hand.¹⁴ Cusack (2018) notes that mass character is often the result of character creation, a model of context or social problems, personal experiences that are close to a large number of readers. And in this case, the religious and philosophical ideas contained in the text are perceived as a new sacred text, subject to study and a kind of almost religious veneration¹⁵.

An effective way of entering the territory of high literature and, consequently increasing the readership is to take advantage of the biblical images and religious motifs. The practice of using religious concepts in mass literature was addressed by many researchers.¹⁶ “The strong adherence to religious motifs (modern interpretations of classical biblical themes, esoteric mysticism, folk beliefs and legends, etc.) indicates a new stage in the evolution of a reader,” Hayder says.¹⁷ Ryazanova (2015) distinguishes three ways in which Russian fiction adopt religious concepts: (1) wiring books with religion as one of the core themes (in this case, major and/or side characters are religious figures); (2) wiring near-philosophical works on the role of religion in society (this category also may include fantasy novels); (3) and wiring texts with religious images and symbols that are hidden.¹⁸ A religious fabula normally falls under the first and third categories.

Problem statement

This study presents a systematic, conceptual analysis of how religious fabula is utilized in contemporary mass literature. The aim of the study is to understand how different authors implement religious concepts in their works through the prism of style, traditions, innovations, and their worldview. The study seeks to link the use of religious fabula with the commercial success of a literary work. For this, the study will

- (1) look at the concepts of high/elite literature and low/trivial one;
- (2) examine religious fabula as an element of fictional prose and find related concepts;
- (3) explain the popularity of religious topics in mass literature;
- (4) quantify literary works with religious themes in contemporary Russian mass literature;
- (5) compare the purpose of religious fabula in high and low literature;
- (6) look at how religious fabula is used in both Russian and non-Russian mass literature;
- (7) evaluate the role of religious fabula as a structural element in a force field of a stylistic phenomenon;
- (8) identify the most common religious concepts found in mass literature;
- (9) comprehensively investigate religious fabula as a tool for commercial success;
- (10) determine the ratio of literary tradition and authenticity in works with the religious perspective of the story.

Methods and materials

The methodological framework of the research consists of conceptual provisions from different fields of science, such as history, the theory of literature, literary stylistics, and aesthetics. The study uses a typological method to interpret single causes of religious fabula usage. The comparative historical method is applied to analyze how literary trends and creativity of single writers influence the process of literary writing. The embodiment of identical religious concepts in different works was assessed through comparison. The aesthetic analysis made it possible to evaluate literary works as artistic phenomena. Some fragments of the text underwent structural and semantic analysis. Literary works for the study were selected by title through continuous sampling.

Results

Today's best writers whose works for mass readership were a huge commercial success, largely due to an intelligent use of religious themes, are Paulo Coelho, Dan Brown, and Stephen King. Namely, *The Alchemist* of Paulo Coelho has sold more than 300 million copies in more than 50 languages, *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown has sold

more than 81 million copies in 44 languages, and Stephen King's books have sold more than 350 million copies in almost every language out there. Their writing strategies regarding the use of religious motifs somewhat vary.

Paulo Coelho refers to the *Tale of Two Dreamers* by Jorge Luis Borges but his novel is a lighter version of the reference. He uses the same literary genre as Borges did, a parable, focusing on the existence of a person, his worldview, a philosophical quest, and religious principles. The introduction of biblical plots and characters in the narrative creates a special kind of chronotope in Coelho's fables. Namely, *The Alchemist* is more of a quasi-biblical novel, rather than a historical one. The line between the two masterpieces, *The Alchemist* and *The Tale of Two Dreamers*, lies in the plane of poetics. Borges's prose fiction is about existential and even, to some extent, polemical problems, such the modern interpretation of traditional Christian theological canons. The writer admonishes the humanity of the transformation of religion into dogma and the loss of moral guidelines. Coelho, on the other hand, wraps his story into biblical concepts to make it look more meaningful from the aesthetic and cultural points of view¹⁹.

Dan Brown, a writer associated with a genre of adventure fiction with elements of detective and thriller, chose a slightly different approach to enshrining religious concepts. The author captivates the reader by decoding him/her mysterious religious symbols and telling him/her shocking pseudo-apocryphal stories, playing on the actual genre of a spy novel, on the disclosure of the life of Secret Societies²⁰. This trend can be seen in his best sellers, such as *Angels & Demons*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Lost Symbol*, *Inferno*, and *Origin*. His Christ and Mary Magdalene are depicted as the central figures of a scandalous gossip. Religious plots and characters in his works create an attractive setting in which the audience would like to immerse.

Stephen King uses religious fabula to build up a plot. The common themes in his works are the end of the world, temptation by the devil, passion of the Christ, etc. His stories are consistent with the present. The concept of Devil's temptation was a foundation of a novel *Needful Things* and a short story *Fair Extension*. The novel *The Stand* is based on a myth of eschatology (the end of the world): the population is dying due to a mysterious virus and has to choose between the Light and Darkness²¹. The Christ in his suffering and death is depicted in a bestseller *The Green Mile*. The novel repeats the structure and plot lines of the Scripture: John Coffey is an innocent man who was condemned to prison. He does miracles to heal those with an incurable sick, including his executioner, just as Jesus healed Pontius Pilate. The executioner who sympathizes with the convicted person tries to help him. The righteous man who is John Coffey refuses to be saved and accepts his death. In the end, the executioner receives divine punishment for killing Coffey and the punishment is immortality.



At the same time, the researchers point out that the reader recognizes “religiosity” in the plot, because the author presents it as such, providing clear and easily identifiable religious markers²². Some researchers are confident that the religious plot, with its vivid and well-visualized images, makes many of Stephen King’s books so organically cinematic²³.

As it can be seen from the above, Coelho, Brown, and King have developed three successful strategies for adopting religious concepts, i.e. three ways of representing religious fabula: (1) creating a quasi-biblical chronotope; (2) decoding religious symbols and scandalous pseudograph; (3) retelling religious stories with postmodern twists. Among other things, these strategies helped the above masters to produce “serious” literature for a broad audience and be high on the bestseller list for a long time. On the other hand, the masters of such “serious” literature exercise a significant influence on the mass consciousness, possibly helping to restore the understanding of the masses of some mysteries and religious taboos²⁴. Furthermore, Paulo Coelho’s novels are even part of many countries school curriculum. It should be borne in mind that both the literary and religious value of his most famous works is fiercely contested by critics²⁵. Its undoubted value for the European school is explained by the support of multiculturalism and positivism as the official neoliberal philosophy in its poetics²⁶.

The religious concepts are often seen in the contemporary mass literature in Russia. Boris Akunin, a detective fiction writer like Dan Brown, was the first writer to achieve readership among different social groups. The presence of numerous allusions and reminiscences, adherence to literary traditions, and definite signs of fiction (plot, simplified stylistics, happy ending, the lack of subtext) in his works indicate that Akunin’s stories fall under the category of middle literature, a term coined by D. MacDonald²⁷ to avoid the dichotomy of the high and the low literature. The religious topic in Akunin’s *Before the World Ends* (*Pered kontsom sveta*) is to ennoble the plot in a detective story.

Stephen King’s strategy, namely the use of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic themes, is commonly utilized in Russian fantasy. Examples are the Russian bestsellers of Dmitry Glukhovskiy: *Metro 2033*, *Metro 2034*, and *Twilight*. *Metro 2033* has sold more than 1 million copies in 37 languages. The topic of Christ’s second coming was addressed in novels *Seekers of the Sky* (*Iskateli neba*) by Sergey Lukyanenko, *An Old Maid named Mary* (*Staraya deva Mariya*) by V. Khlumov, *The Chronicles of the Rift* by Nick Perumov, *The Adventures of Sir Lancelot* by Y. Voznesenskaya, etc. According to Khoruzhenko (2017), the last decade saw the emergence an entire layer of fantasy texts in which a person becomes a god and returns to the world once abandoned by God (or gods). The example is a novel *Gods are not born* by T. Ustimenko.²⁸ The topic of second coming in fantasy somewhat transforms. Namely, the

savior is portrayed in an ambiguous way: he can be either a destroyer or a redeemer. Although a Russian fantasy novel can contain references to the Scripture in its plot, the axiological meaning of the original story may be ignored.²⁹

The concept of temptation is represented in the book of the famous founder of a financial pyramid MMM Sergei Mavrodi – *Lucifer’s Son: The Temptation Chronicles*. In this case, the popularity of the book stems from the fact that it was written by a famous fraudster, rather than its fabula. A short list of Russian literary works with religious themes, motifs, and allusions, their genres, and types of religious fabula are depicted in Table 1.

As it can be seen in Table 1 above, today’s Russian authors who write for a mass audience make use of all types of religious fabula discussed above.

Discussion

This study coincides with Strukova (2006), who argues that mass literature reflects the escapist experiences of a person in a post-industrial society, his/her desire to escape into a fascinate fictional world, which is full of passion, romance and which gives a person the opportunity to be someone else. Strukova defines mass literature as one of the means of immersion into virtual reality.³⁰ Of course, the popularity of religious fabula in mass literature stems from the opportunity it creates to go beyond reality. In this case, religious themes, motifs, and allusions become a tool for shaping the quasi-reality, which helps authors to fulfill the requests of the audience and commodify their literary offerings.

Another important function of mass literature is helping the reader to overcome his/her phobias. New threats and related fears are the reason why apocalyptic themes are popular. Thanks to modern mass media, eschatology has become a phenomenon of mass culture in the 21st century. Films about zombie apocalypses, space invasions, environmental disasters, robot uprising, and artificial realities are integral to modern culture.³¹

When it comes to the intentions of the authors using religious themes in their works, this study is consistent with other researchers,³² who believe that a tendency to tackle religion arose due to the emergence to middle literature at the turn of the 21st century.³³ In general, mass literature has evolved to the point where it can offer its own classics to read, its own genre-artistic paradigm to follow, and its own sign system to apply. While evolving, it absorbed the elements of both high literature and low literature to generate a third category of literature. In a sense, this new type of literature as a sign system has already reshaped the consciousness of the reader.³⁴

The use of plot cliché and formulaic linguistic and artistic means in poetry and prose will make them neither popular nor trivial if the author keeps in mind that he/she deals with an experienced readership,³⁵ yet this also applies to other than elite types of literature.

Genre	Author, literary work	Religious fabula
Mystery, urban fantasy	Anastasia Elly Koldareva, <i>Shards of Heaven</i> (Oskolki nebes) Stepan Mazur, <i>The Emissary of the Shadow</i> (Poslanniki Teney)	retelling religious stories with postmodern twists
Alternate history	Alexander Vert, <i>From Cain</i> (ot Kaina)	pseudepigraphon
Romance fiction novels	Z. Sergeeva-Govorukhin, <i>Diary of a Fallen Angel</i> (Dnevnik padshego Angela) Fey Rodis & Tatiana Abyssin, <i>Academy "Angels of the Roads"</i> (Akademiya "Angely dorog") Olga Korotaeva, <i>The Obsessed: Payback for Love</i> (Oderzhimaya: rasplata za lyubov') Irina Suzdaleva, <i>Descendants of God and Devil</i> (Potomki Boga i D'yavola) Anastasia Sialana, <i>The First Horseman</i> (Pervyy vsadnik) Olga Ryzhaya, <i>Guardian Demon for the Angel</i> (Demon-telokhranitel' dlya Angela) Elena Boloton, <i>Dangerous Liaisons, or Marrying a Demon</i> (Opasnyye svyazi, ili Zamuzh za demona) Olga Danilevich, <i>The Last Werewolf</i> (Posledniy oboroten')	retelling religious stories with postmodern twists
Heroic fantasy, combat fantasy	Gay Yuliy Orlovskiy: Michael, <i>The Sword of the Lord</i> (Book 1): <i>Azazel's Request</i> (Mihail, Mech Gospoda. Kniga pervaya. Pros'ba Azazelya) Michael, <i>The Sword of the Lord</i> (Book 2): <i>The Underground City of Sodom</i> (Mihail, Mech Gospoda. Kniga vtoraya. Podzemnyy gorod Sodoma) Michael, <i>The Sword of the Lord</i> (Book 3): <i>The Road to Salvation</i> (Mihail, Mech Gospoda. Kniga tretaya. Reyd vo spaseniye) Michael, <i>The Sword of the Lord</i> (Book 4): <i>Angel with a Black Sword</i> (Mihail, Mech Gospoda. Kniga chetvertaya. Angel s chernym mechom) Michael, <i>The Sword of the Lord</i> (Book 5): <i>ChVK of the Lord</i> (Mihail, Mech Gospoda. Kniga pyataya. ChVK Vsevshnego) Elena Babintseva, <i>My Godfather Demon. The Third World War</i>	retelling religious stories with postmodern twists
Humorous fantasy	Ruslan Murtazaev, <i>The Warlock of His Dark One-ness</i> (Chernoknizhnik Yego Temneyshestva)	creating a quasi-biblical chronotope

Table 1. Russian literary works with religious themes, motifs, and allusions, their genres, and types of religious fabula.

Modern authors play a game with their readers, such that the more intercultural associations the author uses, the more fun the readers will have.³⁶ This study assumes that this kind of game is characteristic of mass literature, where it acts as a tool for attracting attention of potential readers and giving them an opportunity to feel smart. The serious literature is more about building an emotionally and intellectually intense dialogue between the author and the reader. While readers of Dan Brown and Boris Akunin have to solve the riddle along with main character, those of Fyodor Dostoevsky,

Jorge Borges, and Kurt Vonnegut can only ask questions, usually existential, without getting the answers.

Mass literature is closely connected with the book industry and is regurgitated into product-form. It must be sold like any other product and to find a proper market for it the authors must take into account the expectations of a diverse audience.³⁷ One can hardly agree with Hayder (2017) on sociological factor distorting the artistic value of literature, since it directly depends on the level of commercialization and the influence of the publisher. After all, the focus on the salability of



literary works or authors occupies the lower platform in the pyramid of mass literature, which is produced for an average, inexperienced reader.³⁸ This study holds that the focus on commercial success is a basic (i.e., the main) principle of mass literature, which does not require a distinction between experienced and inexperienced readership. It is crucial for authors of mass literature to expand the readership range and attract new audiences, including the experienced ones and the use of religious fabula is a convenient way of achieving this.

Conclusions

The common approach to sparking interest in a literary work is to take a classic and interpret it in a different way. It is unlikely that Shakespeare would have been offended by the Hollywood version of Romeo and Juliet, as he himself has been rewriting the works of his predecessors. The use of religious images, symbols and plots in mass literature is a similar move. The study reveals that today's fiction writers employ a variety of strategies for exploiting religion in their works, among which creating a quasi-biblical chronotope, decoding religious symbols and scandalous pseudonym, and retelling religious stories with postmodern twists. These solutions, seen in both Russian and non-Russian fiction, are to shift from mass/low literature to middle literature and attract more readers.

While one can agree that the process of literary reinvention is an expected consequence of creativity and the history of literature knows many cases where literary works were reinvented, yet a major difference exists between a great piece of literature and its commodified alternative, like between the real cheese and the processed cheese. Of course, an author cannot be forced to place a label on the cover of his book with all components of the story written on it. Although preservatives and flavor enhancers in art are no less harmful than in food; namely, a lower ideological and aesthetic tension in the story may result in the spiritual and cultural degradation of the reader.

Modern literature needs nothing but time to tell us about the human values once again. History shows that it takes centuries to cultivate new audience segments, as it happened in the Middle Ages, during the Renaissance period, the era of Enlightenment, the Romantic era, and even during the periods of Realism and Modernism. The new audience always needs literature that is adapted to their base of knowledge and worldview. Today, while the audience grows and makes new requests, the literature industry will be forced to transform and respond to these changes.

The results of this study may be useful in teaching literary disciplines in investigating the field of mass literature.

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34. Hayder, "Mass literature: the history of research in the post-Soviet space," 125.
35. Hayder, "Mass literature: the history of research in the post-Soviet space," 123.
36. Hayder, "Mass literature: the history of research in the post-Soviet space," 123.
37. Strukova, "Mass literature as a social and cultural phenomenon," 113.
38. Hayder, "Mass literature: the history of research in the post-Soviet space," 126.

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