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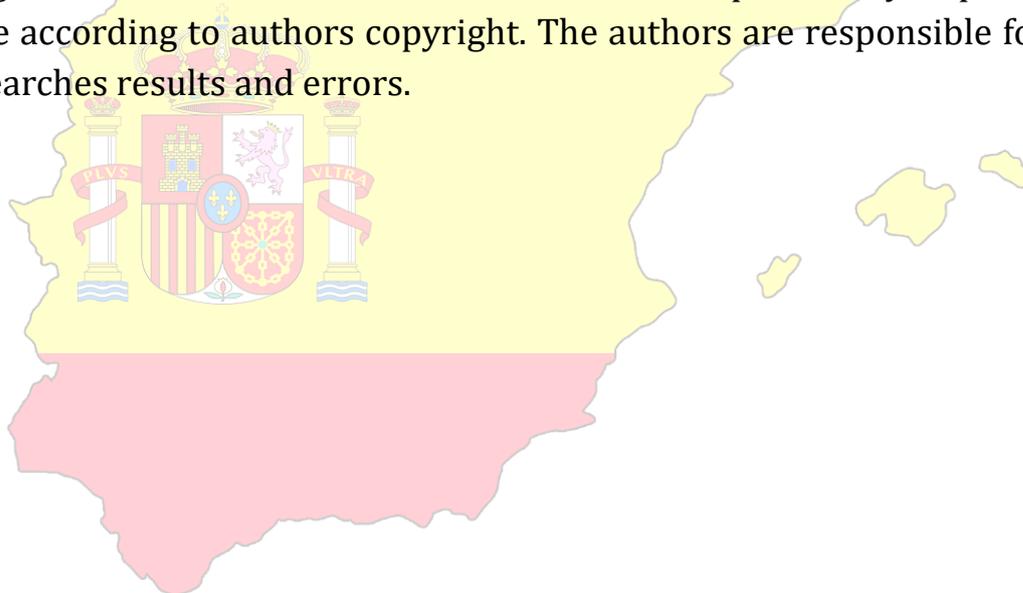


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The Concept of the Hero in Russian and English Literary Discourse of the 19th Century

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Annotation. The article presents a comparative conceptual analysis of the hero in nineteenth-century Russian and English literary discourse. It examines how the notion of heroism evolves under social, philosophical, and aesthetic transformations. Russian literature emphasizes existential struggle, spiritual suffering, and moral absolutism, whereas English literature highlights social integration, ethical pragmatism, and moral development. The study demonstrates that the nineteenth-century hero is a psychologically complex and ideologically conflicted figure, reflecting broader cultural and historical contexts.

Keywords: Hero; Nineteenth-Century Literature; Russian Literature; English Literature; Literary Discourse; Psychological Realism; Moral Development; Comparative Analysis

Introduction. The nineteenth century occupies a central place in the history of European literature, marking a period of intense aesthetic transformation and ideological reorientation. Within this dynamic cultural context, the concept of the hero emerged as a key structural and semantic element of literary discourse. The transformation of the novel as a genre and its increasing focus on subjectivity have been examined by Georg Lukács [3; 4] and Ian Watt [5], who emphasize the rise of realism and the development of individual consciousness as defining features of the modern novel. In Russian literary tradition, the hero is often depicted as a figure engaged in existential and moral struggle. Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism [1; 2] provides a useful framework for understanding the polyphonic structure of Dostoevsky's characters, whose consciousness becomes the site of ideological confrontation. Similarly, Isaiah Berlin [7] and Joseph Frank [8] interpret Russian intellectual history as deeply connected to questions of moral absolutism and spiritual inquiry. In contrast, English literary discourse situates the hero within the framework of industrialization and moral development. Raymond Williams [6] and A. N. Wilson [10] highlight the social foundations of Victorian literature, where ethical growth is closely linked to class mobility and social reform. The development of realism and moral individualism in English fiction is further discussed by Lionel Trilling [13] and Irving Howe [20].

The nineteenth century occupies a central place in the history of European literature, marking a period of intense aesthetic transformation and ideological reorientation. Within this dynamic cultural context, the concept of the hero emerged as a key structural and semantic element of literary discourse. Both Russian and English novels of the nineteenth century reveal a profound rethinking of heroic identity, shifting from the classical model of the idealized protagonist to complex, psychologically nuanced figures shaped by social, moral, and philosophical tensions. The works of Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Ivan

Turgenev in Russia, alongside those of Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Thomas Hardy in England, demonstrate how literary discourse became a space for negotiating the evolving meanings of heroism.

In Russian literary tradition, the hero is often depicted as a figure engaged in an existential and moral struggle, reflecting the broader intellectual climate shaped by social reform, spiritual inquiry, and philosophical debate. The “superfluous man,” the “nihilist,” and the morally conflicted intellectual exemplify transformations in the understanding of individual agency and responsibility. Russian authors frequently portray the hero not as a triumphant conqueror, but as a reflective, suffering consciousness confronting injustice, alienation, and the search for truth. This introspective orientation reveals the influence of Orthodox spirituality, emerging social criticism, and the tension between Westernization and national identity.

In contrast, English literary discourse of the same period tends to situate the hero within the framework of industrialization, class mobility, and moral pragmatism. The English hero often embodies resilience, ethical development, and gradual self-realization within a rapidly changing social order. The Victorian novel, shaped by realism and social commentary, constructs protagonists whose heroism is tested through economic hardship, social inequality, and moral dilemmas. Rather than embodying metaphysical anguish, the English hero frequently represents perseverance, integrity, and adaptation to societal norms, even while critiquing them.

Despite these differences, Russian and English literary traditions share important convergences. In both contexts, the nineteenth-century hero becomes increasingly individualized and psychologically complex. The narrative focus shifts from external feats to internal development, from epic grandeur to everyday moral experience. Heroism is redefined not solely through action, but through consciousness, ethical choice, and social engagement. This transformation reflects broader cultural processes, including the rise of realism, the democratization of literary themes, and the growing attention to subjectivity.

The present study aims to conduct a comparative conceptual analysis of the hero in Russian and English literary discourse of the nineteenth century. By examining representative texts and identifying dominant semantic, narrative, and ideological features, the article seeks to reveal both structural parallels and culturally specific models of heroism. Such an approach contributes to a deeper understanding of how literature constructs national paradigms of identity and how the figure of the hero functions as a discursive embodiment of historical consciousness and moral inquiry.

Results and Discussion. The Russian hero as a psychologically complex and ideologically conflicted figure aligns with Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony [2], where multiple voices coexist without authorial domination. Dostoevsky’s narrative method has been analyzed extensively by Edward Wasiolek [15] and E. H. Carr [9], who emphasize the moral and philosophical experimentation

embedded in his fiction. Tolstoy's reconceptualization of heroism through ethical awakening rather than military triumph echoes George Steiner's comparative study Tolstoy or Dostoevsky [18], which contrasts moral realism with metaphysical drama. Richard Freeborn [14] similarly underscores the national specificity of the Russian novel's ethical preoccupations. In English literature, the moral development of the hero corresponds to Ian Watt's thesis regarding the rise of formal realism [5]. John Carey's analysis of Dickens [16] and David Cecil's work on early Victorian novelists [17] reveal how heroism becomes intertwined with social critique and ethical education. The broader theoretical implications of genre, archetype, and literary structure may also be understood through Northrop Frye's structural criticism [12] and Harold Bloom's reflections on the Western canon [11]. Viktor Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarization [19] further illuminates the narrative techniques that contribute to the psychological depth of nineteenth-century protagonists.

The conceptualization of the hero in nineteenth-century Russian and English literary discourse reflects profound transformations in aesthetic paradigms, philosophical thought, and socio-historical realities. In both traditions, the hero ceases to function as a static embodiment of ideal virtues and instead becomes a dynamic semantic construct shaped by ideological conflict, moral ambiguity, and psychological depth. However, the trajectory and structural features of this transformation differ significantly between Russian and English contexts, revealing culturally specific models of heroic identity.

In Russian literature, the hero often emerges as a figure of internal contradiction and existential tension. The literary discourse of the period foregrounds the problem of individual agency within an oppressive or morally fragmented society. In the works of **Ivan Turgenev**, particularly in **Fathers and Sons**, the character of **Bazarov** represents a new type of hero – the nihilist – who rejects traditional values yet struggles to construct a coherent ethical foundation. The hero here is not defined by triumphant action but by ideological confrontation and intellectual rebellion. His heroism lies in his uncompromising rationalism, yet the narrative simultaneously exposes the limitations and emotional vulnerability underlying his worldview.

Similarly, in the novels of **Fyodor Dostoevsky**, such as **Crime and Punishment**, the hero becomes the site of intense psychological and moral experimentation. **Raskolnikov**'s internal monologues, moral oscillations, and eventual spiritual crisis transform the very concept of heroism. The traditional heroic paradigm – based on strength, honor, and decisive action – is deconstructed and replaced by a model centered on conscience, guilt, and redemption. The Russian hero frequently exists in a liminal state, suspended between sin and salvation, pride and humility. Heroism, therefore, acquires a metaphysical dimension; it is inseparable from suffering and spiritual transformation.

The philosophical scope of Russian heroism is further elaborated in the epic realism of **Leo Tolstoy**. In **War and Peace**, **Pierre Bezukhov** exemplifies a hero

whose development unfolds through moral introspection and historical contingency. Tolstoy's narrative strategy decentralizes conventional heroism by shifting attention from grand historical figures to the inner lives of ordinary individuals. Heroism is not located in military glory or political power but in ethical awakening and compassion. This reconceptualization reflects a broader Russian tendency to associate the hero with moral responsibility and spiritual authenticity rather than with social dominance.

A distinctive feature of Russian literary discourse is the recurring motif of the "**superfluous man**," exemplified in earlier nineteenth-century works but persisting as a conceptual background throughout the century. This type of hero embodies alienation, social ineffectiveness, and existential dislocation. His passivity and skepticism challenge classical heroic ideals, revealing a crisis of identity within the intelligentsia. The superfluous hero's tragedy lies not in external defeat but in internal fragmentation, thus emphasizing the psychological and philosophical dimensions of heroism in Russian culture.

In contrast, English nineteenth-century literature constructs the hero within the framework of social realism and moral progress. The Victorian era, marked by industrial expansion, urbanization, and class mobility, shaped a narrative discourse in which the hero's development is closely tied to social environment and ethical growth. In the novels of **Charles Dickens**, such as **Great Expectations**, the protagonist Pip undergoes a moral education that redefines his understanding of success and virtue. The English hero often begins in conditions of deprivation or naivety but gradually acquires self-awareness through experience. Heroism is manifested not in radical rebellion but in perseverance, moral correction, and reintegration into society.

The works of **William Makepeace Thackeray**, particularly **Vanity Fair**, complicate the heroic model by introducing irony and social critique. Thackeray questions the very possibility of a pure hero in a world governed by ambition and hypocrisy. His narrative voice destabilizes traditional moral hierarchies, suggesting that heroism may be relative, situational, or even illusory. Yet even within this ironic framework, English discourse maintains a focus on social performance and ethical accountability rather than on metaphysical torment.

In the later Victorian period, Thomas Hardy presents a more tragic vision of heroism. Characters such as **Tess in Tess of the d'Urbervilles** embody moral resilience in the face of deterministic social and natural forces. Hardy's heroes are shaped by environment, fate, and social prejudice, yet they retain an intrinsic moral dignity. The tragic dimension of English heroism thus lies not in spiritual rebellion but in the individual's struggle against impersonal structures of power. Unlike the Russian hero, who often seeks metaphysical reconciliation, the English hero confronts the constraints of class, gender, and economic circumstance.

A comparative analysis reveals both convergence and divergence between these traditions. In both Russian and English literary discourse, the nineteenth century witnesses a shift from external to internal criteria of heroism. Psychological depth,

ethical reflection, and narrative subjectivity become central components of heroic construction. The omniscient narrator increasingly yields space to interior monologue, free indirect discourse, and complex characterization. Consequently, the hero transforms into a discursive center through which ideological debates and cultural anxieties are articulated.

However, the semantic core of heroism differs across the two traditions. Russian discourse emphasizes existential inquiry, spiritual suffering, and moral absolutism. The hero is frequently positioned at the intersection of philosophy and faith, embodying a search for ultimate truth. English discourse, by contrast, prioritizes social integration, pragmatic morality, and gradual self-improvement. The English hero's trajectory is often linear and developmental, whereas the Russian hero's path is cyclical, marked by crisis and revelation.

Furthermore, the narrative function of the hero reflects broader national paradigms. In Russia, the hero often symbolizes the intellectual conscience of society, representing the tensions between individual freedom and collective destiny. His isolation underscores the cultural preoccupation with moral responsibility and historical mission. In England, the hero typically mediates between personal aspiration and social order, illustrating the values of industriousness, moderation, and ethical compromise characteristic of Victorian ideology.

Another important dimension of comparison concerns gendered representations of heroism. While male protagonists dominate much of the nineteenth-century canon, both traditions also produce significant female heroes who challenge patriarchal structures. English heroines frequently embody moral steadfastness and domestic virtue, yet they also reveal the constraints imposed by rigid social norms. Russian female characters, although often situated within traditional roles, may assume profound moral authority, influencing the spiritual development of male protagonists. In both contexts, gender becomes a crucial factor in redefining heroic agency and ethical voice.

Ultimately, the nineteenth-century transformation of the hero reflects a broader epistemological shift from certainty to complexity. The hero is no longer an unequivocal moral exemplar but a problematic, evolving consciousness. Literary discourse becomes a laboratory for testing ethical hypotheses and exploring the limits of human autonomy. Through comparative analysis, it becomes evident that Russian and English traditions, while shaped by distinct historical conditions, participate in a shared European movement toward psychological realism and conceptual redefinition of heroism.

The concept of the hero in nineteenth-century Russian and English literature thus functions as a cultural index of changing values, anxieties, and aspirations. By examining narrative strategies, character typologies, and ideological frameworks, one can observe how heroism evolves from a stable archetype into a fluid and contested construct. This evolution not only reflects national specificities but also illuminates the universal human struggle to reconcile individuality with moral and social responsibility.

Conclusion. The comparative analysis of the hero in nineteenth-century Russian and English literary discourse demonstrates that heroism during this period undergoes a profound conceptual transformation. In both traditions, the classical image of the triumphant and morally unambiguous protagonist gives way to a psychologically complex and ideologically conflicted figure. Yet the semantic vectors of this transformation differ: Russian literature foregrounds existential struggle, spiritual suffering, and moral absolutism, while English literature emphasizes social development, ethical pragmatism, and integration within a changing societal framework.

Through the works of authors such as Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky on the one hand, and Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy on the other, the hero becomes a discursive embodiment of national consciousness and historical change. Ultimately, the nineteenth-century hero reflects not only individual moral quests but also broader cultural negotiations concerning identity, responsibility, and the meaning of human dignity in an era of rapid transformation.

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