

# Death as a Semiotic Issue: Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Svetlana Gerasimova<sup>1,\*</sup> Elena Kulikova<sup>1,a</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Kosygin Russian State University (Technologies. Design. Art), Moscow, Russian Federation

<sup>a</sup> Email: kulikova-ev@rguk.ru

\*Corresponding author. Email: metanoik@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

The cultural code of dying is fundamental to every culture. The transition from paganism to Christianity was marked by a new thanatological teaching, expressed in the exclamation: «Christ is Risen!» It formed the basis of Russian traditional thanatology and the Russian cultural code. It is preserved in the life experience of many of Dostoevsky's heroes, whom we will call conditionally as representatives of spiritual culture, it sounds in the story of Prince Myshkin about a person sentenced to death. Representatives of civilization and paganism are destroying the Russian cultural code. Different voices in the artistic world of Dostoevsky form a polyphonic cosmos, not chaos, because they are structured according to the anthropological teaching of the Church. Tolstoy became a truly revolutionary in the field of thanatology, he seeks to create his own religion and his own doctrine of death, based on belief in the immortality of the soul and disbelief in the immortality of the individual.

**Keywords:** Polyphony, Cultural code, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Culture, Civilization, Paganism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: DEATH IN THE SEMIOTIC SYSTEM OF CULTURE — PROBLEM STATEMENT, AND GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Main issue discussed in the article is related to the difference in perception of Bakhtin's theory as evidence of ambivalence reigning in the creative space of Dostoevsky and the writer's world as a structure created by a spiritual hierarchy of values. The problem is how to relate polyphonism to the axiology of Dostoevsky's world. Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel is usually contrasted with Tolstoy's monological world. The problem is that Tolstoy also has elements of polyphonism, and it is necessary to understand their nature in Tolstoy's art world. The solution of these problems defines the aim and tasks of further research.

The aim of the study is to show modifications of the cultural code on the example of a dying process and to realise to what extent Russia managed to preserve its unique cultural code in the 19th century. The juxtaposition of the two writers helps to broaden the range of vision of the issue. So, research

objective is to identify the extent to which, using the concept of the day of death and birth as an example, the national cultural code is preserved today.

The objective of the study is to understand to what extent, using the concept of the day of death and birth, the national code of culture is preserved today.

The choice of the situation of dying is linked to the fact that thanatology defines the type of culture. The transition from ancient paganism to the Christian Middle Ages was marked by a thanatological revolution. «Christ is Risen» is the key good news defining Christianity and the basis of thanatological doctrine. Considering death as a crucial cultural code and an element of the semiotic system, we find different modifications of this code in the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. To narrow down the extensive material, we select four situations of dying: these are the stories of Prince Andrei Bolkonsky (Leo Tolstoy «War and World»), the condemned to death from the story of Prince Myshkin, Hippolytus (Dostoyevsky «The Idiot»), and Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov (Dostoyevsky «The Brothers Karamazov»).

The study is based on a comparative analysis of texts based on semiotic concepts. The article is essentially an abstract of a large unpublished study.

## **2. CULTURAL BILINGUALISM: THE SACRED AND SECULAR MODE OF THE CULTURAL CODE**

Bakhtin called the diversity of points of view polyphony, and Lotman, relying on his predecessor, calls this phenomenon ambivalence, that «in the memory of a culture (as well as any cultural collective, including an individual), not one, but a whole set of meta-systems regulating its behavior is stored» [1].

Theoretically, at least two variations of this cultural code are possible.

The modern semiotic system is a kind of sacred bilingualism, which is expressed not only in the simultaneous functioning of the sacred and profane language, but also in the existence of two parallel cultural languages - the semiotic language of secular culture and the semiotic language of church culture. Sacred bilingualism shows that culture is at a high stage of development, and is not limited to bilingualism, which includes Church Slavonic and Russian in Russia, Latin and national languages in Europe, Arabic and Farsi in Muslim countries.

The most important code that determines the type of cultural language is associated with the choice of what to value more - the birthday or the day of death, and in the version of the XIX century – if it was a symbolic day of life or the day of death. Modern secular culture chooses a birthday; before the revolution, name day was celebrated first of all – «War and World» begins with it: the daughter and the mother of Rostov celebrate Natalia's day. Sacred culture, as we can see from the example of the name day, shaped secular behavior. Secular and sacred cultures were united. This property of the national code of culture has been lost. The symbolic day of life has shifted from the sacred to the secular sphere. Sacred culture values the day of death. And this is understandable: life itself is important for secular culture as well-being; spiritual culture values the quality of personality during the transition from temporary life to eternal life. The genuine man is not the one he was born, but the one he became and appeared to eternity. As the secular culture values a person's birthday, sacred culture values the day of his death as a birthday to eternal life. Every day the church honors the memory of saints who on this day either suffered for Christ as martyrs, or died

peacefully after a long ascetic life. The Church commemorates only three birthdays: there are Christ's, the Virgin's and John's the Baptist ones; the birthday of St. Nicholas was also honored in the XIX century. The memory of all the other saints coincides either with the day of their death, or with the transfer of their relics, which is also inseparable from death, or with the name day. Having been born a person does not bring anything into the world. The first birth is corporeal and temporary - the second birth (aka death) is spiritual and eternal. Spirituality is not an unambiguously positive category, because demons are also spirits. The fate of the soul in eternity depends on the quality of spirituality.

Each type of culture creates its own chronotope, its own time and space. The reverse perspective of the icon corresponds to the Julian calendar style. The Gregorian calendar style is suitable for the direct perspective of paintings. Paradigmatic thinking (the paradigm of time, the paradigm of space) is important for secular culture, the situation of choice is valued here as a means of implementing the paradigm. The sacred culture is characterized by syntagmatic thinking (the simultaneity of the three hypostases of time and space on the icon), and the idea of conciliarity as a consequence of syntagmatic thinking.

## **3. THE POLYPHONIC NOVEL AS A COSMOS**

In fact, the range of modifications of attitudes to the problem of death in culture is wider than the sacred and secular version of it, but at the base of each subjective interpretation of the code (at the base of each fantastic logos) lies the sacred logos.

Bakhtin emphasizes the variability of cultural codes that form a polyphonic novel. However, Dostoevsky does not have ambivalence and conventionality of the hierarchy of values. Dostoevsky strictly follows the Christian axiology. "The central concept in axiology is the concept of value, which characterizes the socio-cultural significance of the phenomena of reality included in value relations." [2] Dostoevsky's polyphonism is not chaos, but cosmos. It is structured by Christian anthropological teaching. Firstly, it is built according to the ideas that the Divine Trinity is reflected in the trinity of personality. Saint Evagrius expounds the doctrine of the trinity of the soul in the Philokalia, distinguishing three forces, or parts, of the soul: the rational («mind»); the wrathful («part of the soul in which anger is located») in the region of the heart; the lustful («part in which lust is put»)

[3]. As a result, the brothers Karamazov appear as a single conciliar personality. Ivan – the mind, Alyosha - the heart, Dmitry - the lust. The second structuring principle will be the doctrine of the movement of human nature. In the eighth word, Abba Isaiah expounds the doctrine of three types of movement of human nature: this is the grace type according to the «nature of Jesus» (to lend and to forget about it); type according to the «nature of Adam» (to ask for repayment); unnatural type, «against his nature», that is against Adam's nature (to demand interest) [4].

The system of voices of Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel is formed from the interaction of three forces of the soul with three types of movement of human nature. This system reflects the axiology of Dostoevsky's novels.

National culture is formed as a result of the historical teaching of the people, therefore, three types of voices created by history, but not all of their potentially possible diversity, are most often found in Dostoevsky: these are representatives of an unnatural civilized mind (Ivan Karamazov, Raskolnikov), a gracious, cultured heart (Sonya Marmeladova, Prince Myshkin, Elder Zosima, Alyosha Karamazov) and «natural» pagan lust (Marmeladov, Ferdishchenko, Dmitry Karamazov), worshiping Bacchus or Aphrodite. Let's briefly call them as representatives of civilization, spiritual culture and paganism. As a result, the variety of voices in Dostoevsky's novels forms a cosmically harmonious system.

#### **4. FEATURES OF POLYPHONISM IN TOLSTOY'S NOVELS**

The structure of the anthropological concepts of the fathers of Philocalia was not entirely interesting to Tolstoy. He analyzes the natural and unnatural movements of human nature, and his ideas about naturalness change over time. Dolly's and Anna's reflections on motherhood («Anna Karenina»: Part Six: XXIII) sound like polyphonic dialogue. The natural swarm life, embodied in Platon Karataev and Kutuzov, and the unnatural individualism gravitating towards Napoleon's pole are tensely arguing in «War and World». Each individual soul in the artistic world of Tolstoy is polyphonic; this property is usually called the dialectic of the soul, fluidity and the quest of heroes.

Dostoevsky emphasizes the rational, heartfelt and lustful strength in the personality, Tolstoy comprehends the natural and unnatural movements

of human nature. Dostoevsky personifies these forces, a powerful interpersonal dialogue is conducted in his novels. There are only grains of polyphonism in Tolstoy's novels, so he hears more actively not the forces of the soul, but the types of movement of human nature. In his novels nature itself moves, it conducts a dialogue with itself in every individual soul, in human society, in the entire universe, as a result the impression is that his novels are monological, since only one ideal value is affirmed - naturalness, and selfish passions are recognized as unnatural, but they are not alone, but the grace-filled movements of the soul by the nature of Jesus seem unnatural too: Olenin gave Lukashka a horse, and received only suspicions of bad intentions in return, because giving a horse to a distant acquaintance is unnatural if you do not have any distant reprehensible plans. The hero experienced enlightenment, he was spiritually born - only such people are truly alive. Tolstoy considers other people to be the living dead, because they have not experienced a second birth. Despite the fact that Olenin experienced a spiritual birth, the world of natural people rejects him: his spiritual rebirth was not complete, on giving up the horse, he retains the instinct of ownership in love for Maryanka. As a result, a certain system of oppositions is built up in Tolstoy's world. This system will change over time: happiness in a large marriage - and proud individualism that destroys the family, are usually contrasted in early works, they fight each other like life and death. This is how the fates of Natasha Rostova and Helen Bezukhova («War and World») are contrasted, marriage will shift to the pole of death («Living Corpse») in later works. Fyodor Protasov is a martyr of the idea: he abandoned family and life, Protasov is a secular analogue of the holy fool in Tolstoy's world, this is an ideal hero who does not accept the falseness of the world. Note that Tolstoy perceives everything as false by 1900, he is a critic of the entire world order, including marriage and the Church.

#### **5. DEATH IN THE WORLD OF DOSTOEVSKY**

Situations of dying form a small polyphonic space within the large polyphonic space of Dostoevsky's artistic world.

The dying of representatives of spiritual culture most fully realizes the Christian code of Russian culture. Talking about a person sentenced to death, Prince Myshkin designates the moment of death as merging with the rays of light reflected from the

gilded roof of the church. This light, as the condemned man anticipates, will become his new nature. The tradition of state the names or attributes of God, such as Light, Beauty, Fragrance, etc., was reflected both in the patristic tradition (in the writings of St. Dionysius the Areopagite, St. Maximus the Confessor, etc.), and in the creations of Russian religious philosophers (in the works Vladimir Soloviev, Sergiy Bulgakov and others). Prince Myshkin knows that beauty will save the world, but it is only the Creator's Beauty that will save the world. And in the case of those sentenced to death, the human soul after death will unite with God, with his uncreated Tabor light, which the hesychasts contemplated.

The dying of representatives of civilization, for example Hippolytus, is a meeting with the evil, mocking nature of the world. This nature scoffs at the intuition of immortality embedded in the human soul. It defiles all the best impulses and hopes of a person. Hippolytus wants to challenge this evil mocking force, he does not want to wait for nature to deign to kill him or when consumption becomes the cause of his death, the hero wants to declare his right to freedom from this force. He wants to die «willingly». The world lies in evil for the Christian. Representatives of civilization feel the evil of the world and rebel against it. Unfortunately, this rebellion often leads them to suicidal thoughts. This perception of death moved away from the Russian Christian code of dying, but gave rise to the cultural code of the French existentialists. Life is absurd and meaningless in the face of death in their writings. Hippolytus also feels the absurdity of life in the face of mocking death and decay, which did not spare even the most beautiful thing on earth - Christ. The painting «Dead Christ» brings Rogozhin to disbelief. Russian atheists, protesting against the nonsense of death, deny life. Dostoevsky shows how, proceeding from a good idea - rejection of the evil world, representatives of the civilization come to evil, to rejection of life and God. Civilization is the world of unnatural mental movements of human nature. This is the world of a proud mind and a devastated heart.

The dying of representatives of paganism is illustrated by the example of Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov. He languishes in voluptuousness even before death. This is a shameful and nasty death without repentance, the Russian cultural code is destroyed as a result. It is no coincidence that the hero is proud of his resemblance to the ancient Roman. In addition, the unfortunate old man is killed by his own son. This novel situation is connected to the pagan cultural code, which makes this plot a

variation on the theme of parricide in ancient mythology, which tells about Uranus, Cronos, Zeus, Oedipus, etc.

Dostoevsky's heroes die in different ways, but the axiological cosmos of his artistic world is one. It is based on the Russian Christian cultural code. The author allows his heroes to live and die as they want, but all their desires and actions are inscribed in the Christian anthropological system and can be explained and analyzed from it. They do not destroy, but account for the single axiological cosmos of Dostoevsky, with its poles of good and evil. Representatives of spiritual culture follow the sacred mode of the semiosphere, while representatives of civilization and paganism come after the secular one. Death did not become a meeting with Christ for them. It is excruciating and pointless.

## **6. DEATH IN THE WORLD OF TOLSTOY**

Neoplatonists, Manicheans, Gnostics, Buddhists oppose matter to spirit in the same way as they oppose evil to good, therefore asceticism and death for them is a blessing, liberation from matter. Tolstoy also has a connection with these teachings, but he initially got to know them not directly, but through the enlighteners of the 18th century.

This is not the case in Christianity. Here the New Adam is opposed to the Old One in the same way as good contradicts evil. A new holy body and a new holy soul will be after the universal resurrection, so it is not the body itself that is bad, but the Old Adam is bad, since evil often acts through him.

Tolstoy follows the tradition of associating the body itself with evil. V. Semenko subtly notes: personality for him is also corporeal and material, therefore it is good to get rid of it. Tolstoy believes that this liberation leads to spiritual growth, which Prince Andrei Bolkonsky experiences on the eve of death. The hero perceives dying as awakening in a purely Buddhist way («War and World»: Vol. IV, Part 1: XVI). Yu. Prokopchuk writes: «Tolstoy liked to compare life with sleep, he likened death with awakening. Prince Andrew came to this very thought shortly before his death; Tolstoy included the same in his Reading Circle» on November 7» [5]. The writer clearly expresses this idea in the preface to the «Summary of the Gospel»: «True life is not only a life outside of time - present, but it is also a life outside of personality — it is a life shared by all people and it is expressed by love» [6]. It is the simple people who can die «correctly»: «Ethics and

ontology are identical here; more precisely, Karataev does not need ethics itself: one who does not have a personality and personal aspirations does not need to be convinced of the need for "sacrifice", because he "does not care"» [7]. Andrei Bolkonsky approaches the ideal to die like a tree («Three Deaths»). The motive, who will get the boots of a dying man, connects the story «Three Deaths» by Tolstoy and the novel «All Quiet on the Western Front» by Remarque. If the dying Fedor gives away his boots, then the tree that died gives all of itself for the human benefit.

The first writer who combined Buddhist and Christian motifs was St. John of Damascus as the author of «The Tale of Barlaam and Joasaph». Buddhist realities have been transformed into completely Christian ones. The third religion is formed from two traditional beliefs in Tolstoy's world. On the one hand, Tolstoy as Buddhist denies the personality and personal love that binds a person to the wheel of samsara. Buddhists call for killing love. On the other hand, Tolstoy is Christian. The source with which the spirit of the deceased Andrei Bolkonsky will merge is universal Divine Love. God is Love in Christianity, nirvana has nothing to do with love in Buddhism. Nirvana is personal nothingness and impersonal bliss.

God is Love in The Gospel, therefore He loves, and does not destroy the human personality at all. Tolstoy points out that the erasure of personal love and the whole personality is a condition for connecting with the source of love.

If Tolstoy follows the path of the «universal union» of religions in «War and World» [8], then he creates a Buddhist world in the story «Assyrian king Asarhadon». Here there is a remotely Christian preaching of love between people, but its necessity follows from purely Buddhist logic. The identity in this story is denied, and the one whom the king is going to execute may turn out to be the king himself.

Tolstoy's move from a more Christian understanding of death, as in the case of Andrei Bolkonsky, to a Buddhist view of it, as in the story of Asarhadon, was due to the writer's unique teaching about simplicity.

Simplicity is the indivisible core of man. Tolstoy believes that personal memory and personal love are too subjective and superficial. He is looking for the fundamental foundations of being, which are based on the universal nature of man, but not on his original personality. Such an idea does not correspond to Christian teaching. Socrates, and not

only Buddhism, influenced this teaching. Tolstoy created an idealized biography of this philosopher. Plato describes the last day of Socrates in the Socratic dialogue «Phaedo». Proving the immortality of the soul, Socrates asserts that the soul is simple as an idea, and therefore eternal. Describing the spiritual quest of the heroes and experiencing it himself, Tolstoy understands that the sphere of intelligence and personal manifestations is changeable, it cannot be eternal and simple. Tolstoy denies personality as a vain, changeable and devoid of simplicity. Not only do Buddhist views underlie this denial, Socrates also influenced Tolstoy. The soul must always be identical with itself and indivisible if it wants to be immortal. The eternal and indivisible experience of personality can be reduced to the formula: «I am me». This is simplicity. The soul is eternal equality with itself. The simplicity of the soul is manifested in the fact that childhood, maturity and old age of a person have an important common property. This common property lies in the fact that the simple and unchangeable human soul is always preserved. The personality develops, but the soul remains unchanged. The personality will die, the soul will connect with the source of love («War and World») or will incarnate again and again. The soul is not equal to personality, the soul is the negation of personality and the affirmation of universal human nature. It is her movement that underlies the swarm life. Tolstoy believes in the immortality of the soul and does not believe in the immortality of the individual. This is especially clearly seen in the context of Tolstoy's Buddhist belief in rebirth. Every new birth is a new memory, a new experience and a new personality. Consequently, the personality is changeable and transitory, and the soul is eternal and simple. The soul will be saved; the personality will perish. The foundations of these ideas are already laid in the history of the death of Prince Andrei Bolkonsky.

Christianity puts an equal sign between the soul and the personality. The soul will be saved with all the specifics of its personal memory and personal love, because God is love and does not destroy anything of what He has created. The personality in Christianity is not the result of earthly experience, like Tolstoy's, it is a creation of God, therefore it is immortal.

The Christian code of the dying at Russian culture is completely destroyed by Tolstoy. He made a thanatological revolution. The doctrine of death is fundamental to Russian culture. Tolstoy does not believe that Christ is Risen. For Tolstoy, the

Resurrection is meaningless, since the human person is vain and meaningless.

Dying in Tolstoy's world takes place in the sacred mode of culture, but he strives to create it himself. Tolstoy, as a revolutionary, destroys the Christian foundations of culture.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The polyphonic novel does not deny the strict hierarchy of values structuring Dostoevsky's artistic world. The writer creates an encyclopedia of the movements of human nature, the forces of the soul can be personified in his novels, serve good or evil, but the universe of Dostoevsky's novels has a single coordinate system, which, like a large universe, includes small universes of the characters of the heroes and explains the nature of their spiritual path, correlating with Christian anthropology.

Tolstoy studies the natural and unnatural movements of human nature, which are also partly correlated with Christian anthropology, but Buddhist tendencies in his work become more pronounced over time.

Dostoevsky's artistic world has preserved the Russian Christian cultural code of dying in the context of the spiritual experience of cultural representatives. The writer shows how the national cultural code is being destroyed under the onslaught of the values of civilization and paganism.

Tolstoy is really a mirror of the Russian revolution, because he made a revolution in thanatology, which is the basis of any cultural system. Tolstoy denied the Resurrection of Christ and the value of the human person, striving to create his gospel and his religion on the basis of Christianity and Buddhism.

Tolstoy sought to create a new cultural code, but it did not take root, Tolstoy's religion did not work out. The Russian cultural code of dying in modern Russia is gradually returning to its pre-revolutionary Christian forms, as everyone strives to celebrate the funeral of all baptized, but non-church deceased people. In the sphere of life, the Russian Christian cultural code is resurrecting much more slowly.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Elena Kulikova's contribution consists in the systematization of the disparate views of Russian scientists on the philosophy of death in the novels of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy.

The contribution of Svetlana Gerasimova consists in correlating the problem of death with Orthodox anthropological teaching, that made it possible to see patterns in spontaneous polyphonicism and call it a cosmos, modeled by the voices of representatives of spiritual culture, civilization and paganism, and not chaos; the author also points out the elements of polyphonicism in Tolstoy's artistic world, clarifies the idea of simplicity and points out the difference between an immortal soul and a mortal human person in his artistic world.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Yu.M.Lotman. Articles on the semiotics of culture and art. Saint Petersburg: Humanitarian Agency «Academic Project», 2002 - 544 p. P.52.
- [2] E.V.Kulikova, A.V.Solyankin, M.V.Yudin. Implementation of the axiological approach in educational work and foreign language teaching // Actual problems of linguistics and intercultural communication. Materials of the international scientific and practical conference. Moscow: RSU, 2020. PP.170-175. P.171
- [3] Evagrius Evagrius Abba. Philokalia (vol. 1-5) volume 1 (translation: Saint Theophan the Recluse). Moscow: Sibirskaya blagozvonitsa, 2010. PP.282-320. P.305.
- [4] Isaiah, Abba. The words of the Monk Abba Isaiah to his disciples // Philokalia (vol. 1-5) volume 1 (translation: Saint Theophan the Recluse). Moscow: Siberian blagozvonitsa, 2010. - 320 p. - PP. 143 - 233. P. 164.
- [5] Yu.Prokopchuk. Life and death // L.N.Tolstoy: Encyclopedia. Comp. N.I.Burnasheva. M.: Enlightenment, 2009. PP.466-468. P.468.
- [6] L.N. Tolstoy. Summary of the Gospel// The complete works in 90 vols.24. Moscow: Russian State Library, 2006. PP.800-815. P.802.
- [7] Vladimir Semenko. Leo Tolstoy: The Philosophy of Death URL: [https://ruskline.ru/analitika/2010/11/26/lev\\_tolstoj\\_filosofiya\\_smerti](https://ruskline.ru/analitika/2010/11/26/lev_tolstoj_filosofiya_smerti)
- [8] E.Y. Poltavets. «War and World» by L.N. Tolstoy: genre - myth - ritual. Moscow: MSPU, 2014. - 328 p. P.79.