

SEMANTIC TRANSFORMATION OF THE “LITTLE MAN” IMAGE IN
METAPHORICAL AND CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract. This paper examines the semantic and conceptual features of the “little man” image in literary discourse and its transformation from a traditional literary type into a complex contemporary character. Particular attention is paid to the formation of metaphorical and contextual meanings and to the semantic relationship between the character and such concepts as social isolation, psychological withdrawal, virtual reality, and spiritual alienation. The traditional model of the “little man” in Russian literature is compared with its contemporary representation, with particular reference to V. Pelevin’s novel *Generation “P”*. The study explores the metaphorical and symbolic dimensions of the character, as well as their relationship to the concepts of simulacrum, mass culture, and the conceptual oppositions between reality and virtuality. The findings demonstrate that in contemporary literary discourse, the concept of the “little man” has undergone a significant transformation: from a passive and vulnerable individual into an ambivalent subject capable of understanding, exploiting, and seeking to control the system within which he exists.

Keywords: “little man”, literary discourse, metaphor, figurative meaning, conceptual meaning, character, semantic transformation, Viktor Pelevin, *Generation “P”*, Vavilen Tatarsky, simulacrum, virtual reality, intertextuality, conceptual opposition.

Introduction and Main Discussion

The image of the “little man” has developed into an important aesthetic type in Russian literature, representing complex relationships between the individual and society. Its principal characteristics include social isolation, marginalization, psychological withdrawal, and a discrepancy between external social status and the character’s inner world. In traditional literary models, the “little man” is generally portrayed as an individual lacking social power and remaining vulnerable to dominant social and ideological structures [1].

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However, in contemporary literary discourse, the semantic content of this image has undergone considerable transformation and acquired new conceptual dimensions. The “little man” is no longer represented exclusively as a socially powerless or defenseless individual; rather, he may also appear as an active subject capable of understanding, adapting to, and exploiting complex social systems. From this perspective, the transformation of the image is determined not merely by the character’s external social position, but also by his internal strategies and relationship with the system.

A metaphorical approach makes it possible to examine this transformation in greater depth. In literary discourse, metaphor functions not merely as a stylistic device that enhances imagery, but also as a mechanism for conceptualizing particular social and psychological conditions [2]. In this process, the literal meaning of a character or concept may expand under the influence of context and generate figurative and conceptual meanings.

This process can be represented through the following semantic model:

literal meaning → contextual meaning → figurative meaning → conceptual meaning

Within this model, the “little man”, initially referring to an individual of limited social status, may acquire broader metaphorical meanings in a literary context, representing alienation, spiritual vulnerability, dependence on social structures, or, conversely, a strategy for exploiting the existing system.

Viktor Pelevin’s novel *Generation “P”* provides a particularly revealing example of this transformation [3]. At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist Vavilen Tatarsky is presented as a socially marginal individual searching for his place in a rapidly changing society. However, he subsequently masters the mechanisms of advertising, mass culture, and virtual reality and becomes an active participant in the very system that initially appears to marginalize him. In this respect, Tatarsky differs significantly from the passive model of the traditional “little man”.

The character’s inner world is constructed around the opposition between real and virtual reality. Within the semantic structure of the novel, advertising and mass culture function as mechanisms capable of creating an artificial reality for the individual. Jean Baudrillard’s concept of the simulacrum provides a useful theoretical framework for interpreting this process, particularly the replacement of reality by signs, images, and artificial constructions that acquire an autonomous existence [4]. Therefore, Tatarsky’s

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transformation from a “little man” into an active subject of the system can be interpreted not simply as social advancement, but also as a metaphorical and conceptual reorganization of his consciousness.

This transformation gives rise to several important conceptual oppositions

No.	Conceptual opposition	Semantic realization
1	smallness ↔ power	transition from social marginality to an aspiration to control the system
2	real ↔ virtual	actual life versus artificially constructed reality
3	spirituality ↔ self-interest	conflict between higher values and material interests
4	individual ↔ system	the individual's adaptation to social mechanisms
5	reality ↔ simulacrum	actual reality versus its artificial representation

Thus, the concept of the “little man” acquires a broader conceptual meaning within the literary text. It becomes a metaphorical model representing the individual's position in contemporary society, the possibility of preserving personal identity, and the relationship between the individual and dominant communicative mechanisms.

A comparison between Vavilen Tatarsky and such literary characters as Chichikov and Ostap Bender further reveals this transformation [5; 6]. Their common feature is the ability to adapt to existing circumstances and exploit social systems through intelligence, calculation, and strategic behavior. However, Tatarsky differs from these traditional types because his activity is directly connected with the modern media and advertising environment. As a result, his character represents not simply a conventional trickster or opportunist, but a product of postmodern culture.

The absence of an exclusively positive or negative attitude toward the protagonist further contributes to the semantic complexity of the character. Although his self-interest and manipulative behavior are subject to negative evaluation, his ability to understand and exploit the mechanisms of the existing system may simultaneously be

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perceived as a form of intellectual competence. Consequently, one of the central semantic characteristics of the character is ambivalence.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that the image of the “little man” has undergone a significant semantic transformation in contemporary literary discourse. Whereas in traditional Russian literature this image primarily represented a socially marginalized, vulnerable, and neglected individual, in contemporary postmodern discourse it may appear as a complex subject capable of understanding, adapting to, and exploiting the existing system.

The example of Vavilen Tatarsky demonstrates the transition of the concept of the “little man” from literal meaning to figurative and conceptual meaning, as well as its expansion through such conceptual oppositions as real versus virtual, spirituality versus self-interest, and individual versus system. Therefore, a metaphorical and discourse-based analysis of the “little man” image makes it possible to reveal not only its external social characteristics but also its deeper connection with contemporary individuals’ relationships with society, culture, and virtual reality.

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