

# opción

Revista de Antropología, Ciencias de la Comunicación y de la Información, Filosofía,  
Lingüística y Semiótica, Problemas del Desarrollo, la Ciencia y la Tecnología

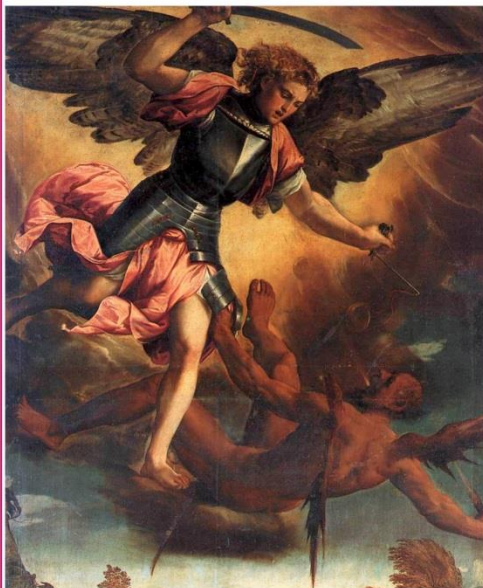
Año 35, 2019, Especial N°

# 20

Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales

ISSN 1012-1537/ ISSNe: 2477-9385

Depósito Legal pp 198402ZU45



Universidad del Zulia  
Facultad Experimental de Ciencias  
Departamento de Ciencias Humanas  
Maracaibo - Venezuela



# Concept of life in Autobiographical Prose of Ivan Bunin and Vladimir Nabokov

**Nadezhda S. Stepanova<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Southwest State University, Kursk, Russian Federation  
[ns-kursk@yandex.ru](mailto:ns-kursk@yandex.ru)

**Alfia I. Smirnova<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>2</sup>Moscow City University, Moscow, Russian Federation  
[alfia-smirnova@yandex.ru](mailto:alfia-smirnova@yandex.ru)

**Tatiana V. Kovaleva<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>3</sup>Southwest State University, Kursk, Russian Federation  
[t\\_kovaleva@mail.ru](mailto:t_kovaleva@mail.ru)

**Larisa I. Shchelokova<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>4</sup>Moscow City University, Moscow, Russian Federation  
[Lariva2007@yandex.ru](mailto:Lariva2007@yandex.ru)

## Abstract

The article identifies the content and structure of the life concept in autobiographical works of the first wave of Russian émigrés. The authors analyze the lexical and semantic features of the concept in the autobiographical prose of Ivan Bunin and Vladimir Nabokov via integrated approach, including a conceptual analysis of a literary text. It was proved that the concept fulfills sense-forming, plot-forming and genre-forming functions, reinforces moral rules, and reflects physical and moral challenges and spiritual dynamics of a personality. In conclusion, the concept life is a complex mental formation, subject to semantic and value variation in various discursive practices.

**Keywords:** Autobiographical, Prose, Bunin, Concept of Life.

## *Concepto de vida en prosa autobiográfica de Ivan Bunin y Vladimir Nabokov*

### **Resumen**

El artículo identifica el contenido y la estructura del concepto de vida en las obras autobiográficas de la primera ola de emigrados rusos. Los autores analizan las características léxicas y semánticas del concepto en la prosa autobiográfica de Ivan Bunin y Vladimir Nabokov mediante un enfoque integrado, que incluye un análisis conceptual de un texto literario. Se demostró que el concepto cumple funciones de formación de sentido, de trama y de género, refuerza las reglas morales y refleja los desafíos físicos y morales y las dinámicas espirituales de una personalidad. En conclusión, el concepto de vida es una formación mental compleja, sujeta a variaciones semánticas y de valor en diversas prácticas discursivas.

**Palabras clave:** Autobiográfica, Prosa, Bunin, Concepto De Vida.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Each national picture of the world has its peculiar constituent elements, but at the same time we always find such a universal concept as life among them. The concept life is a complex mental phenomenon, one of the basic concepts of Russian literature, the structure and content of which reflect the diverse attitudes to the phenomenon of life, values and evaluative characteristics of a person and a nation. In the Russian mentality, **the concept of life** occupies a

special place, since in the Russian language consciousness it is one of three basic concepts, along with the concepts man and home. Each period of time has its own way of artistic vision and its own vision of life and way of life as **a personality's evolution.**

Understanding the problems of personality formation is inextricably entwined in literature with the ideological system of the relevant culture, world perception and world outlook of the era. **Bunin (1994)** and **Nabokov (1989)** are the witnesses of social cataclysms, wars and revolutions, could not help but feel their consequences, i.e. depreciation of a person's life, depersonalization. The writers created an image of a spiritually rich creative personality, who worthily follows his path of life, and defends his right to exist.

Such approaches to the definition of an artistic concept make it possible to use it as a tool for literary analysis and consider it as a literary concept (which confirms the inclusion of the article Concept in **"Literary Encyclopaedia of Terms and Notions"** (Nikolyukin, 2001: **394**). The artistic concept is different from the cognitive concept; it is more complex and significant than the artistic image, unequal to the symbol or motive (although their names may coincide), includes the value (axiological) and emotional components. Researchers also use the terms literary concept, creative concept. Ipanova collected and classified features identified in various studies, which can be used to isolate concepts; she included the feeling of concepts; their nominative, semiotic density; complexity, internal dissection of the semantic composition of concepts; cultural significance, axiological

connotation and ideological orientation; etymological memory; linguistic abstraction (Ipanova, 2005; Mulyono et al., 2018).

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

In our study the term concept (artistic concept) means a complex mental emotional axiological construct, which reflects the universal artistic experience recorded in cultural memory, expresses individual author's understanding of the essence of objects or phenomena, receives its representation in a work of art, has a dialogic, communicative nature, as it is designed for the reader's knowledge, memory and imagination, and we will take into account that "the linking of concepts gives rise to a meaning that exceeds the meaning of each element taken separately" (Zusman, 2003: 12), that this is an open system that goes beyond a specific work.

In determining the methods of analysis in the works of modern researchers the terms conceptual analysis, concept analysis, concept-analysis are often used. The researchers noted that, obviously, we are talking about different methods, which are selected depending on the purpose and objectives of the study. Conceptual analysis is an analysis of concepts and analysis using concepts, which has concepts as its subunits. Concept analysis (as well as concept-analysis) involves the study of the implementation (embodiment) of the concept in the text and modeling its content, identifying the individual author's content of the concept. Our study is based on an integrated approach, including

the use of biographical, historical, literary, functional, structural methods, as well as the method of concept analysis.

### **3. RESULTS**

Long-term relationships between **Bunin (1994)** and **Nabokov (1989)**, the transition of friendship to literary rivalry (culminating in a literary duel), aesthetic, ethical, metaphysical questions of the dialogue between the two writers are constantly in the field of view of the researchers; these are the writers who, even then and now, were perceived then and are perceived now as representatives of the older and younger generations of the first wave of Russian emigration. The basis of such an established division is not so much the criterion of age and real life experience as the issue of attitude to artistic tradition.

The corpus of literary studies presents a wide range of opinions on this issue: from stating a deep conflict between the writers to recognizing their commonality, meaning that despite the dissimilarity of the artistic worlds, they fully belong to the Russian culture. In the artistic work of these writers, the attitude to death differs. For **Bunin (1994)** death as a means of constructing the end of a novel or a story was the embodiment of his life philosophy: love and death are inextricably linked, and the stronger the passion, the more likely the protagonists will die; tragedy of heroes for **Bunin (1994)** is the tragedy of life interrupted by the invasion of senseless and sudden death, which is as impossible to understand reasonably as destiny, fate itself.

Next, we consider the lexical and semantic features of these and other meanings of **the concept of life** in the works of **(Bunin, 1994; Nabokov, 1989)**. Life as a special form of existence of matter, which arose at a certain stage of its development, the main feature of which, in contrast to non-living objects, is metabolism, existence in general, being in movement and development, is realized in autobiographical prose in oppositions living – non-living, life – death, for example: **“wearing an opera cloak, he almost lost his life in an airplane crash on a beach near Bayonne” (Nabokov, 1989: 74); “whose uncontrollable temper was rumored to have been a threat to the boy’s very life” (Nabokov, 1989: 76)**. **Bunin (1994)** very often wrote about this, since the life – death opposition was a constant topic of his thoughts: Are we not born with the sense of death? People are not all equally sensitive to death.

But there is a category of people who live their whole life under its sign, who have from early childhood an acute sense of death (most often by reason of possessing an equally acute sense of life), **“And in everything there was death, death intermingled with eternal, lovely and futile life” (Bunin, 1988: 17)**. Life appears as a movement, a vividness caused by the actions of living beings; existence in motion (in nature) for example: Round me, wherever the eye turns, stretch the stubbly fields of rue and oats, and in their midst, in the dense thicket of inclined stubble, the partridges live their hidden, watchful lives, **“In the stables the horses lived their own horsy life, which consisted of standing up and noisily chewing hay and oats” (Bunin, 1988: 19)**.



“...and come back two hours later in triumph with a bagful of seething invertebrate life and several additional items” (Nabokov, 1989: 134). Life as the beginning of consciousness, the very first memory of oneself, memory of oneself, self-awareness, impulse that includes consciousness. Childhood reveals a person’s life, and Nabokov (1989) needs to find out where the gentle impulse comes from, from which the soul, which is doomed after this never to stop in motion, starts and moves. This phenomenon Mineralova called the primary event –the memory, the impression of the autobiographical child put up at the very beginning of the literary work, the basic, title, defining, i.e. with all the values of phenomenality and the strong position of the myth, that is event being the first step in the development of the chain of events “forming the whole plot plan of an autobiographical nature” (Mineralova, 2012: 95).

This is the time of creation, the birth of consciousness, the starting point (followed by regularity and cyclic recurrence – the time of the eternal flowering of life, confidence in its immortality. A special role in the birth of consciousness was played by the estate, a place of happy childhood (Kovaleva and Tsuric, 2015). In the works of Russian writers it is shown that the estate where the autobiographical heroes were born and spent their early years laid the foundations of the world perception. Bunin (1994) finds the most accurate narrative principle that corresponds to the plan: ... the process of memory awakening (Indriastuti, 2019).

Life as a time from birth to death of a person, the period of existence, the whole continuation of a person’s earthly life, life as a

biography, which in Nabokov's (1989) autobiographical prose does not appear as a straight line, not as a vector directed from the past to the future. This complex system of views on space and time is expressed metaphorically rather than scientifically, and is presented in *Drugie berega (Other Shores), Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* as a magic carpet, or a maze, or mixed threads of five journeys to Europe, or a spiral. For example, "A colored spiral in a small ball of glass, this is how I see my own life" (Nabokov, 1989: 288). Narrating his attempts to penetrate, deepen into the realm of higher realism, localization of memory, inherent in a human being as a carrier of the spirit, Nabokov (1989) exclaims: "Over and over again, my mind has made colossal efforts to distinguish the faintest of personal glimmers in the impersonal darkness on both sides of my life" (Nabokov, 1989: 25).

Life as fate, the totality of all the events of human life, predetermined from above, depending or not dependent on the person's will: All human destinies shape themselves accidentally, depending on the destinies surrounding them... So also the destiny of my youth shaped itself, determining likewise my whole destiny, "so full was I of the fairest hopes and plans, and of confidence in destiny" (Bunin, 1988: 16). Life as fate. Is fate comprehensible or incomprehensible for the human mind? Nabokov (1989) believed that life is only the development and repetition of the hidden themes in someone's clear fate:

Neither in environment nor in heredity can I find the exact instrument that fashioned me, the anonymous roller

that pressed upon my life a certain intricate watermark whose unique design becomes visible when the lamp of art is made to shine through life's foolscap (Nabokov, 1989: 30)

Returning to the past with the smuggling of the present, Nabokov (1989) does not accidentally and haphazardly build a story, as it seems to many, but he writes about the personal margin of the common history, selects facts that confirm his idea that the coincidence of patterns is one of the wonders of nature, which works for the creative task, so clearly stated in the Preface to the Russian edition and confirmed further: "The following of such the matic designs through hone's life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography" (Nabokov, 1989: 232). Life as a human activity in the totality of its manifestations, or in its individual manifestations, and its internal content, for example, "His life was not particularly eventful" (Nabokov, 1989: 64), "Uncle Ruka seems to have led an idle and oddly chaotic life" (Nabokov, 1989: 74), "Marital misfortunes were rumored to obscure his life" (Nabokov, 1989: 94).

Life as a certain period, stage, limited by time or place, filled with events and special content, for example, "...a whole period of emigrant life for which that ring was to pay" (Nabokov, 1989: 85), "Quite a feature of emigrant life, in keeping with its itinerant and dramatic character, was the abnormal frequency of those literary readings in private houses or hired halls" (Nabokov, 1989: 294),

The tension of waiting for him and hoping that, for once, his superhuman doggedness might balk before the gray

wall of some special snowstorm was the kind of feeling that one trusts never to meet within mature life (Nabokov, 1989: 92).

“She spoke as warmly of her life in Russia as if it were her own lost homeland” (Nabokov, 1989: 121), “In thinking of my successive tutors, I am concerned less with the queer dissonances they introduced into my young life than with the essential stability and completeness of that life” (Nabokov, 1989: 182), “There was later a period in my life when I might have found this relevant to my last glimpse of Tamara as she turned on the steps to look back” (Nabokov, 1989: 252), “Thus the college period of my life began on a note of embarrassment, a note that was to recur rather persistently during my three years of residence” (Nabokov, 1989: 272), “All of a sudden, I felt that with the completion of my chess problem a whole period of my life had come to a satisfactory close” (Nabokov, 1989: 305). Life as a process, events that happen to someone, for example, “From the veranda or drawing room, where life was going on without me, my mother would come up for the warm murmur of her goodnight kiss” (Nabokov, 1989: 89).

Life as a course of events, reality in the totality of its manifestations, independent of the person’s will, for example, “At a certain point they faded out of my life” (Nabokov, 1989: 91),

When I learned these later developments, I experienced a queer shock; it was as if life had impinged upon my creative rights by wriggling on beyond the subjective limits so elegantly and economically set by childhood

memories that I thought I had signed and sealed”  
(Nabokov, 1989: 97).

Nabokov (1989) is amazed by life, which changes the life paths of the heroes of his autobiography, building up their destinies, in a way he could not have ever predicted (the fate of his tutors Būrnese and Cummings).

- World War one came, then the Revolution. In the early twenties, long after our correspondence had fizzled out, by a fluke move of life in exile I chanced to visit Lausanne with a college friend of mine, so I thought I might as well look up Mademoiselle, if she were still alive (Nabokov, 1989). Life as a way of existence, pastime, lifestyle – To my obscure annoyance, he advised my parents to have their two boys – the three younger children were beyond his jurisdiction – lead a more democratic form of life, which meant, for example, switching, in Berlin (Nabokov, 1989), “Meanwhile, the life of my family had completely changed” (Nabokov, 1989: 255). Once and for all a set way of decent life, developed by the Rostovtsevs, who were proud of the fact that “the Rostovtsevs were Russians, genuine Russians, that they lived the especially simple and outwardly modest life that was the real Russian life, and then which there was and could be nothing better” (Bunin, 1988: 59).

Earthly life - in the Christian sense, in opposition earthly life - eternal life (the life of the soul, not the flesh). Likhachev believed that

The conceptual sphere of the national language becomes richer when the whole culture, its literature, folklore, science becomes richer <...>, it corresponds to all the

nation's historical experience and religion especially" (Likhachev, 1993: 5).

The most important component expressing the peculiarities of the national consciousness is the Orthodox subtext, or the Orthodox code of autobiographical works, the sobornost dominant in Russian culture. Nabokov (1989) dwells on these issues even though he repeated several times that he was indifferent to organize mysticism, to religion, to church – any church (Three interviews..., 1995: 239). In the autobiographical prose, he wrote about the symbol of Mother and her sense of God:

The appalling insecurity of an afterlife and its lack of privacy did not enter her thoughts. Her intense and pure religiousness took the form of her having equal faith in the existence of another world and in the impossibility of comprehending it in terms of earthly life" (Nabokov, 1989: 43).

Such a position, perceived by the son, is not subject to doubt and retains the value of ethical creed; the formation of the soul of the hero is due to the dissolution of God in all things, which is a constant incentive for moral improvement.

Life as internal vigor, the fullness of physical, spiritual and moral forces, the expression of elation, enthusiasm, spirituality, energy, the delight of life: "In order to enjoy life, we should not enjoy it too much" (Nabokov, 1989: 24), That everlasting Russian need of a holiday! How sensual we are, how we crave the delight of life, "But with what tenderness, with what poignancy of the sweetest love for the

world, for life, for physical and moral human beauty, which, all unwittingly Annchen had unveiled to me, did I weep” (Bunin, 1988: 76). Life as a great unknown: Why is man, from his childhood onward, allured by distance, by things wide and deep and high, by the unknown and dangerous, by the things that enable him to swing his life around or even to lose it for sake of something or somebody?

Would this have been possible if our lot were confined to “that which God has given, only to the earth, only to this one life” (Bunin, 1988: 28). Life as an inner world of a human, rich, deep, harmonious, complex or simple, unique and inimitable, his spiritual life, his knowledge, outlook and his soul. The heroes have to find the purpose of life, understand its meaning: their mind is set on searching for its essence, meaning and purpose, for something so important:

That something that is constantly escaping the mind’s grasp and that cannot be expressed in words: After all, what is my life in this incomprehensible, timeless, and gigantic world surrounding me, thrown into the boundlessness of past and future, and at the same time enclosed in a place called Baturino, within the limits of space and time allotted to me personally? (Bunin, 1988).

Attempts to figure out the meaning of life lead to understanding the complexity of this task, the impossibility of obtaining a direct or exhaustive answer: “But then, the knowledge we acquire during our short personal life is too scanty – there is another, infinitely richer, that with which we are born” (Bunin, 1994: 12), or lead to a striking discovery: the goal of life is life itself!

#### 4. DISCUSSION

At a certain stage when Bunin (1994) and Nabokov (1989) were of certain age their lives were affected by catastrophes to which they could not have prepared in advance and which destroyed and turned their old lives upside down forcing them to take other paths, imposed by specific historical conditions. However, after all the cataclysms, they remained alive, and it was necessary to go on living, even if due to personal tragedies it was unbearably difficult: “But the soul still got emptier and emptier with every stage, the will was breaking anyway, and the life path, which I tried to outline for myself, was twisting, – it bent not only internally as well as externally” (Osorgin, 1989: 113). To preserve dignity, to become and remain people worthy of respect, moral guidelines for contemporaries and descendants, to take place as outstanding writers – perhaps they did not clearly declare their goals thus clearly stated, but they achieved them, showing how worthy life can be and how worthy the way of life could be.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

Thus, the concept of life is a complex mental formation, subject to semantic and value variation in various discursive practices. The preservation of all the accumulated material from verbally structured forms to figurative features, the responsibility of an individual for actions performed based on the memory of them, the choice of one's



own life story represent one of the conditions for the individual's unity (Alwahdani, 2019; Armakan, 2017).

The study of autobiographical works of Bunin (1994) representatives of different generations of the first wave of Russian emigration, made it possible to establish the semantic content of the artistic concept life, to consider life as a plot-forming element, as a chronotop and as a concept. The concept life along with other artistic concepts, such as path (journey, road, way, passage, wandering), fate, image of the world, home, family, father, mother, childhood, memory, homeland, freedom, space, time, exile, creativity, choice and others, defining the life path as the evolution of a person in the conditions of exile, as a result of complex interaction, interlinking of artistic concepts, gives rise to a meaning that surpasses the semantics of each concluding part and forms a conceptual sphere the way of life, which is an open system that goes beyond the particular construct.

The Way of Life as one of the most significant universals of culture, semantically turns out to be connected with ideas about the spiritual dynamics of a person, about the change and/or development, the formation of meaning and consciousness of an individual, the physical and moral challenges. In autobiographical works, the conceptual sphere the way of life is the most important element that performs semantic, plot-forming and genre-generating functions, it is a reflection of a personal history of hardships and the development of the individual. The concept of life in emigration autobiographical prose reflects the search for truth, forming the plot basis of the works, it "has the ability to transform spatial loci into value modi"

(Kupriyanova, 2007: 20), autobiographical heroes are in dynamics, in search of themselves and their truth, therefore their development becomes the embodiment of the spiritual formation of a creative personality.

## REFERENCES

- Alwahdani, A. 2019. **The Impact of Trust and Reciprocity on Knowledge Exchange: A Case Study in IT Outsourcing.** Journal of Information Systems Engineering & Management, 4(1), em0084.
- Armakan, S. A. 2017. **Effective personal factors on capability from the staff point of view of training hospitals of Yazd Province.** UCT Journal of Management and Accounting Studies, 5(2), 5-12.
- BUNIN, I. 1994. **The Life of Arseniev: Youth.** Northwestern University Press. Evanston. USA.
- INDRIASTUTI, H. 2019. **Entrepreneurial inattentiveness, relational capabilities and value co-creation to enhance marketing performance.** Giap journals. Vol 7. N° 3. India.
- IPANOVA, O. 2005. **Life Anthology of concepts.** Vol. 2. pp. 146-166. Paradigm. Volgograd. Russia.
- KOVALEVA, T., & TSURIC, T. 2015. **Transformation of a nobility manor in Russian culture historical space of the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries.** Bylye Gody. Vol. 36. N° 2: 260-267. Russia.
- KUPRIYANOVA, A. 2007. **Motif of the way in the prose by V.P. Aksyonov. Abstract of PhD thesis.** Tyumen. Russia.

LIKHACHEV, D. 1993. **The conceptual sphere of the Russian language.** News of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Vol. 52. N° 1: 3-9. Russia.

MINERALOVA, I. 2012. **Primary event in autobiographical prose about childhood.** World literature for children and about children. Vol. 16: 91-99. USA.

Mulyono, D., Asmawi, M., & Nuriah, T. 2018. **The Effect of Reciprocal Teaching, Student Facilitator and Explaining and Learning Independence on Mathematical Learning Results by Controlling the Initial Ability of Students.** International Electronic Journal of Mathematics Education, 13(3), 199-205. <https://doi.org/10.12973/iejme/3838>

NABOKOV, V. 1989. **Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited.** Vintage International. Vintage Books. A Division of Random House, Inc. New York. USA.

NIKOLYUKIN, A. 2001. **Literary encyclopedia of terms and concepts.** NPK Intelvak. Moscow Russia.

OSORGIN, M. 1989. **Times: autobiographical narrative: novels.** Sovremennik. Moscow. Russia.

ZUSMAN, V. 2003. **Concept in the system of humanitarian knowledge.** Issues of literature. Vol. 2: 3-30. Germany.



**UNIVERSIDAD  
DEL ZULIA**

---

# **opción**

Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales

Año 35, N° 20, (2019)

Esta revista fue editada en formato digital por el personal de la Oficina de Publicaciones Científicas de la Facultad Experimental de Ciencias, Universidad del Zulia.

Maracaibo - Venezuela

**[www.luz.edu.ve](http://www.luz.edu.ve)**

**[www.serbi.luz.edu.ve](http://www.serbi.luz.edu.ve)**

**[produccioncientifica.luz.edu.ve](http://produccioncientifica.luz.edu.ve)**