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Don Juan as a Figure of Masculinity: Slovak Literary Appropriations in the Nineteenth Century*

Don Juan belongs among those figures of the European literary canon that have transcended the confines of a single work, and indeed of literature as such, to become archetypal myths circulating within the European cultural tradition. These figures have been repeatedly reinterpreted and reimagined across successive literary epochs. Alongside Don Juan, characters such as Don Quixote, Faust, Hamlet, and Falstaff have attained comparable status.

The Czech literary theorist Vladimír Svatoň characterises these paradigmatic figures—reappearing in emblematic situations across diverse cultural and historical contexts—as myths of the modern novel, which, as he argues, articulate "the individual's longing" (Svatoň 104). He conceives of them as "prefigured possibilities" within art and culture, grounded in a continuous tradition of culture and literature. In his interpretation, this continuity draws on Ernst Robert Curtius's concept of *topoi*, Northrop Frye's theory of archetypes, and Alexander Nikolayevich Veselovsky's notion of literary formulas (Svatoň 30).

Leo Weinstein, in *The Metamorphoses of Don Juan* (1959), places Don Juan among literary characters who "enjoyed universal renown" (like Hamlet,

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Faust, and Don Quixote) and "seem to encompass the greatest problems and aspirations of **mankind**" [emphasis added] (Weinstein 1).

Similarly, in his monograph *Myths of Modern Individualism: Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan, Robinson Crusoe* (1996), Ian Watt positions Don Juan among several characters who exemplify the myth of individualism. These figures, he argues, represent "A traditional story that is exceptionally widely known throughout the culture, that is credited with a historical or quasi-historical belief, and that embodies or symbolizes some of the most basic values of a society" (Watt xxvi). As he emphasizes, such myths "exhibit a single-minded pursuit by the protagonist of one of the characteristic aspirations of Western **man**" [emphasis added] (Watt 1).

Such theoretical approaches paradoxically present these archetypal figures as universal and gender-neutral representatives of humanity, even as their authors acknowledge—explicitly or implicitly—that these are fundamentally fictions of masculinity, representing various forms of male identity and its crises across cultures and artistic traditions. Rather than being essential or immutable, these figures undergo continual redefinition across historical and artistic contexts, acquiring forms that both represent and reproduce contemporary cultural, social, and gender relations. Each epoch reinterprets and reimagines these cultural and artistic models of masculinity, investing them with new meanings. Women appear in these narratives primarily as idealised and passive projections or victims, rarely as active subjects. The overlooking of the gendered dimension of these figures and their presentation as representatives of a universal norm or human principle exemplifies what Kimmel terms "the invisibility of masculinity" (Kimmel 3).

This gendered dimension is particularly evident in the figure of Don Juan, a character who has inspired numerous artistic adaptations over the centuries. Weinstein reflects this implicitly when, concluding his study of the character's transformations from the seventeenth to the mid-twentieth century, he describes Don Juan as a "male wish image" (Weinstein 174). Similarly, Watt characterises the figure's agency as "the privileged male to the possession of the woman he desired" (Watt 105) and designates him as "the superstar of inveterate male sexuality" (272). Sarah Wright, who devotes considerable attention to Don Juan's masculinity in her book *Tales of Seduction* (2007), characterises him as a "legendary seducer of women, charismatic rogue, trickster and transgressor of sacred boundaries" and "a potent icon of uncontained male sexual energy" (Wright 5).

The story of Don Juan, which initially circulated in oral folklore, received its first literary treatment in Tirso de Molina's (pen name of Gabriel Téllez)

morality play *El Burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra* (*The Trickster of Seville and the Stone Guest*), published in Spain around 1630. Several studies trace the character's origins to ancient myths and rituals of nuptial or prenuptial substitution by male hegemonic powers, as well as to archaic trickster figures from myths and legends. This genealogy highlights two key characteristics emphasised across Don Juan's artistic incarnations: his connection to hegemonic masculinity and the patriarchal system, and, conversely, his subversive transgression of social norms.

In his 1960 study "The Don Juan Myth," Dallas Pratt traces the character to ancient nuptial substitution rituals, arguing that "Don Juan is a latter-day representative of this substitution" originally performed by "a hero or god" and "later, the gods were ritually represented by priests or kings." As a descendant of "these divine fertilisers," Don Juan possesses "many of the earmarks of a god-like being, including superhuman physical prowess" (Pratt 322).

Watt similarly underscores Don Juan's connection to hegemonic power while foregrounding his transgressive nature: "Don Juan enjoys the deceptions of trickery, but he inhabits a world where, like almost everyone else, he pays lip-service to universally accepted moral, social, and religious codes" (102). Watt associates this behaviour with a youthful desire for unlimited presence—the conduct of a privileged young man whose predatory sexuality confronts the law of the fathers and is ultimately punished by a paternal figure, represented by the Commander. Don Juan thus emerges as a figure of excess and transgression who violates contemporary moral codes while simultaneously benefiting from and exploiting hegemonic power through his privileged social and gender position.

While de Molina's *El Burlador de Sevilla* functions as a morality play, subsequent rewritings resonate with the cultural and social movements of their eras. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni* (1787) played a key role in reimagining the Don Juan figure, paving the way for more psychologically nuanced interpretations of the character (Rank 108). This shift was further explored through the artistic and philosophical reflections of E. T. A. Hoffmann (the short story "Don Juan," 1813) and Søren Kierkegaard (*Enten–Eller* [*Either/Or*], particularly in the section "The Seducer's Diary," 1843). Over time, the character evolved: from a sensual being focused on physical pleasure – an embodiment of male virility and sexual energy – he gradually became a manipulative narcissistic libertine devising seduction strategies, a rebel against social norms, a passionate romantic and ironist, and ultimately an aesthetic being oriented towards subtler pleasures and driven by the pursuit of an ideal (see Winter 18).

In the nineteenth-century European cultural imagination, two distinct incarnations of the Don Juan figure persisted: one characterised by unrestrained

sexuality and power rooted in a privileged social and gender position, the other by irony shading into melancholy, associated with disillusionment at the unattainability of an ideal. Both incarnations find their way into nineteenth-century Slovak literature, though appropriated within the specific circumstances of a small culture shaped by the cultural and political dynamics of a nascent national movement.

Slovak culture crystallised in the 1830s and 1840s amid competing Hungarian and Czech nationalisation. Ľudovít Štúr, together with other representatives of the nascent Slovak intelligentsia, pursued national and cultural emancipation, aiming to transform Upper Hungary's Slovak population into a modern political nation with its own distinctive culture.

The Slovak national movement, like its Central and Eastern European counterparts, operated as a distinctly masculine enterprise. These movements established themselves as homosocial male domains in which men claimed the active, creative role. Slovak intellectuals positioned themselves as architects of the modern nation through cultural and political work, relegating women to serving as "reproductive vessel of population and tradition" (Mudure 156). The nation-building project presented itself as a patrilineal mission: sons following their fathers' path (see Bilińska for an extended discussion).

Representatives of the emerging Slovak nation aimed to construct a cultural model that "defines the unified, the artificially schematised image" and "exerts a powerful regulating influence, preordaining the construction of culture, introducing order, and eliminating contradiction" (Lotman and Uspensky 227). This model was developed through analogical or oppositional relations to established Western cultures and rival national projects—operating through what Lotman and Uspensky term "mirror culture" and "anti-culture" (220; see also Macura 39). Integral to this model was the presentation of "national types" deployed in literature to manifest emerging Slovak identity. These literary types possessed a profoundly gendered dimension. Slovak literary texts featured male characters designed to embody an alternative masculinity – defined against cultures perceived as dominant and established – distinguished by distinctive physical, psychological, and moral qualities anchored primarily in ethnic, ethno-racial (particularly Slavic), and national values. The literary scholar Oskár Čepan notes that Romantic poets foregrounded in the emerging Slovak literature heroes characterised by "naïve manliness," by the position of an outsider or rebel underestimated by all, destined for a tragic fate (see Čepan 55ff.) – in every case, male heroes defined in opposition to power.

In this context, the Don Juan figure initially appears as a seducer and trickster, representing hegemonic forces and corrupt power, showcasing his social

dominance and predatory sexuality. In these adaptations, the character often aligns with antagonistic national forces. By the end of the century, as modernist trends grew and the focus on national struggle diminished, the interpretation of Don Juan changed markedly: it now emphasises his ironic and melancholic side as a seeker of ideals.

In what follows, I present three case studies of the appropriation of the Don Juan figure in nineteenth-century Slovak literature, variously drawing on diverse manifestations of this character across European literary history to negotiate – through both rejection and adaptation – competing models of masculinity within a specific cultural moment.

The most explicit appropriation of the Don Juan figure appears in the play *Španielska komédia* (*Spanish Comedy*), serialised in *Národné noviny* (the principal political newspaper of the Slovak national movement) and published in book form in 1874 under the expanded title featuring the protagonist's name, Don Bellos Rinaldino de la Horca. The work appeared under the pseudonym Don Basilio Santofuego de las Bombas.[1] Its author was Viliam Paulíny-Tóth, a Slovak writer, publicist, and prominent figure in Slovak national life during the 1860s and 1870s. Literary history recognises him as an eclectic author of late Romantic and post-Romantic poetry, prose, and drama (see Palkovičová 2025), yet this play has received remarkably little scholarly attention.

The text possesses limited artistic merit, functioning primarily as a satirical pamphlet and farce directed against a political adversary: the Hungarian politician Béla Grünwald (1839–1891), a notorious figure in nineteenth-century Slovak history.[2] Beyond his political activities, Grünwald was known among acquaintances as a practised seducer with promiscuous habits (Demmel 134) and fathered at least one child outside marriage (Demmel 141–146).

Paulíny-Tóth employs the Don Juan archetype to discredit his opponent, drawing on the scandals surrounding Grünwald's personal life. He sets the play in Spain – the birthplace of the Don Juan legend – specifically in Barcelona, naming his protagonist Don Bellos Bellicos Rinaldinos de la Horca. The text is crafted so that contemporary audiences would have readily identified Grünwald through the physical description of the main character, while the Spanish-sounding names of the supporting characters serve as thinly veiled

1 The play appears in mystifying guise as an originally Spanish text "translated" by Mydloslav Vechtovič.

2 As an official of Zvolen County, Grünwald orchestrated measures against crucial Slovak cultural and educational institutions, facilitating the closure of three Slovak gymnasiums (1874) and Matica slovenská (1875), the era's preeminent Slovak cultural institution.

references to actual residents of Banská Bystrica, where Grünwald lived and served.

The protagonist is cast as a "bandit chief" – a notorious seducer, coward, criminal, and liar. Against an exotic Spanish backdrop, he pursues young ladies and married women alike, provokes a duel with a cuckolded husband in which he behaves dishonourably, and ultimately commits murder. Paulíny-Tóth thus adapts the Don Juan figure into a melodramatic villain who exercises no restraint and who, as a representative of the privileged classes, transgresses all moral norms and descends into criminal behaviour.

In this pamphlet, the Don Juan archetype is reduced to a one-dimensional caricature, its negative qualities deployed as a weapon in a political contest. While this reductive treatment departs significantly from the more complex European reimagining of the figure, it selectively draws on qualities already present in the earliest incarnations of the character. As the Austrian psychoanalyst Otto Rank observed in *The Don Juan Legend* (first published in book form in 1924), the early nineteenth century in European cultural tradition was dominated by versions of the character defined by "lustful fantasy wish" and "lack of restraint" (Rank 107). Drawing on the version of Don Juan established by Tirso de Molina, Paulíny-Tóth amplifies the character's unrestrained sexuality, debauchery, lack of moral scruple, and abuse of social privilege, thereby favouring satirical caricature. With the pamphlet's satirical directness, the author simultaneously projects these qualities onto the ruling circles. The predatory and transgressive masculinity of Don Bellos – which proves no obstacle to his political career – thus becomes a symptom of the corruption of the contemporary political establishment.

A similarly conceived, though artistically more accomplished character is Artuš Villáni, the antagonist of Pavol Országh Hviezdoslav's epic poem *Hájnikova žena* (*The Gamekeeper's Wife* 1884–1886), who embodies the fusion of social privilege and sexual conquest characteristic of early Don Juan treatments.

Villáni is a figure of hegemonic masculinity in its most predatory form – a destructive force unleashed upon the idyllic life of the young couple, gamekeeper Michal Čajka and his wife Hanka. Villáni's sexual interest in Hanka is an expression of this predatory nature – the exercise of dominance that is at once sexual and social. In the poem, he is cast as a hunter, a "werewolf," a "devil," and a "demon." His predatory character is established from the outset: he first appears as a hunter stalking prey, his interest in Hanka already signalled by "wolfish eyes" gazing upon her during Sunday mass (Hviezdoslav 82), and he subsequently reappears in the forest in hunting attire, on the chase. His dark complexion and hunting dress evoke fairy tales in which the devil takes the guise of a hunter. Hanka – whom he attempts to seduce through flattery, bribery,

manipulation, and ultimately physical violence – represents a trophy for him, repeatedly likened to a fleeing doe, embodying not only his sexual but also his social dominance. From his hegemonic position, he asserts control over his subordinates on both fronts: he repeatedly assaults Hanka and strikes Michal to reassert dominance after Michal proves to be the more accomplished hunter.

Scholars have traditionally interpreted Hviezdoslav's poem as depicting the conflict between "cottages and castles" (Šmatlák 670). Yet this clash between "socio-cultural models" (Gbúr 96) equally represents competing forms of masculinity: one hegemonic and doubly nationally antagonistic, emerging from the "world of castles"; the other rooted in the idyllic "cottage" world, integrated into nature and representing "the people." Against Villáni's hegemonic masculinity in its conquering, predatory form stands Čajka, who inhabits the world of "cottages"—protective spaces conceived as nests against adversity, forming a complex unity with an idyllic natural order. Where Villáni transgresses moral boundaries, conquers, and plunders, Michal lives in harmony with his surroundings, respecting social order and professional duty. He understands love as commitment and approaches his role as forest protector with a quiet seriousness, watching with displeasure as the estate owners strip the forest for profit.

The poem's socio-cultural conflict thus reflects competing forms of masculinity that both derive from and define their respective environments. The castle towers arrogantly over the landscape, unnatural and out of place – a "self-grown warehouse" (Hviezdoslav 13) – while its inhabitants ruthlessly clear the forest for gain. One type of masculinity is fixated on pleasure and indulgence; the other belongs to a world that "endures," "acts," and "provides sustenance" (Hviezdoslav 90).

The contrasting deaths associated with these masculinities prove equally revealing. Čajka's father, the old gamekeeper, dies peacefully in his beloved forest, absorbed into nature's cycle: "Darkness yawned over the mountains—and he was there, he vanished" (Hviezdoslav 27)[3]. Villáni dies violently, killed by Hanka in self-defence like a predatory beast.

Hegemonic masculinity here asserts its superiority through sexual conquest – yet this dominance is not confined to the sexual realm alone, extending to the demonstration of social superiority over a male rival, as the relationship between Artuš and Michal makes clear. A parallel may be drawn with de Molina's play, where Don Juan seduces a peasant bride in an act of social as well as sexual domination. Equally significant is the moment when Artuš' transgression is condemned by the patriarchal code itself: his father forgives

3 Translations from original sources provided by Ivana Taranenková.

the Čajkas and restores Michal's lodge, enabling the resumption of harmonious "cottage" life – a gesture that implicitly indicts his son's conduct as a violation of the established moral order.

Through the negative portrayal of the Don Juan figure, Hviezdoslav affirms an alternative model of masculinity to that perceived as hegemonic – a confrontation that operates simultaneously along social and national lines. Both his and Paulíny-Tóth's engagement with the material implicitly links hegemonic masculinity with sexual and moral licentiousness and predatory behaviour, qualities they perceived as emblematic of the stance adopted by those in power towards the Slovak nation.

At the turn of the twentieth century, a different incarnation of the Don Juan myth entered Slovak literature, rooted in the more psychologically nuanced Romantic reimagining of the figure and shaped by the context of advancing modernist aesthetics. Unlike the earlier appropriations, where the Don Juan figure embodied predatory hegemonic masculinity, Janko Jesenský's engagement with the archetype displaces this model with a crisis of masculine identity. The crisis is decidedly gendered: it afflicts male protagonists whose uncertainty about self and loss of control over their relationships manifests as irony, cynicism, and small-town flirtation masking an insatiable longing for ideals. This emotional restraint and Don Juan-esque self-stylisation function as a defence against vulnerability (Mikula 626; Mikulová 630). Significantly, these men encounter female partners who resist objectification, engaging instead as equal players in the seduction game. The short stories *Oľga*, *Bozk* (*The Kiss*), and *Koniec lásky* (*The End of Love*)—all published in 1902—exemplify this dynamic.

The first two short stories follow a pattern: the protagonist pursues a young woman only to discover her as a calculating, egocentric coquette—an adversary rather than a conquest. *Oľga* inverts the dynamic entirely. Here, the protagonist himself becomes the humiliated victim when he confesses love to the titular heroine, and she responds with mockery: "A small side room, she and my longing. Then her laughter, her ugly, disgusting, triumphant laughter. And even now, after five years, blood rushes to my face at the memory. I am ashamed before myself" (Jesenský 310).

In *The End of Love*, the narrator coldly and analytically observes his love's evaporation, awareness of transience plunging him into melancholy:

> Against the windows beat the disgusting winter rain. Outside, everything is hidden in the dark, impenetrable night, not a single point of light. Sadness here and there… As if nothing interested the soul. The world empty, without joy… Where are you, quiet, timid Elena with

> light hair and sad eyes? Where is the world of unforgettable feelings you conjured? (Jesenský 354).

Jesenský's variations on the seducer figure are defined by a loss of control in the very domain where these protagonists, as gender-privileged subjects, might be expected to assert dominance. In each case, their encounters with the object of desire lead to the same destination: scepticism, disillusionment, and the conviction that authentic love is impossible – all shadowed by an awareness of an unattainable ideal.

Czech Romanist Vladimír Mikeš characterises the Romantic Don Juan—specifically Byron's version—as "a solitary figure who hides tears beneath irony," whose "captivating indifference, immobile mask" constitutes "self-preserving stylisation" (Mikeš 24). This description aptly fits Jesenský's protagonists. His variation on Don Juan—frustrated longing for ideals masked by irony and cynicism—transposes Romantic treatments by Byron, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Kierkegaard, Pushkin, and Lermontov. Here, seduction and flirtation no longer signify conquest but rather a fleeting surrender to illusion or a carefully constructed defence against a hypocritical world. Jesenský's seducer is no longer the antagonist of a nationally and socially charged confrontation – he is instead the embodiment of an individual and gendered crisis, one that lays bare masculine uncertainty and vulnerability.

These case studies from long nineteenth-century Slovak literature reveal two principal approaches to appropriating the Don Juan archetype, shaped by contemporary national, cultural, and social conflicts and, subsequently, by modernist anxieties – approaches that may be characterised, respectively, as expressions of antagonistic hegemonic masculinity and masculinity in crisis. In both instances, the character's gendered dimensions prove central, with the significance of the Don Juan archetype shifting markedly across ideological and conceptual contexts.

These patterns continue into the twentieth century. The debauched seducer familiar from literary classics became a subject of parody, most notably in Pavol Vilikovský's epistolary novella *Slovenský Casanova* (*Slovak Casanova* 1991, co-authored with Lajos Grendel). Here, the protagonist is a communist political instructor, PhDr. Artuš Villáni, CSc. (Candidate of Sciences degree, equivalent to a PhD), navigating his sexual escapades during Czechoslovak normalisation (the period of political repression following the suppression of the Prague Spring). Alongside this satirical appropriation, the figure of Don Juan as seeker of ideals—one who finds fulfilment in erotic conquest yet experiences profound crisis and doubts about his masculine role—also persists. Such figures

appear in Dominik Tatarka's autobiographical prose, where characters define themselves as "comforters of women," in Rudolf Sloboda's *Romaneto Don Juan* (1971), and in writings by Peter Gregor and Ivan Popovič.

These examples reveal that Slovak literature, despite persistent ideological and moral constraints, successfully appropriated this literary myth and made distinctive contributions to the Don Juan canon—a fiction of masculinity that has remained central to European culture for centuries.

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| **Abstract**

Don Juan as a Figure of Masculinity: Slovak Literary Appropriations in the Nineteenth Century

This article examines the adaptation and appropriation of the Don Juan myth in nineteenth-century Slovak literature through the lens of masculinity studies. The Don Juan figure, one of European culture's most enduring archetypes, embodies various models of masculinity that are reinterpreted across different historical and cultural contexts. The study first analyses Don Juan as a cultural archetype of masculinity, tracing his evolution from a sensual being driven by lust, a libertine focused on manipulation and seduction, to an aesthetic being searching for an ideal. In nineteenth-century Slovak literature, the Don Juan figure appears in two distinct forms. First, as an antagonistic predator representing hegemonic ethnic and class power. Second, towards the century's end, as a romantic cynic embodying modernist crisis and scepticism toward love. These adaptations reveal how literary representations both reflect and produce culturally specific models of masculinity, shaped by national and social antagonisms and modernist transformations. In doing so, the article demonstrates how a small literature engages with shared European archetypes to negotiate its own cultural, national, and gendered specificities.

Keywords: Don Juan; masculinity; 19th-century Slovak literature; literary adaptation

| **Bio**

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