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POZNAŃSKIE STUDIA SLAWISTYCZNE

NR 26 (2024)

DOI: 10.14746/pss.2024.26.22

Data przesłania tekstu do redakcji: 27.10.2023

Data przyjęcia tekstu do druku: 22.05.2024

The Archetypal Character of Eve: A Comparative Overview of Modern Czech, French and Canadian Literatures

ABSTRACT: Štělec Karel, *The Archetypal Character of Eve: A Comparative Overview of Modern Czech, French and Canadian Literatures*, "Poznańskie Studia Slawistyczne" 26. Poznań 2024. Wydawnictwo "Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne," Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, pp. 459–471. ISSN 2084-3011.

There are very few archetypal characters being more important for European cultural tradition than the Biblical first woman – Eve. As evidenced by literary onomastic research, the very use of semantically loaded first names implies intertextual connectedness, fulfilling – in most cases – associative and symbolic functions. This reference to archetypal stories and heroes makes it possible to create a multitude of new semantic layers, but it also serves to keep their original sense in cultural and collective memory. In our contribution, we seek comparative analysis and interpretation of selected characters, bearing the name of Eve, in modern French, Canadian and Czech literatures. The study focuses on variants, shifts, and similarities that, to varying extents, refer to the first Biblical woman. Throughout both the national literatures, we observe forms of the pretext–posttext relation and concrete onymic functions of the name of Eve in the time span from the close of the 19th century to the present day.

KEYWORDS: Eve; archetypes; first woman; Czech literature; Francophone literature



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1. Introduction and theoretical background

The archetypal images, narratives, and characters that co-create the cultural memory and identity of Western, Euro-Atlantic civilization draw heavily on two basic and extensive sources: ancient mythology and canonical and deuterocanonical biblical texts. These stories, characters, and their fates have been present in European culture since the early Middle Ages and have contributed significantly to its overall formation and development. Therefore, the cultural representation of such archetypes cannot be perceived purely in the perspective of classical literary comparative studies, but rather through the prism of a transcultural concept, which “is based on the assumption that cultures as such are not homogeneous, they do not consist of clearly separable units, but are interpenetrating” (Welsch, 1997, qtd. in Petrbock, 2019, 10). The quoted statement is undoubtedly true of European national literatures, since they are results of tendencies, forces, and traditions that have been dynamically influencing each other for centuries.

One of the most profound images shared by Western collective memory and culture is undoubtedly the biblical book of Genesis and the theme of the first two humans: “The archetype of male–female, animus–anima, Adam–Eve stands at the bottom of our unconscious untouched and identical today as much as in the most distant past” (Evdokimov, 2011, 167). Let us complement the thesis of the Russian-French philosopher and theologian with a similar statement, namely, that “the biblical story that had the greatest impact on the spiritual, social, cultural, and political lives of the members of the Judeo-Christian culture is (...) above all the creation of man and woman – Adam and Eve” (Dubinová, 2008, 20). Thus, the biblical Eve is one of the most prominent feminine archetypal types and, as a highly symbolically burdened being, she has represented, since the medieval literary tradition, the element of sin, immorality and temptation, stemming from her rebellion against God’s command (Lederbuchová, 1996, 118); at the same time, she is endowed with the specificity of the first woman and the giver of life. However, the representation of the archetypal nature of the characters is not immutable and undergoes evolution, which is the case of the discussed topic as well.

This creates an intertextual field in which the recipient decodes and interprets the relationship established between the pretext and the (post)text. This happens, among other things, “through quotation, allusion, paraphrase, complex transformation, adoption of certain components or rules of construction, thematic connection (plot, characters), etc.” (Mareš, 2017). Being aware of the variety of theories of intertextuality, formulated by a number of literary scholars, especially in the last third of the 20th century (alternatively, such close terms as hypotext–hypertext, prototext–metatext, and others are also common), in this paper we use only the basic terminological pair of pretext and posttext, without an intention of differentiating it further.

In addition to the motivic correlation, the onymic sphere, i.e. the explicit use of an identical anthroponym that implies elements of cultural tradition and archetype, plays a crucial role in the relation between the pretext and the posttext as well. The use of one of a group of names borne by characters generally held in the cultural memory of societies adds associative and symbolic functions to the basic nominative one. Nevertheless, this kind of name (Romeo, Mary, or Sisyphus, for example) does not imply allusiveness in literature without exception:

Even names with a potential associative function should, however, be approached with some caution – not every fictional heroine named Eve must necessarily be associated with a biblical foremother, and not every Adolf must be linked to Hitler; these names must be interpreted in the context of the work as a whole (Dvořáková, 2017, 164).

Literary staging and reviving of archetypal pretexts thus ideally require a combination of the use of the original anthroponym together with a motivic level, containing distinct reminiscences, references, etc., in the posttext.¹

¹ The issue is further developed by Frank Wagner (2008, 32): “In order for the effect of intertextuality to materialize on the aesthetic level, it is certainly indispensable that the encyclopaedical resources of readers contain the work (or the authorial identity) which is the object of the allusive mechanism, but once this condition is fulfilled, one measures to what extent the intertextual motivation of onomastics

In the light of the above, we focus on the analysis, interpretation, and comparison of poetic texts by six authors of Czech and French (Francophone) literature inspired by Eva's archetype, which were written from the turn of the 19th century to the present day. This is an epoch of cultural development in which the representation and interpretation of the ancient pretext are clearly expanding in a diverse range of literary works, also due to the plurality and multiple layers of artistic movements and authorial poetics; Eve plays a key role in these texts, referring to her aesthetic archetype in various ways. Specifically, the corpus includes works by poets Maria Krysińska (1857–1908), Charles Péguy (1873–1914), Vladimír Holan (1905–1980), Anne Hébert (1916–2000), Karel Šiktanc (1928–2021), and a female author who is known under the initials of A. Š. (died 1932).

2. Eve as life and original sin

Conservative versions of the thematization of the first biblical woman in modern poetry generally take over the basic attributes of the Old Testament narrative. This is the main construction feature of the mythical poetic cycle *Adam a Eva* (*Adam and Eve*) by the Czech poet Karel Šiktanc, and of the monumental French lyrical composition by the writer and philosopher of Catholic orientation, Charles Péguy, simply titled *Ève* (*Eve*). Refrains, dramatic tension, cyclical structuring, and the motives of other essentially archetypal elements (notably creation and extinction) run through both works while Eve's fate is reconstructed; they differ, however, in their length (Šiktanc's poem is considerably shorter than Péguy's nearly eight thousand lines) and in terms of the intimacy–pathos contrast.

Šiktanc's *Adam a Eva* evokes the creation myth by its very composition, with six parts reflecting the days of the world creation, to which sections are added at the beginning and end of the book, differing in the

possess the virtues of exposure and derealisation". For the onymic component of the workings of intertextual relations (Magné, 1989, qtd. in Wagner, 2008).

italics used. The biblical story is transcended by the tension and a certain immense weight with which the two characters struggle in an atmosphere dominated by natural phenomena and the elements. These predominantly materialize as refrain-like motives of water, the inventory of which is very broad, including rain, thunder, fog, tadpoles, fish, waves, and lake eddies. The energy of intense rain forms the link among poems, from the very beginning, when Adam meets Eve: "And the rain poured into his mouth" (Šiktanc, 2001, 67). The ubiquitous moisture and water simultaneously project the woman-water connection and highlights the importance of the feminine, Eve element in the text. Thus, one cannot limit oneself to the claim that water here merely brings "a flood in which everything important drowns, washes away, becomes speechless" (Hruška, 2010, 167); conversely, it is also a symbol of life and hope that the encounter with the feminine element brings to a man, as well as of purification that water produces: "However, the Earth was clean" (Šiktanc, 2001, 91), "And the Earth was green / and floating"² (Šiktanc, 2001, 100). The aforementioned heaviness, then, arises rather from overcoming the incongruity, the two poles expressed by the archetypal elements. It is Adam who is sprinkled with rain upon meeting Eve, and who thus recognizes a hitherto unknown force with which he is forever confronted from that moment on (also metaphorically in the form of the surrounding environment).

Water and (first) woman are related archetypes: "The water-woman resists her spiritualization; but this resistance must be broken, and the woman-water must 'sacrifice' herself" (Kalnická, 2007, 58). In this sense, sacrifice is understood as the emergence of togetherness with the cycle of creation, and the continuum of water flow as the maternal role of woman, the giver of life. Šiktanc's foremother is thus undoubtedly the centre of the poetic composition, accentuating the equivalence Eve = life. The mutual examinations, the attempts to get closer to each other and be together through words are recurrent in a refrain-like fashion, but exist here with the awareness of the ever-present possibility

2 There is a language pun in Czech hidden in the word "plavý": while the basic meaning is "fair," expressing mostly the hair colour, the etymology of the word is linked to the group of float verbs ("swim," "float," "flow").

of re-estrangement. Their world (and *largo sensu* the world of all people) offers only one escape from futility – “to find oneself in each other” (Hruška, 2010, 169). This is reminiscent of the struggle, waged in the poem until its conclusion: “He was falling. He was getting up. Still. More. Night and / day” (Šiktanc, 2001, 99).

Péguy’s poem, first published in 1913, represents the author’s synthetic masterpiece, which litanically addresses the foremother in confrontation with the description of (not only) the spiritual development of humanity after the expulsion from Paradise. Several thousand lines start with the incipit “*Jésus parle*” – it is Christ who is here a possible heir and redeemer of Eve and her sin: “O first wife, thy son bows down to thee... // And I salute thee, first handmaid, / foremother of shepherds and good servants, / foremother of herdsmen and guardians of the first meadows, / be well, oldest follower” (Péguy, 2003, 19). The stories of the two characters, Christ and Eve, are presented in alternately complementary and antithetical ways, semantically fulfilling both a vertical and a horizontal relationship.

The horizontal frame of the poem is the axis of time. In the beginning, Eve opened the way for humankind from Eden to knowledge, pain, and suffering. At the opposite end of the pilgrimage, Péguy places Christ, who, in turn, as the Saviour, leads people out of this reality of the earthly world – he is the hope for the return of Paradise, which Eve rejected by her action. The vertical relationship is fulfilled by the roles of Eve-mother of all and Christ-heir, but also by the symbolic semantic spheres of above (heaven, Christ, the sacred, the eternal world) and below (earth, Eve, the profane world, impermanence): “Eve looks at things from below, the glorified Jesus from above; both see the same realities, but each approaches them differently” (Burda, 2012, 158).

Eve’s preoccupation with material goods and values generally represents human toil, futility, and insecurity – the permanent feeling of threat and insecurity becomes emblematic for the humankind expelled from the original Garden of Eden. Let us conclude this section by comparing Péguy’s and Šiktanc’s conceptions: the French poet depicts humanity constantly seeking and rediscovering Christ, the intercessor for the fallen, embodied by Eve. Šiktanc’s search and reunion is an intimate drama between man and woman, where the uncertain

coexistence of two beings brings a constant beginning, yet also an end; Adam and Eve must strive again and again for their closeness. In the dual form of love (for God or for a human) as redemption, Eve's biblical act is thus transcended.

3. Eve as a symbol of femininity and eroticism

With the advent of modern artistic movements, and further on in the course of the twentieth century, we can see – simultaneously in both the national literatures under study – gradual shifts in the connotation and perception of this character, one of which is the transformation of the image of Eve into an erotic, carnal form. Here, she takes the form of a *femme fatale*, repeatedly destroying and uplifting men and fascinating them with her ambivalence (Lederbuchová, 1996, 118–121). It is also necessary to recall the remark that “in the development of literature, religious and ecclesiastical themes, however, are also intertwined with secular culture” (Hrtánek, 2007, 10). The original meaning of Eve as a religious, Christian symbol of sin and at the same time as the first wife of the biblical Adam may thus be secularized; the extreme form of this profanation of the sacred is the very emphasis on the archetype of female sensuality and sexuality.

In a sense, such a pioneering rendition is already present in the poem *Ève* from the collection *Rythmes pittoresques: mirages, symboles, femmes, contes, résurrections* (*Picturesque Rhythms: Mirages, Symbols, Women, Tales, Resurrections*) (1890) by Marie Krysińska, a poet half-forgotten by both readers and scholars. The book by the French poet of Polish origin includes a section on women, devoted to five archetypal figures: Eve, Ariane, Hélène, Marie and Magdelaine. The poem thematizing the first woman sketches a natural and instinct-driven image of paradise, a harmonious interconnection of humankind, flora and fauna – as if nature here replaced the unmentioned and absent man, Adam. The approaching turning point in the destiny of humankind is outlined only at the very end of the text, with the motive of the approaching seductive serpent. The physical descriptions of Eve, or rather her body, are notable (on the contrary, the characterization of her personality is absent) – the woman

has “an innocent body tired of charming games” (Krysińska, 1890, 53). Krysińska then moves from this general evocation to a more intimate, erotically tinged image: “Magnetic sweetness of these beautiful white hips” (Krysińska, 1890, 54). The all-pervading tension (of sin and attraction and erotic beauty) is further illustrated by the choice of lexical expressions: “ecstatic rest,” “lascivious mouth,” and others.

In Czech literature, Vladimír Holan, a poet of meditative and meta-physical nature, repeatedly works with the eroticisation of the character of the first woman in his collections *Na postupu* (*On the Advance*) (1964), *Bolest* (*Pain*) (1965, expanded 1966), and *Na sotnách* (*On the Bier*) (1967). In the books, the name Eva (Eve) appears in several lapidary poems, some of which use this anthroponym as their titles. Let us give an overview of selected specific variants: in the collection *Bolest*, with its nineteen verses and dedication, the love text is one of the longest; in the composition plan, the physical enchantment graduates as the length of the stanzas increases. The poem is based on a biblical story and refers to it with its reflection on immortality and eternity, but especially with the motive of the serpent. It appears here in the form of an apocryphal variation – in contrast to the tempting animal, it is dominated by passivity: “and the serpent, no longer on the stone, but under the heather, / lay down on its belly and covered himself with its little back” (Holan, 1966, 13). In the poem, temptation is thus only embodied by the woman, whose physical attraction again evokes strong, almost uncontrollable emotions: “She was so beautiful that the madness of my passion / was still to be followed by a whole, whole lunacy...” (Holan, 1966, 13).

Next, Holan intersperses the sensuality of femininity with an original series of reflexive antitheses in the hermetic poem *Eva*, dedicated to the Italian writer Giancarlo Vigorelli (collection *Na sotnách*). Like Krysińska, he draws on the motive of the naked body, which is unification of timelessness and the excitement of the moment – the lines “naked, present woman in one place / but in all times” (Holan, 1967, 192) refer to the repetitiveness of temptation and physical beauty since the beginning of humanity, made present to each man and each generation through individual experience. The desiring principle of Eros is problematized, however, for it is this principle that can pose an obstacle to the higher, spiritual expression of love: “such a woman for the love of life / and such

a love lost / by the beginning of loving!" (Holan, 1967, 192). This transience of the sexual and the erotic can finally be interpreted as a synecdoche for the transience of all physicality and materiality – in contrast to the motive of the perfect and lost mythical paradise.

4. Eve as suffering and resistance of woman/women

After the intertextual forms of Eve's story in modern poetry described above, let us add a third, significantly updated meaning. This is a subversive take on the motive from the Book of Genesis, in which Eve is not the bearer of sin and temptation, or the originator of original sin, as evidenced by the words "[b]ecause thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake" (Gen. 3:17), but a suffering woman, continually misunderstood by society or by the world, or the whole symbol of the supposed patriarchal oppression within Judeo-Christian culture. The inherited "fate of women" is breached by the female authors in their emancipatory poems, in which themes of resistance, accusation, and desire for almost absolute freedom appear.

The anonymous poem *Jablko Evino: dopisy mrtvé (Eve's Apple: Letters of a Dead One)*, published posthumously in 1933 and signed by the initials A. Š., also sounds like a strongly erotic poem; however, we include it in this section because its key idea is different. In a highly exalted autobiographical text, the poem's subject, a young woman/girl, finds herself, suffering from a progressive illness, on the verge of an expected death. With the loss of her physical beauty, formerly taken for granted, she looks back on unfulfilled physical desires of her youth and sharply denounces contemporary morality's view of female sexuality. She comes to terms with Eve's archetype in the opening stanzas: "I wanted to live! – What would I give for that...! / So far I've only been dying of desire. / – I was first swept up in the arms of a man. // My heart? – His conscience? – It's innocent! / The Bible and the world and love and sin / Will put the blame on the apple of Eve's" (Š. A., 1933, 7). The rejection of the tradition linking temptation, infidelity, and coquetry with

womanhood culminates in an inverse understanding of guilt, where the suffering girl sees her only sin in the fact that she “sinned little” (Š. A., 1933, 38). The trauma of the last days culminates in a cry for the need of a new Christ and a reminder of another archetypal biblical woman: “I am only a woman! / But I would like to be a Magdalene! / Only twice have I given myself to a man, / – and like her I loved too much” (Š. A., 1933, 44).

Another example of this shift is the poem *Eve* from the collection *Poèmes (Poems)* (1960) by Anne Hébert, winner of the French Prix Femina. In the book, the author returns to the theme for the second time (in her first book, *Les Songes en équilibre (Dreams in Equilibrium)* from 1942, she includes a paraphrase of Eve’s story, not unlike Šiktanc’s *Adam and Eve* regarding the motive of the element of water). The text’s intention to be a kind of implicit critique of antifeminism was already pointed out, in a study by Kathleen Kells, who, among other things, wrote in her essay,

by insisting on Eve’s right to supersede her beneficently meek and pristine counterpart, Anne Hébert succeeds in exposing, demythicizing, and subverting centuries of misogyny, the insidious nature of which was diffused by the church through its adoption of the Virgin Mary as an object of worship almost equal to Christ himself and as an officially sanctioned pseudowomanly intercessor to whom women in particular might pray to obtain absolution for their special sin: that of being women (Kells, 1989).

Hébert’s text sharply challenges the idea of Eve as a kind of pendant of the first human being, man, scolding the traditional social role of women in Western civilization. Yet, we do not believe that Kells interprets the poem completely adequately.

The poem, in the form of a lament and a plea, speaks for women who do not, however, perceive the above-quoted feeling of “sin for being women”. Rather, the naturalistic motives of decay such as rotting, crushed bones, plague, tears, and weeping are more general attributes of the heaviness of earthly life for humans, both men and women. The emancipatory emphasis in the composition, on the other hand, is entirely positive, equalizing and showing the strength, will, and

ability of women; after all, the act of Eve's biblical decision is also, in Hébert's work, an act of free agency. This way, the woman is the dominant element, as illustrated by a number of lines: "Look, your sons and husbands rot pell-mell between your thighs, under the same curse"; or further "Tell us, flawless love and the first man dismantled in your arms" (Hébert, 1960, 101). Finally, the anti-traditionalist collective poetic monologue is also a polemic against the classical, almost binary conception of a pair of biblical female archetypes, Mary and Eve, rehabilitating the latter.

5. Conclusions

The archetype of the first biblical woman is frequent in the Euro-Atlantic culture and literature of the 19th and 20th centuries in various variants and mutations. As interpretations of French and Czech poetic texts of the period show, these updated forms of Eve's fate are not tied to a particular national literature, but appear across many of them – modern poetic appropriations thus continue to fulfil the trans-cultural role that the pretext (along with other Old Testament or ancient stories) has contained for centuries. The three thematic spheres set out in this paper are naturally somewhat simplistic – it would certainly be possible to stratify them by discussing sub-nuances or to expand the chosen corpus to include other authors. Nevertheless, to sum up, it can be stated that literary works which repeatedly and variously update the theme of biblical Eve do not only carry a peculiar aesthetic value within their own fictional worlds – their significance is broader: they represent an extremely valuable and telling testimony of how the understanding of femininity, identity, and traditional archetypes has been evolving in the modern Western cultural space.

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