



‘By creating plot texts, man learnt to distinguish plots in life and thus to make sense of life’: a discussion of narratology in the work of Juri Lotman

Joe Andrew¹

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Abstract

The overall aims of this article are to revisit one of the key contributions to narratology of the late twentieth century, Juri Lotman’s *The origin of plot in the light of typology of 1973*, to attempt to determine its place in Lotman’s work as a whole, its relationship with the work of other theorists, as well as to suggest its value, and its applicability to literature and other manifestations of human culture. Of course, Lotman was not the first to suggest that narrative structure and plots have some claims to universality. Moreover, in the twentieth-first century story, plot and narrative—and the terms are more or less interchangeable in general usage—have become almost ubiquitous, being applied to politics, sport, history as well as cultural objects as such. In this seepage of cultural theory into popular culture, and, in fact, into everyday parlance, Lotman’s article plays a pivotal role, and has become a modern classic of literary theory.

Origins itself covers a wide area and ranges from prehistory to contemporary times. In this overview he offers myriad examples from Ancient Greece, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky and many more besides. In some ways, it is important to see this piece of 1973 as an extension of his own *Struktura khudozhestvennaia teksta* of three years previously. In this, one of his more rigorously structuralist works, Lotman sees semiotic space organised in binary terms along the positive / negative axis of *verkh / niz*. But in *Origin*, Lotman establishes a very powerful, infinitely replicable typology, encapsulated in the simple chain: “entry into enclosed space—exit from it.”

Important refinements have been made to this model by Teresa de Lauretis in her seminal article “Desire in narrative,” where in her feminist re-reading of Lotman she does not in any way undermine the validity of Lotman’s model, but greatly enhances it. This model, especially as refined by de Lauretis, has immense applicability. For example, Turgenev’s four major novels, with their heroes entering the

✉ Joe Andrew
j.m.andrew@keele.ac.uk

¹ Keele University, Newcastle, UK

enclosed space of the ‘enclave’, only to fail the ‘test of love’, readily spring to mind, as do most of the stories comprising Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Time*, as well as Pushkin’s *Evgenii Onegin*. After offering an overview of such instances, this article will give about half a dozen ‘case studies’ to provide more in-depth assessments of the applicability of Lotman’s theories. The texts to be analysed as case studies are Turgenev’s *Asya*, Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground and Brothers Karamazov*; Tolstoy’s *Father Sergius*, and the films *Kommissar* by Askoldov, and Bodrov’s *Prisoner of the Caucasus*.

Keywords Juri Lotman · Narrative · Feminism · Russian literature · Cinema

“Narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there like life itself.”
Roland Barthes

General remarks 1

The overall aims of this article are to revisit one of the key contributions to narratology of the late twentieth century, Juri Lotman’s “Происхождение сюжета в типологическом освещении” (“The origin of plot in the light of typology,” 1973 [hereafter “Origin”]), to attempt to determine its place in Lotman’s work as a whole, and its relationship with the work of other theorists, as well as to suggest its value, and its broader applicability to literature and other manifestations of human culture.

Of course, Lotman was not the first to suggest that narrative structure and plots have some claims to universality. Roland Barthes, for example, as we see from our epigraph, has argued: “Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself” (Barthes, 1977, p. 79). Indeed, in the twentieth-first century story, plot and narrative—and the terms are more or less interchangeable in general usage—have become almost ubiquitous, being applied to politics, sport, history as well as cultural objects as such. Narrative concepts such as beginning, middle and end, the trajectory of a story, turning points and so on, are applied, for example, to discussion about the unfolding of the Covid pandemic, and sports commentaries; while the concept of the “journey” has been applied to reality television programmes to the point of unintended self-parody. All this suggests that today, and increasingly so, many people see life, and their lives not as some random collection of episodes, but as a *story*, and one over which, moreover, they seek to exercise as much control as possible. In this seepage of cultural theory into popular culture, and, in fact, into everyday parlance, Lotman’s article plays a pivotal role, and has become a modern classic of literary theory.

This article will first examine Lotman’s own *obiter dicta* on the meaning and purpose of narrative in human culture. We will then discuss his explorations of plot typologies, and their interconnections with other aspects of the narrative world, before moving to a feminist development of his ideas. The rest of our work here will

be devoted to a series of case studies that use and develop Lotman and the work of others.

General remarks 2

In his *Structure of the artistic text* (*Структура художественного текста* [hereafter *Structure*]) published three years before “Origin” in 1970, Juri Lotman had addressed head on the issue of the alleged “abstractness” of his kind of “structural” analysis of culture: “There exists an extremely widespread prejudice that structural analysis attempts to divert attention from art’s content, its social and moral concerns, for the sake of purely formalistic study, the statistical calculation of “devices”, and the like” (Lotman 1970, p. 32). He returns implicitly to this issue in the first few lines of “Origin,” where he notes that the “observer external to all earthly cultures” (p. 161)—the mythical “visitor from Mars”—would no doubt be puzzled by “the existence of the enormous number of texts relating events which are known *not to have taken place*” (ibid.—my italics, JA). In other words, why is there in human culture so much fiction, why are there so many plots? In other words, Lotman implicitly asks *what does plot do, what is it for?* (and he will answer this implied question with the last sentence of his article, which forms the first part of our title). With this bookending of a question as to the purpose of fictional plots, and his answer to it, Lotman demonstrates the profound philosophical humanism of his “structural” approach.

In some senses, we should also note, “Origin” is a development from, and an intensification of some of the key questions posed in *Structure*. We can therefore look to the earlier (and much longer) text to pick out some of the other key humanistic themes of Lotman’s structural poetics. Perhaps the most important issue to tackle here is one of the implications of his theory that literature, and art more generally, is a modelling system, albeit a “secondary modelling system” (secondary in relation to language, that is). This view is revealed in several key passages towards the end of *Structure*. For example, in writing about *Anna Karenina*, he argues:

Each individual text simultaneously models both a particular and a universal object. Thus, the plot of *Anna Karenina* reflects, on the one hand, a certain narrow object—the life of the heroine, which we are fully capable of comparing with the lives of individuals who surround us in everyday life. [...] But this same subject, on the other hand, is a reflection of another object which tends to expand without limit. We can regard the life of the heroine as a reflection of the life of any woman belonging to a certain epoch and a certain social milieu, any woman, any person (p. 211).

Even in documentaries, such as the cinéma vérité of Dziga Vertov, for example, objects which may be of a universal nature are inevitably created. As we will also see in our case studies, how a text begins and ends is of particular importance in creating these “universal objects.” In looking at this in terms of human life itself, Lotman also notes that emphasis on the beginning or end will determine whether “birth or death will be projected as the basic feature of existence” (p. 212). Shortly

after this, in a particularly striking passage, Lotman sums up the key significance of his arguments here:

This reveals the dual nature of an artistic model: while reflecting a separate event, it simultaneously reflects a whole picture of the world; in recounting the tragic fate of a heroine, it speaks of the tragic nature of the world as a whole. That's why a good or bad ending is so significant for us: it attests not only to the conclusion of some plot, but also to the construction of the world as a whole (p. 216).

Clearly, then, Juri Lotman wants his reader to be in no doubt about the ultimate impact and import of his theories: they will assist us in our reading of culture “to make sense of life.” We will continue to see this as we now turn to investigate the key components of his typologies of plot and other crucial aspects of the narrative world.

Plot typologies and the narrative world

Plot typologies

“Origin” is a remarkable piece of work in many ways. At not much more than 20 pages it is a masterpiece of concision that manages to cover a brief history of plot development from the dawn of human culture, through to the (then) present, and, at the same time, lay down the building blocks of narratological theory that we are able to use with such wide reference and relevance today and, no doubt, on into the future.

The early sections of the article are taken up with a discussion of ancient plot types in myth, which deployed an essentially “*cyclical*” structure,” with characters that are “unconditionally identical” (p. 162). In turn, and in reverse, the historical kernel of plot narration is the “fixing of unique and chance events”; hence the term *novella*, or, indeed, the novel. As we approach modern literary forms, Lotman notes, that the “modern plot-text is the fruit of the interaction and reciprocal influence of these two typologically age-old types of text” (p. 163).

Of course, plots are not only about plot! Two other key elements that Lotman develops both here and elsewhere are characters, and the narrative space. Just as there are, broadly, two types of plot historically, in an analogous way, there are two fundamental types of character, the mobile and immobile, the latter being a function of the space, while in the initial situation plot-space is divided by a single boundary into internal and external spheres: a single [mobile] character crosses the boundary.

Taking these three “ingredients” together (plot, character and space), Lotman establishes the crucial core of his narratology:

The elementary sequence of events in myth can be reduced to a chain: entry into closed space—emergence from it (this chain is open at both ends and can be endlessly multiplied). Inasmuch as closed space may be interpreted

as “a cave,” “the grave,” “a house,” “woman” (and, correspondingly, be allotted the features of darkness, warmth, dampness) entry into it is interpreted on various levels as “death,” “conception,” “return home” and so on; moreover, all these acts are thought of as mutually identical. The birth-resurrection consequent upon death-conception is linked with the fact that birth is thought of not as an act of the emergence of a new, previously non-existent personality, but as the renewal of one which has already existed (p. 168).

As we will see later on in our case studies, this typology is enormously productive, but it can equally be reduced to an even more basic formulation: “life–death–resurrection (renewal)” or, on a more abstract level: “entry into enclosed space–emergence from it” (pp. 170–1). Similarly, these typologies find their equivalent a few pages later in yet another formulation: “death–sexual relations–rebirth” (p. 173).

As we already know, this level of abstraction does not lead to a quasi-scientific dryness. On the contrary, it is in understanding these fundamentals that we “make sense of life.” Equally, “Origin” is a fairly short work, as we have noted, and Lotman elaborated these core constructs at greater length and in more detail both before and after this work of 1973.

Structure is an especially important work for our consideration of Lotman’s thinking around the intersections between character, space and plot. In developing his theories, Lotman notes that the “simplest and most fundamental case is when the space of a text is divided by some boundary into two parts and each character belongs to one of them” (p. 231). But, of course, more complex situations occur wherein different characters may be associated “with different, occasionally incompatible, types of spatial division.” As he would go on to argue in “Origin,” here too Lotman divides characters into the mobile and immobile. From this arises the fundamental “unit of plot construction,” when a mobile character crosses the textual border into different space. Consequently, therefore, the *privileged* characters are those that are *mobile*: this will be especially important when we move to Teresa de Lauretis’ feminist reworking of Lotman. As he puts it: “[t]herefore a plot can always be reduced to a basic episode—the crossing of the basic topological border in the plot’s spatial structure” (p. 238).

Mobile characters are privileged in various ways: “The immobile submit to the general, plotless type of structure. They are part of a classification which is thereby consolidated. They are not permitted to cross the border. A mobile person is one who has the right to cross the border” (ibid.). Moreover, the mobile person may act in ways that are not permitted to the immobile. As Lotman himself will go on to argue, this notion of, in effect, *transgression* will have powerful implications for texts such as *Crime and Punishment*.

As we see, therefore, movement through space, and the crossing of boundaries/borders are fundamental aspects of Lotman’s narratology, so it is also important to investigate how more generally he sees narrative space organized.

Space in the narrative world: up/down

As ever, Lotman's model is grounded in a philosophical humanism. He puts it thus in *Structure*: "[T]he structure of the space of a text becomes a model of the structure of the space of the universe" (p. 217). The text enables us to understand our life, and, indeed, the very universe! In more specific terms, he sees the artistic space created and organized on a binary model, the two core concepts of which are high and low, or up and down (*верх/низ*). These binary terms have many spatial and semantic equivalents. Moreover, the typology of entry into closed space/*the grave* has, self-evidently, implicit within it the idea of movement *downwards*.

Initially, of course, and within the confines of a given text, the binary oppositions are configured in a literally spatial dimension, along the lines of "high-low," "right-left," "near-far" (pp. 218–220). At the same time, however, both implicitly and explicitly, these spatial binaries take on value judgements, as we already see in the English use of "sinister." Thus, high–low (or up/down) also come to mean "valuable–not valuable," "good–bad," "one's own–another's," "mortal–immortal" and much else besides. Again, Lotman reminds us of the semantic and, indeed, *spiritual* importance of all this, when he notes that these are criteria "with whose help man comprehends the world around him at various stages in his spiritual development [, and they] are invariably invested with spatial characteristics—sometimes in the form of oppositions such as 'heaven vs. earth'." Moreover, these oppositions also apply to "real-life" socio-political categories, as when we speak of the "upper" and "lower" classes. More broadly in human societies, culture, consciousness and all forms of spirituality belong to the top, while the animalistic, uncreative principle constitutes the bottom of the universe (p. 224).

In both *Structure* and other, later works, Lotman elaborates these binary oppositions in ways that, as we shall see in our case studies, prove enormously productive and significant. Returning to arguments expressed elsewhere, we should again note that

the boundary becomes the most important topological feature of space. The boundary divides the entire space of the text into two mutually non-intersecting subspaces. Its basic property is impenetrability. The way in which the boundary divides the text is one of its essential characteristics. This division can be between insiders and outsiders, between the living and the dead, between rich and poor (pp. 229–30).

Lotman then goes on to extend these concepts to more specific instances that he will develop elsewhere, when he notes that "the space of a fairy tale is clearly divided into "home" and "forest" (p. 230). This opposition between home and forest, or rather and more broadly, home and *anti-home* will become especially important in "Заметки о художественном просранстве" ("Notes on artistic space"). This opposition is indeed crucial to a number of the texts we will study, especially when we also consider the semantic equivalents that Lotman adduces. Thus, "home" also means or implies "one's own, safe, cultured, protected," while "anti-home" indicates "the other's, diabolical space," the place of temporary death, "the world of the grave" (p. 457). In this seminal piece of writing Lotman applies these key ideas to

Dante, Dostoevsky and Bulgakov, all to great effect, seeing, for example, that the Underground Man and Raskolnikov inhabit spaces which are "the space of death [...] through which they must go to be resurrected and reborn" (p. 458). Again, it is essential to stress the interconnections between Lotman's narrative typology, and the semiotics of space. In a sense, neither may be fully understood without reference to the other.

Exciting and ever relevant as these ideas about plot and narrative space may be, no theory is universal. One perennial polarity that Lotman does *not* really investigate is that of gender. One has to say, admittedly with the benefit of hindsight, that this is a rather large lacuna! That said, as we will now see, the Lotmanian model and a gendered reenvisioning of it reveal that *gender is already implicit in Lotman's binaries* (even if Lotman himself did not bring out these implications.) Indeed, in turning to the work of Teresa de Lauretis we should begin by stressing that in her feminist re-reading of Lotman she does not in any way undermine the validity of Lotman's models, but, rather, greatly enhances them. It is to an investigation of this enhancement that we now turn.

Feminism and the role of the female in plot

Before turning to Lotman proper in her major contribution, "Desire in narrative" (1984), de Lauretis follows in his footsteps, as it were, by exploring gender in myth and legend. In looking at the key issue (for her) of the intersections between narrative and desire, she argues that the role of women in male narrative is as places and markers (p. 109); they are obstacles, to be slain or defeated so the male hero can fulfill his destiny/his story (p. 110).

In moving on to Lotman's "Origin," she carefully traces his key arguments, noting in particular, as we have also done, his emphasis on mobile and immobile characters, the centrality of borders and boundaries within plot space, and the way in which plots may be reduced to the "formula" of "entry into a closed space, and emergence from it" (p. 118). However, in highlighting Lotman's formulation that "closed space may be interpreted as "a cave," "the grave," "a house," "woman"," de Lauretis focusses specifically on this last interchangeable term ("woman") to conclude that

[i]n this mythical-textual mechanics, then, the hero must be male, regardless of the text-image, because the obstacle, whatever its personification, is morphologically female and, indeed, simply, the womb. [...] all these terms are predicated on the *single* figure of the hero [who] crosses the boundary and penetrates the other space. In doing so the hero, the mythical subject, is constructed as human being and as male; he is the active principle of culture [...] Female [...] is an element of plot-space, a topos, a resistance, matrix and matter" (p. 119, her italics).

To an extent perhaps even greater than Lotman, de Lauretis very much sees plots as assisting us "to make sense of life." Clearly, though, while recognizing her indebtedness to Lotman, she comes to a rather different conclusion as to what this "sense"

is. For her, this “narrative endlessly reconstructs it [the world] as a two-character drama in which the human person creates and recreates *himself* out of an abstract or purely symbolic other—the womb, the earth, the grace, the woman” (p. 121, her italics). To put this differently, most narrative historically is *not* universal, but is ultimately androcentric, and patriarchal.

As we have seen, then, both Lotman himself, and, “channeling” him, de Lauretis, offer us immensely significant—and exciting!—pictures of the world, that help us make sense of life, as our ancestors have been doing since before the dawn of human culture. Narrative really is this important! In more personal terms, since I first encountered these aspects of Lotman’s work, and de Lauretis’ reinterpretation of them, I have found them immensely illuminating, as I hope now to show through a series of case studies. These will cover primarily works from nineteenth-century Russian literature, as well as some cinematic works. The works chosen are ones to which the Lotman/de Lauretis typology has especial applicability. Equally, by placing nineteenth-century Russian prose fiction alongside twentieth-century cinema, my aim is to suggest that these typologies have immense, and very broad applicability. We begin with *Asia*, a novella by Ivan Turgenev, first published in 1858.

Case studies

Turgenev’s *Asia*

Asia is one of a loose trilogy of novellas (along with *First love* [1860] and *Spring torrents* [1872]) which deal with a middle-aged man recounting tales of love found and lost. In them, as in Turgenev’s four major novels the hero fails “the test of love”; in terms of Lotman’s narrative typologies of “entry into closed space—emergence from it” or “death—sexual relations—rebirth,” the central male protagonists fail to complete the typological heroic journey on which they embark.

Here in *Asia* the opening lines lay down the basic trajectory for the hero, who remains, incidentally unnamed, thereby affording him a kind of more generalized status in terms of narrative theory. In moving abroad from Russia to “find himself,” he leaves closed space for open space. As he puts it: “I had just broken free and gone abroad [...] to look at God’s world” (p. 71). Here, in entering the spa town that will be one of the key locales for his amorous adventures with the eponymous heroine, and other women, he re-enters closed space. At first he engages in “sexual relations” with the (also unnamed) widow. This affair proves unsuccessful, so he is not reborn. This initial incident is, however, paradigmatic, and sets the pattern for his ultimately abortive relationship with Asia, which *ipso facto*, will also lead to his not experiencing rebirth.

The story constantly repeats this paradigmatic pattern, in that N.N. (as he is styled according to the convention of the time) repeatedly crosses the *border* of the Rhine to enter the “enchanted kingdom” that Asia inhabits, and which he will leave at the end of each day. The most intense version of Lotman’s paradigm occurs, however, *not* when N.N. visits Asia and her half-brother Gagin in their little white house on

the top of a hill overlooking the river, but in the tale's climactic scene when N.N. and Asia have their "rendezvous" at Frau Luise's house in the town. Here other aspects of Lotman's typology also come into play. This fits the paradigm in several ways. It is their first tryst that is not outdoors, and so, self-evidently, to meet Asia (=sexual relations) N.N. enters "closed space." Turgenev uses narrative sleight of hand to intensify the Lotmanian implications of the scene. Although it is about 5.30 on a July afternoon in Northern Europe (when the sun would set at about 9.00 pm), the narrator tells his reader: "The evening shadows were already suffusing the air, and the narrow strip of sky above the dark street turned crimson with the glow of sunset" (p. 111). As N.N. enters the cottage, which is described in terms redolent of the Brothers Grimm he notes that he found himself "in complete darkness." Clearly, in anticipation of the later narrative typology, Turgenev's narrator, suggests that the hero has entered a space evocative of both the "cave" and the "grave." These significations are intensified yet further as Asia awaits him in a tiny dark room. However, as they embrace, N.N. remembers that he has promised Gagin, in effect, *not* to have "sexual relations" with Gagin's half-sister, and their relationship is still-born. Like almost all Turgenevan male protagonists, therefore, N.N. fails the test of love. In Lotman's terms, he enters closed space, he "dies" and enters a "grave," but he does not have sexual relations, and so fails to be reborn.

From the very first publication of this work, to the present, this failure of the hero has been seen to have wider implications. Early radical critics, for example, sought to trash not just N.N., but his creator, and the liberal generation that Turgenev was seen to represent. In other words, by failing to be reborn as a true hero, who would then be of value to Russian society, N.N. was seen to be symptomatic of the alleged failure of the whole generation of the "fathers." And this is why Lotman's theory is so important. His discussions about the ancient typology of what makes a hero is most certainly not an arid, "academic" exercise in structural analysis. Rather, as anticipated probably by Turgenev himself, this "typological" failure of the hero helped "make sense" of, in this instance, contemporary Russia. This was, of course, especially important in an era when direct political discourse was severely circumscribed—as the dire, tragic destiny of Chernyshevsky was shortly thereafter to bear witness.

Of course, Chernyshevsky and Turgenev were not alone in this "anticipation," as we see in analyzing works by Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, beginning with Dostoevsky's *Notes from the underground* (1863).

Dostoevsky's *Notes from the underground*

In the view of some, this work is perhaps *the* most influential of all Dostoevsky's works, certainly in terms of the ways in which twentieth-century existentialist philosophy grew out of Dostoevsky's thinking. However, for all the writing there has been on this seminal work, there have been remarkably few studies of this text as a work of literature, and how it "was made" to use the Formalist phrase. Moreover, the general view is that *Notes* is not strong on narrative structure, and lacks plot. However, when we look at it, especially Part II, through the eyes of

Lotman, we discover that it is, in fact, very carefully constructed. The two key areas of Lotman that we are considering in this article, up/down, and narrative typology, both bear abundant fruit when applied to Dostoevsky's work.

We begin with up/down. This semiotically rich opposition is central to much of the value system of *Notes*. The significance of the two poles is especially apparent when we consider the sub-sets that Lotman constructs, as we discussed earlier in Sect. 2.2 above. In general terms, as we shall now see, the Underground Man is ever aspiring upwards (верх) only to forever fall back to the ineluctable down (низ). (We should also note that, like the protagonist in *Asia*, he remains unnamed, again leading to his having a more generalized import.)

The Underground Man indeed seems conscious of this polarity within himself from the very outset: "The more I was conscious of all this 'beautiful and lofty', the deeper I became immersed in my slime" (p. 101). He returns to this theme, later commenting on what he sees as the essence of his being: "Either a hero, or the dirt, there was no middle way" (p. 133). Throughout the text this dyad of *верх/низ* permeates all aspects of the text, its philosophical underpinnings, its morphemes and lexemes, and its plot situations. Indeed, merging our two key concepts taken from Lotman, *верх/низ* and plot typologies, it is highly significant that the climactic encounters that the Underground Man has in Part II take place in the dark, and, in the case of the brothel scene, in total blackness. As was the case in *Asia*, the key moment of the text takes place in the epitome of "down," in a textual "grave." The Underground Man prognostically inflicts this descent (into a textual grave) on the prostitute Liza, as she seeks to transmit his own abasement on her: "You'll move from here to somewhere lower [...] ever lower and lower. And [...] you'll end up on Hay Square in your cellar" (p. 154).

Just as he predicts her descent, so too the Underground Man himself follows almost exactly Lotman's model of "entry into closed space" and an attempt—ultimately futile—to be reborn through "death—sexual relations." Before the story even begins, as we know from the title, he has descended into the Underground, and this is intensified in the brothel scene, where Liza's wretched, squalid room is redolent of a kind of grave. There, as we know, he encounters a woman. Unlike his predecessor N.N., he does in reality engage in sexual relations with her, but *typologically* he does not, because he refuses to accept the rebirth that a relationship with Liza offers, in anticipation of Sonya's "offer" of resurrection to Raskolnikov, which he too initially refuses. In effect, in rejecting Liza, he rejects rebirth and resurrection.

Indeed, he reflects years later on this encounter and its implications, to "make sense" of it, in terms that are very similar to those that would be formulated by Lotman just over 100 years later. Liza, he recalls, had come to him "to love me, because for a woman love subsumes all this *resurrection*, [...] all this *rebirth*" (p. 176, my italics). And, indeed, as we have just noted, Dostoevsky was to replay this Lotmanian plot a few years later in *Crime and Punishment*, in which, as we know, rebirth is the denouement.

So, then, the two unnamed protagonists that we have considered thus far, N.N. and the Underground Man, both, in different ways and for different reasons fail to fulfil the typology that Juri Lotman was to outline a century later. The creators of

both these failed heroes sought, through them, to “make sense” of their times, and both come to pessimistic conclusions about masculinity, and about the intellectual class of their times, the *intelligentsia*. Indeed, foreshadowing Teresa de Lauretis, they both show how women function as “obstacles,” or mere markers on the (failed) heroes’ journeys. Both writers would in turn “recycle” the typology at issue, as we have already seen with reference to *Crime and Punishment*, and as we may now also see with our next case study, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).

Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*

As in the earlier works already discussed we can apply Lotman’s work to *Karamazov* in a way that will assist us in decoding Dostoevsky’s own vision for the work. Much has been made of the novel’s epigraph, taken from John’s Gospel, 12: 24: “Truly, truly, I say to you: unless a wheat grain fall into the earth and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it brings a rich harvest.” That is, the grain/the hero, must descend into the earth/the grave, to die and then be reborn, as the speaker of those words, Jesus himself would do. This is the model for the heroes of *Karamazov*; with its implicit message of death and redemption, it can be seen to encapsulate the key narrative structures of the novel.

Although they reach different stages in their journey towards rebirth/resurrection, the story-lines of all the brothers, and some other male characters as well, essentially conform to Lotman’s typology of “death–sexual relations–rebirth.” In these stories women are designated the role of helper or donor, to use Propp’s terms, and to which Lotman is also indebted. In the case of some of the characters, notably Smerdyakov and Ivan, but also Father Zosima, the plot typology is merely sketched in and not fully developed, but they clearly, nonetheless, conform to this pattern, Smerdyakov with his *inamorata*, Maria Kondratevna, Ivan with Katerina. In neither case does the typology fully develop, because of the death of Smerdyakov, on the one hand, and Ivan’s temporary insanity. Zosima’s journey along this path is relegated to his “back-story” and is, again, partial.

Clearly, though, the fullest working out of this typology is in the stories of Alesha and Dmitry. That Alesha’s story is to be modelled on the mythic, typological narratives is, in effect, *announced* both in the novel’s epigraph, and when he is dubbed a “hero” in the work’s very first line. The frequent references to his virginity also suggest that he is due to undertake the journey of “death–sexual relations–rebirth.” The crucial scene in this part of his journey comes in Book six, Chapter three, “The Onion,” when he is taken to Grushenka, in effect, to lose his virginity (engage in sexual relations). After an initial sensual encounter between the two, a veritable miracle occurs in that they see the real human being in each other, and Alesha is restored to his true, spiritual path. He then thanks her for the rebirth that the encounter has wrought in him: “I came here to find an evil soul—I was drawn to it because I was base and evil myself, but I have found a genuine sister, I have found a treasure, a loving soul [...] She took pity on me [...] *You have restored my soul*” (XIV, p. 318, my italics). In these few lines in a sense the whole plot kernel which lies at the heart of *Crime and Punishment*, and potentially so in *Notes from the underground*,

is re-encapsulated. The hero is reborn by entering metaphorically into sexual relations in coming to Grushenka. And to return to another of Lotman's key ideas, *a picture of the whole world* is given in these remarks of Alesha. Moreover, as the following scenes and, indeed, the rest of the novel reveal, Alesha becomes a new and better version of his *old self*. As Lotman puts it in "Origin": "The birth-resurrection consequent upon death-conception is linked with the fact that birth is thought of not as the act of the emergence of a new, previously non-existent personality, but as the *renewal of one which has already existed*" (p. 168, my italics).

Dmitry Karamazov's story anticipates—and fulfills—Lotman's narrative typology even more exactly. Although he is mentioned on the first page of the novel proper, and intermittently thereafter, it is only in Book eight, "Mitya" that his story really gets under way. Indeed, in the very first chapter of this book, he shows that he is presciently aware, as it were, of what Lotman would write 90 years later. That is, as he ponders whether Grushenka will choose him rather than one of her other "admirers," he reflects that if she does choose him, then "oh then will begin at once that completely *new life*! [...] He thirsted for this *resurrection and renewal*" (XIV, p. 330, my italics). It will be a long time, indeed, beyond the temporal confines of the novel itself before Dmitry will be completely renewed. He must first undergo narrative death through his trial and imprisonment (echoing not only Raskolnikov, but Dostoevsky himself, of course), but it is clear that his story conforms to the ancient pattern that Lotman would later discern.

As we may see already, however long and elaborate works of nineteenth-century Russian literature may be (and *The Brothers Karamazov* is one of the longest novels in any language), at their heart is a very simple, endlessly repeatable typology. Moreover, and, indeed, because of its very repeatability, this typology also conveys a very particular "whole picture of the world" that "makes sense of life" in a certain way. We can now see this repeated once more—and repeated several times indeed—in a late work by another of the "greats" of Russian literature, in Tolstoy's *Father Sergius* (1890).

Tolstoy's *Father Sergius*

Never published in Tolstoy's life-time, *Father Sergius* is often seen as, in effect, part of a trilogy of works written about 1890 which deal with sex and lust, and devil women (amongst other matters), the other two being, of course, *The Kreutzer Sonata* and *The Devil*, the latter also first published posthumously. In all three tales the lives of the male protagonists are ruined by events that centre around sexual involvement with a woman, although in the case of Sergius, his "ruin" is, in fact, the beginning of his discovery of his true self. In other words, all three plots conform to a greater or lesser extent with the key features of Lotman's narrative typologies.

We will move to a discussion of the hero's "death—sexual relations [typological as well as real]—rebirth," but before that, an overview of the plot trajectory will reveal how closely it conforms to Lotman's model, *avant la lettre*. Indeed, the opening paragraph summarizes the basic plot, or at least its initial phases, in terms which may be paraphrased to fit this model quite precisely. The hero (Stepan Kasatsky, who

will become the eponymous “father”) abandons society and his fiancée to become a monk: that is, he leaves his first home and his first identity to go on a journey to find his true self, and women will be staging posts on this journey. When he becomes a monk, we are told very starkly that he “entered the monastery” (p. 11): more or less explicitly, that is, he enters closed space. And the whole story will be structured along these lines with Father Sergius repeatedly entering more and more enclosed space; only at the end, will he enter wide open space as a man reborn.

We see this typology even more in evidence at the second phase of his monkish life, when he enters the hermitage. His cell is a *cave*, cut into the mountain: here we see the precise formulation of Lotman’s model made manifest. Furthermore, this cave is redolent of the grave in more ways than one. His predecessor Illarion is actually buried in this cave; in the lead-up to his ordeal with Makovkina, he wonders: “Will not this couch be my grave?” (20) More generally, of course, his life as a hermit draws him further and further away from the world, and into closed space. After the episode with Makovkina, the narrator summarizes the story so far by stating that he has now spent 20 years away from the world, and he has become more and more ascetic; he now spends virtually the entire time in his cell, praying or talking to visitors. And the typology will be completed when he does have sexual relations and leaves closed space to be reborn.

Let us now consider in more detail what leads him to these final stages. In the first instance, we should note the overall pattern. In the first three episodes where he encounters women who are, it transpires, “obstacles” on his path to salvation, “sexual relations” are either contemplated or are actual. In the first, with Meri, his fiancée, sexual desire had not been his motivating force, but rather worldly ambition. In the second, with Makovkina, he comes very close to actual sexual contact, and only his symbolic castration in lopping off his finger saves him. The third is actually sexual, but significantly this is with the woman for whom he feels nothing but disgust and fear. Finally, he achieves rebirth by a relationship with a woman, his childhood friend, Pashenka, but this relationship is not merely unsexual, nor merely asexual, but positively *anti*-sexual.

In summary, then, the whole plot of *Father Sergius* is structured on the basis of what would become Lotman’s narrative typology of “death–sexual relations [typological as well as real]—rebirth,” with some interesting twists and variations. We should note that the typology is repeated, thrice in fact on the fairy-tale pattern. The male protagonist enters closed space, and dies to his old self, contemplates, and then actually engages in sexual relations. However, he is reborn only *after* he has left closed space, and on the basis of a denial of sex and sexuality.

In this way, once more, Lotman is highly revealing as to the picture of the world that Tolstoy has given us, and illuminates how, in his last period, he tried to make sense of a complex life. In this world, women are significant, but in an almost instrumental, and largely negative way. That is, *Father Sergius* rejects most women and the dangerous sexuality they embody. Tolstoy writes of them with loathing and with fear. In rejecting their role within the lives of men, he would seem also to have rejected any sense of community, or love of any kind. It is perhaps strange to have to report that the ending of *Father Sergius* suggests not so much rebirth and redemption, as predicated on Lotman’s typology, but that fulfilment is to be found

in isolation, separation, even alienation; a strange message perhaps for an avowedly Christian writer. In this sense, the work is imbued not only with misogyny, but, ultimately, with an almost existentialist, pre-Beckettian misanthropy.

As we have seen, the typology that Lotman would develop in the 1970s was applied by him to a huge range of texts, from ancient times into the twentieth century. So far, we have seen that it is enormously helpful in understanding how “classics” of nineteenth-century Russian realism worked, and, even more importantly, in enabling us to see the pictures of the world they created, and how Turgenev, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy attempted to make sense of life. Of course, we can take Lotman much further than this, in that he can also be applied to works of cinema, and to works that have central *female* protagonists, as we may now see in our final two case studies, starting with Sergey Bodrov’s film, *Prisoner of the mountains* (1996), which continues the more prevalent tradition of having a male protagonist.

Bodrov’s *Prisoner of the mountains*

Bodrov’s film is at least the third retelling of the same story. The context is the troubled relationship that Russia has had for the last two centuries with its “deep south.” In each of the three versions, each building on the previous one (Pushkin in 1822, Tolstoy in 1872, Bodrov in 1996), *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* tells the story of how one, sometimes two, young Russians are captured by local fighters, and who then escape with the help of a local young woman, unnamed by Pushkin, and called Dina in both Tolstoy and Bodrov. That is, a young man is captured (enters closed space/the grave); is aided by a young woman (typologically at least, engages in sexual relations); leaves closed space (to the detriment, even death of the woman) to resume his old identity.

In each work, the plot is initiated by precisely the motif of “entry into closed space.” Bodrov seeks to not merely “recycle” Tolstoy’s version, but to develop and intensify it, in that we see the hero Zhilin being brought, and later returned to the village on no fewer than four occasions. Moreover, here as in the previous two versions, it is repeatedly emphasized that the space is doubly closed, in that, not only is Zhilin brought into the small village with narrow twisting streets, but the village itself is surrounded by the majestic towering mountains. In the film, they become almost a character in their own right.

Like Tolstoy’s version of the story, the film suggest that Zhilin’s captivity is a kind of death, again in accordance with Lotman’s typology. When he, and his fellow-prisoner first arrive in the village, they are tied across the backs of horses, seemingly lifeless. The collocation of closed space/grave/death intensifies after Zhilin attempts to escape and is recaptured, and thrown into a deep “damp” pit. He is filmed from above; although he is merely sleeping, the shot evokes the image of a man lying in his tomb.

Bodrov develops the relationship between Zhilin and his captor’s daughter, Dina, much more thoroughly than in either Pushkin or Tolstoy. In the former, the local girl is unnamed, and is effectively little more than an obstacle-cum-donor. In Tolstoy,

she is given the name Dina, but remains largely at the level of plot function; in more “human” terms, Zhilin uses her in a purely transactional manner, abandoning her to a no doubt grim fate after she has helped him (as a donor) to escape (leading to his rebirth into his old identity). In Bodrov, at least in typological terms (she is still a girl), this relationship fulfills the model of “sexual relations” leading to rebirth; at the same time, the relationship develops into much more than that. After the coded “sexual relations” exchanges between them, in which Zhilin now treats her much more as an equal, and as a “real person,” this Dina also assists him to be “reborn” / escape. Now, though, Zhilin refuses to abandon her. Ultimately her father, Abdul, decides to seek a peaceful resolution. Love may not conquer all, but love does lead to some kind of peace. (Whether this peace will last is another matter).

These innovations by Bodrov are important; they are not merely changes in emphasis. He retains the basic typology developed by Pushkin and Tolstoy (and codified by Lotman) of the hero entering closed space, having sexual relations/dying, leaving closed space/being reborn, but adds much to it. In particular, Bodrov offers a quasi-feminist interpretation, not only by developing the character of Dina, and changing the dynamic between captive and captor’s daughter, but also, for example, giving Zhilin’s mother (and the maternal more generally) a much more significant role. Thereby, he radically transforms the meaning of the tale. Let us remind ourselves of Lotman’s words on this matter: “That’s why a good or bad ending is so significant for us: it attests not only to the conclusion of some plot, but also to *the construction of the world as a whole*” (1977, p. 216, my italics).

Bodrov’s *Prisoner*, then, has used the Lotman typology, but has taken it much further. This “feminist” interpretation of the model will be even more important when we consider our final text and case study, Askoldov’s *The commissar* (1967).

Askoldov’s *The commissar*

As a preliminary to this study, let us remind ourselves of Teresa de Lauretis’ feminist reworking of Lotman. She argues that “[i]n this mythical-textual mechanics, then, the hero must be male, regardless of the text-image, because the obstacle, whatever its personification, is morphologically female and, indeed, simply, the womb. [...] the mythical subject, is constructed as human being and as male; he is the active principle of culture [...] Female [...] is an element of plot-space, a topos, a resistance, matrix and matter” (p. 119). Whether de Lauretis is correct will be a vital question in this analysis, as the “hero,” the commissar, is indeed a woman, Klavdiya Vavilova, who enters closed space, is reborn by giving birth, and then emerges at the end, *explicitly* to resume her old identity.

Many of these typological concepts can be very readily applied to *The commissar*. The story begins and ends with the army, and then later, Vavilova and her troops in open space, with the vast bulk of the rest of the film spent in the closed space of the town, and then the even more closed space of the Magazannik household where Vavilova is billeted. At once, noting de Lauretis’ arguments, we should regard Vavilova as the hero, with a “male” identity, as, typologically speaking, the hero who enters, and then leaves closed space, is defined as male.

Moreover, seemingly aware of the ancient typology being invoked, Askoldov constantly reiterates these motifs, and draws our attention to them visually. For example, when Vavilova reluctantly has to leave the army to have her baby, we see her being led down a lane, then down some steps towards the Magazanniks' house, thus evoking ideas of descent into the grave (again, typologically). In turn, when she arrives the camera captures her entering ever more enclosed space no fewer than three times (as before, a folklorically significant number, of course), when she enters their yard, then she goes through their doorway, and finally we see her go into, with symbolical significance, the conjugal bedroom.

The typology is intensified and made more specific later in the film during a bombardment. Vavilova joins the family as they huddle in the cellar to escape the bombardment. Thereby, she has entered into an even more closed space, and the lighting, the dark shadows, and the camera angles all reinforce the typological connotations of "cave" and "grave" into which the hero has now descended to wrestle with "his" identity. Thus, Vavilova, in pursuing her heroic journey enters the grave *twice*, emerges reborn *twice*, and it is this second, final identity which should typologically be regarded as the true one. Significantly, moreover, it may also be seen to conform exactly with Lotman's analysis, in that this new birth "is thought of not as an act of the appearance of a new personality which did not exist before, but rather *as the renewal of one that already existed*" (1979, p. 168, my italics, JA). The typological interpretation is once more emphasized visually, in that we see Vavilova emerge through the cellar doorway, stepping alone into the daylight, determined to renew herself as a hero.

From the very beginning the film plays with the interplay between masculine and feminine identities, in ways that may be imbricated onto de Lauretis's contention that the "hero" must be, at least morphologically, male. The very title, a masculine noun in Russian, but used to apply to a woman, immediately demonstrates this, and the film modulates this dyad throughout. However, this "male" hero will become increasingly feminized, by virtue of the fact that she is pregnant, and, despite seeking an abortion, will give birth, and then become a proud mother. At the end of the film, though, she will abandon her baby son Kirill, to the care of the Magazannik family, to resume her life as a soldier. At last, she leaves their house/closed space, forever, and we see her running up the hill she had descended 80 minutes/several weeks earlier. We do not see her rejoining her troops as such, but the film concludes with the stylized sequence out once more in desolate open space, as Vavilova leads a diminishing number of soldiers to the strains of the Internationale.

Here Vavilova seems to have chosen death rather than life, and, moreover, a death which may well be futile. If, however, we remember the typology which the film recreates, we should perhaps reach a different view. Using the theoretical considerations of Lotman and Teresa de Lauretis, we may argue that Vavilova has emerged from her second "grave" reborn, indeed, resurrected, with a new version of her old identity. The newness of this identity is based on her having fully lived out her feminine identity as a mother. She has decided not so much to choose death over life, but rather *to choose between different kinds of death*—the passive death of waiting for the Holocaust, or a death in the name of a cause for which "one would not regret dying."

In this sense, birth does equal rebirth, as a better, more human, and more humane, Commissar, but still definitely a Commissar.

Once again, then, our application of Lotman's typology does not merely offer a useful guide to how this work is made, although it certainly does this, but, more importantly, it reveals "a whole picture of the world," which helped Askoldov "make sense" of the life in the Soviet Union of the 1920s that he depicts (and indeed the life that surrounded him in the Soviet Union of the late 1960s). As ever, this "picture" and this "sense" are the *real* contribution that Lotman has made to literary theory, and, moreover, to philosophical humanism. We may now move to come conclusions about these contributions, as well as about Lotman himself.

Conclusions and beyond

Through our investigation of Lotman's writings on narrative, and narrative space, and a feminist reworking of it, we have seen that the typology that he formulated, in both its full and abbreviated forms, helps us to understand the way texts were structured and organized throughout human culture. Moreover, these structural principles enable us to make sense of the world that the works evoke, and of the world more generally. As we have also seen, Lotman's methods may be applied to a great range of texts, and we have seen how these operate in works of nineteenth-century Russian literature, and twentieth-century Russian film. Moreover, there are many other texts to which the typology might apply—almost all major Russian novels of the nineteenth century, from *Evgenii Onegin*, *Hero of our time*, the novels, and, as we have seen, novellas of Turgenev, and so on beyond. The works examined here are, then, merely a small sample, chosen because they illustrate the typology very exactly, but also for their variety—film as well as literature, female protagonist as well as male. Elsewhere, we could mention the film *Casablanca*, many works by Shakespeare—the list would be extremely extensive. It would not be true, though, to say that Lotman's typology would have *universal* applicability, such a declaration would be quite fanciful. It falls beyond the scope of this present article, however, to discuss which texts would not be susceptible to this type of analysis, or why.

There is, though, one final dimension that I would like to explore, especially in view of the fact that this is the centenary of Lotman's birth in 1922. This is Juri Lotman the man who underpins the philosophical humanism that permeates his work.

Lotman the man; Lotman and me

I had the great good fortune to meet Juri Lotman on a number of occasions in the last three years before his untimely death in 1993. Most of these encounters took place in Tartu, his home for almost all of his academic life, and which opened up to Western visitors around 1990 as the Soviet Union began to fade from history. I saw him lecture to undergraduates, met him alongside his wife and fellow scholar, Zara Mintz, as well as other colleagues at 18a Ulukooli, the home of Tartu University. On each occasion he revealed great kindness, generosity and dry wit. Although he

was now a world-famous cultural theorist, he remained modest and self-effacing. I last met him in May 1993, at his flat in Tartu, where once more he welcomed me with great humanity, and signed a copy of one of his books for me, with the message “with the warmest of feelings.” It is one of my most treasured possessions.

I had first gone to Tartu in April 1990 to set up an exchange between my own university, Keele, and Tartu. This was in the company of and at the initiative of my colleague, Professor Valentina Polukhina. She died the day before I completed this piece of writing, and I dedicate it to her memory, “with the warmest of feelings.”

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