**Iconization, Diagrammatization and Allegorization of Suffering in Slovak and North American Culture-forming Texts**

Jana Javorčíková

Jana Javorčíková has worked at the Department of English and American Studies in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia, since 1997. She specialises in literature of the English-speaking countries. Her publications include *Contemporary Literature in English* (2017)and monograph *Anatomy of Literary Genres* (2015). She has also published in the field of American literature (*A Compendium of American Literature,* 2017). In 2005–2006, she spent a year teaching literature at Minneapolis Community and Technical College in Minneapolis, USA.

Abstract

In response to the American philosopher-scientist Charles Sanders Peirce, who explored three types of iconic signs (images, diagrams and metaphors), present-day scholars, among them Jørgen Dines Johansen, recognize three ways that a text may be iconized: imaginative iconization, diagrammatization and allegorization. The comparative study takes a close look at how religious and secular suffering is represented and iconized in selected culture-forming literary and political texts of Slovak and North-American provenience. These texts include Slovak Romantic-national poetry and poetry of the Realistic period (by Pavol Országh-Hviezdoslav and Samo Chalupka and poetry and prose of the American Colonial and Romantic-Early National Period (Phillis Wheatley, Walt Whitman and Maya Angelou). We will defend the argument that suffering is a significant and culture-forming motif in each narrative; however, it plays a very different role in the Slavic and North American cultures. Whereas in the Slovak literary discourse, suffering is iconized as an unchangeable, permanent “ordeal”, the American literary discourse interprets suffering within the framework of the “American Dream”, as a challenge leading to a necessary change and resulting in wellbeing.

Key words: iconization, imaginative iconization, diagrammatization, allegorization

**Introduction**

Suffering is a complex and interdisciplinary phenomenon that plays a significant role in the nation-shaping phase of many countries and nations. Literature is the reflection of the world and thus suffering is “…one of the enduring themes of world literature. From the ancient epic to the modern world, literature has been concerned with depicting the torments and anguish to which the human individual may be subjected.” (Powell, 2007, p. 7). The focus of this analytical-comparative study is on the analysis of the theme of suffering from the perspective of literary semiotics. We will demonstrate how differently suffering can be conceptualized in two different national cultures – the Slovak and the North American – and in their culture-forming texts. We will rely on the findings of the American philosopher-scientist Charles Sanders Peirce, who explored three types of iconic signs: images, diagrams, metaphors, and on the follow-up research of the Danish literary scholar Jørgan Dines Johansen, a co-author of *Literary Discourse: A Semiotic-Pragmatic Approach to Literature* (2002a), *Reading as Iconization* (2002b) and many other significant works on literary semiotics.

In response to Peirce, in his study *Reading as Iconization*, Johansen proposes three ways how to iconize a literary text: imaginative iconization (i.e. imaginization), diagrammatization and allegorization (2002b, p. 205). As the meaning of the text (the script, the literature) offers concrete imaginative iconic exemplification of models, complex diagrams for imagining (2002b, p. 322), Johansen understands reading as a process of iconization (2002b, p. 329). Johansen (2002b, pp. 205-212) further distinguishes three ways of semiotic perception of a literary text: 1) Iconization (imaginization) which “…has to do with the use of imagination in linking the symbolic signs of the text with the iconic ones”; 2) Diagrammatization [which] “…is abstractive, systematic and concerned with the totality of the text, not focusing on details; [and it...] looks at a text as an algebraic structure” and 3) Allegorization – “relating of elements and relationships of the universe represented in the text to other conceptual structures”. In this study, we will approach selected representative culture-forming texts from a semiotic-pragmatic point of view in order to identify the method of iconization of suffering (being imaginized, diagrammatized or allegorized) and explore the role iconized suffering plays in the two cultures.

**The Role of Suffering in Slovak and North American Culture-forming Texts: Research Corpus**

Any corpus of culture-forming texts1 may be subject to an academic debate; notable scholars however, stress its constant evolution and redefinition from the point of view of permanent and transformative values that form the cultural substance of each nation. Many experts, for example Peter Zajac (Zajac, 2018, p. 1) undermine justification of many traditional historical works and suggest re-definition of those works that traditionally formed the Slovak literary canon (and thus may represent culture-forming texts, or, vice-versa) and subsequently formed its priorities. For the purposes of this study, however, we follow Zajac’s key point, understanding a “living literature” (2018, p. 1), i.e. that one that is “alive” among readers of any age as being representative of each culture. Thus we decided on an eclectic approach; three Slovak and three American representative texts that every schoolchild is aware of and learns early in their lives as a part of formal education were selected for the research corpus. The Slovak culture-forming texts are represented by “iconic” poems by two poets: “Turčín-Poničan” (Man from Poniky turned Turk2, 1863), “Mor ho!” (Kill them!,1864)3 and “Branko”(1864) by the Romantic poet Samo Chalupka (1812–1883)4 and the notable poem-ballad “Zuzanka Hraškovie” (1900) by one of the greatest Slovak poets of Realism, Pavol Országh-Hviezdoslav (1849–1921).

Comparatively, the North-American culture-forming texts in this study are represented by the famed Phillis Wheatley (1754–1784) and her poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America” (1773). Another author who represents the topic of suffering in the North-American literary canon is Walt Whitman (1819–1892), and his collection of poems “Leaves of Grass” (1892). Especially the poem “Song of Myself” (1855) originally entitled “Poem of Walt Whitman, an American” expresses the role of suffering (or absence thereof) in Whitman’s Buddhism and pantheism-inspired philosophy. Finally, the research corpus is completed by one of the most popular poems by an Afro-American, “Still I Rise” (1978) by Maya Angelou (1928–2014), an author of many popular and influential feminist poems. In the following part of this study, we will demonstrate how modern secular and religious modes of thinking about suffering are depicted in the conceptual corpus of Slovak and comparatively in American culture-shaping texts as representative of the strongest axiological and national traits. We will analyze the sematic-pragmatic conceptual foundations for attributes of suffering, subject to further semiologic analysis in terms of Johansen’s concepts of imaginization, diagrammatization and allegorization.

**Iconization, Diagrammatization and Allegorization in representative culture-forming texts**

Slovaks and Americans represent relatively young nations with natural historical “opponents” – the Ottoman Empire and the Hungarians on the Slovak side and the British (and French) on the side of the Americans. Freedom in both countries was well deserved and won in heavy fighting and war turmoil. Thus, in both national literatures, the theme of national identity resonates very strongly in their discourses, even though its legacy is very different.

In Slovak folklore, literary works of art in general and namely in selected Slovak culture-forming texts, suffering, which covers various exemplifications such as yearning for independence, cultural and linguistic autonomy and freedom is, a very strong motif, artistically, politically and historically. One of “iconic” Slovak ballads by Pavol Országh (known by his pen-name Hviezdoslav), “Zuzanka Hraškovie”, depicts the physical and mental hardships of a starving, humiliated and beaten motherless child who cannot fight back and eventually dies. The agent of evil – her stepmother – symbolizes somebody alien, non-native to her family. The tone and archaic language of the poem very strongly stresses the victimization and passivity of the child and demonization of the evil impersonated in the vulgar and aggressive stepmother. God does not intervene, even though He is called upon. Moreover, the source of the stepmother’s aggression is unknown; she hates the child without the reason being explained.

Other authors of significant Slovak poetry also stress the alien Other as the symbolic source of suffering. Notably, Samo Chalupka in another famous Slovak poem, “Turčín-Poničan” (Man from Poniky turned Turk), opens the poem with the stress and horror of the Turkish raids: “Dear God, grave fear, the Turks have invaded the Poniky village” (Chalupka, 2009, p. 1). He further goes on into detail about the physical suffering of the innocent villagers, picking an old woman as a symbol of their helplessness and purity. The author very vividly describes the atrocities of the Turkish raids (blood pouring, body tearing) and inhuman nature of the enemies. God, just like in Hviezdoslav’s poem, is on the side of the Slovaks; however, he does not intervene*.* Ironically, later the old woman finds out that the bloodthirsty Turk is actually her lost son, kidnapped as a child by the Turks. Startled and ashamed, the young Turk invites his mother to live with him in Turkey like a queen; she however, refuses and prefers to end her days back in her homeland. This peacemaking paradigm, however, is not quintessential in all of Chalupka’s poetry; in his equally famous poem “Mor ho!” (Kill Them!), the author calls for a heroic revolt and defending one’s land at any cost. Again, however, he stresses the motif of peaceful Slovaks versus warmongering Turks or, alternatively, nameless inhuman “foreigners”. The recurrent motif of Slovakia as “somebody to whom the wrong is done” may be found in many other Chalupka’s works, e.g. in the poem “Branko”: “…We were happy, a long time ago, famous Slovaks lived in the world, they lived freely just like fish in fresh water. // Enemies invaded our country, stole our motherland, and trod upon our rights; our fame is long gone.”5

Suffering in these poems is depicted in similar conceptual patterns: It has a permanent *status quo*. It cannot be changed or avoided; instead, it is a kind of “ordeal” to which the Slovaks were pre-destined. Therefore, it is over the long term or, alternatively, eternal. As such, it is thus to be suffered with grace and dignity and only under exceptional and extreme circumstances can the Slovaks try to vanquish the source of their suffering and stand for themselves to improve their situation.

The American conceptualization of suffering in key documents and its role in the life of an individual and the nation is very different from the Slovak one. The Americans, just like the Slovaks, suffered from a lack of national identity until the War of Independence in 1775–1883. Then the new American nation started to form and many notable scholars, among them de Crevecoeur, Paine, Jefferson and Tocqueville tried to define it. From the very beginning of the formation of the USA, America, unlike Slovakia, was associated with positive (sometimes ungrounded) images; in secular and religious historical documents it was denominated as a land of dreams, the Promised Land, New Canaan, and after the 1930s also as the country where the “American Dream” was possible and accessible to the general public. This positive spirit translated itself to many North American culture-forming texts. From the poems selected for this study, Phillis Wheatley, a slave brought to America at the age of seven, stands out. Long before the USA was established, she wrote her poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America” (1773). It is perhaps the optimistic tone and perspective of a better future that addressed many readers and made this poem one of the most popular poems in the US. Other significant American authors share a similar spirit of optimism. Transcendentalist, free-spirited Walt Whitman (2019, p. 1) in “Song of Myself” writes, I celebrate myself, and sing myself, // And what I assume you shall assume, // For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you… The celebratory motif of one’s existence is recurrent. Whitman (2019, p. 1) mentions also evil and suffering; it is, however, external and cannot interfere with his wellbeing:

 ...The sickness of one of my folks or of myself, or ill-doing or loss or lack of money, or depressions or exaltations,

 Battles, the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of doubtful news, the fitful events;

 These come to me days and nights and go from me again,

 But they are not the Me myself.

A century later, African-American activist and writer Maya Angelou shares the same strong voice of optimism in her race-inspired poem “Still I Rise” (2019, p. 1):

You may write me down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies,

You may trod me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I’ll rise.

These poems are invariably included in the set of representative poems of the respective nations; many of them are parts of schoolbooks and curricula and thus they may be representative of culture-forming texts. A semantic interpretation of their meaning in accordance with Johansen’s tripartite model of iconization, actualizing itself as imaginative iconization (imaginization), diagrammatization and allegorization, will clarify their role in the cultural and artistic perception of suffering in different cultures.

1. **Imaginative Iconization**

Johansen understands imaginative iconization (imaginization) as having to do with the use of imagination in linking the symbolic signs of the text with the iconic ones (Johansen, 2002b, p. 205). In literary text, however, the iconic signs may generate a diversity of symbolic meanings that may vary from one reader to another. In his monograph *Literary Discourse: Semantic-Pragmatic Approach to Literature* Johansenis aware of this semiotic multiplicity; he admits that even though “typical realizations” fill what is presupposed but not mentioned have a limited set of objects, scenes and actions (2002a, p. 330), these realizations inevitably vary from reader to reader. That, however, is not contraproductive, according to Johansen; in spite imaginization is “subjective and personal”, individual realizations or “mental images” are different but similar in readers’ apprehensions of the text (2002a, p. 330).

Let us explore imaginization in Slovak and North American texts. In “Zuzanka Hraškovie”, Hviezdoslav uses many icons that may serve as symbols: the beaten child symbolizes innocence and harmlessness. Her inferior position is further specified by other icons, i.e. symbols such as her humiliating peripheral location (in the corner, where the broom has a place), insufficient food (pieces of stale bread), vulgar names her step-mother calls her and dirty appearance. The child is a total outsider; even though she has a father, she is lonely in her suffering (her father plays down her misery and other people are willing but powerless to interfere). The child only takes refuge at her mother’s grave (another symbol of suffering), where she eventually dies. The fury of the stepmother is further symbolically expressed by her unbound verbal and physical aggression and intensified her archaic cacophonic language (Hviezdoslav’s neologisms). The figure of the stepmother symbolizes near-demonic and reasonless evil. All these symbolic meanings accentuate the role of suffering that entered the Slovak collective consciousness in this poem. Suffering is personified in the passive figure of an innocent orphan who cannot and does not fight back. The image of underserved suffering is stressed by extensive system of symbols – child-sufferer, a minor trespass (dirty legs) excessively punished by severe beating. The sufferer is literally and symbolically innocent; what is more, he or she is a subject to false and ungrounded accusations, which he or she is severely punished for; however, he or she does not counteract and remains passive.

Contrastively, semiotic analysis of iconicized suffering in American culture forming texts reveals many more symbols that point to more active role of the sufferer. Even Wheatley’s poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America”, written before the fight for independence and long before the Civil Rights Movement, reveals a much more proactive and free spirit: the revolt lies in the symbolic meanings of italicized words (Pagan, Saviour, Christians, Negroes, Cain), indicating their ironic, reverse meanings. Africa is a “Pagan” land only from the perspective of the white colonizer; in fact, the native cultures were extensively religious. “Saviour” may also be meant ironically –God, observing miseries of the African-Americans is inactive and thus does not serve as any kind of “Salvation”. Even a stronger tone of irony is felt in the use of the word “Christians”; for the Christian imperative is to love one’s neighbor of any race. Cain conventionally symbolizes evil (so does the “diabolic” and “sable” black color); here, however, he is mentioned ironically, as the white man’s construct of blackness equaling evil. Contrastively, the “Angelic train” symbolizes purity and goodness, which however come only after one’s death. Symbolism in the poem is obvious: the source of the speaker’s (the Afro-Americans’) suffering is one’s race that for the white oppressor indicates Pagan, diabolic and dangerous, blasphemous and generally inferior qualities.

Even though Walt Whitman was closely connected to the two burning issues of his era – war and slavery, most of his poetry has an artistic paradigm very different from Wheatley – they deny suffering. Instead, they are indicative of the positive. “Leaves of Grass” and especially “Song of Myself” suggest a way how to avoid suffering by celebrating and immersing oneself into the uniqueness of the Self. “Song of Myself”, according to Vivien Pollak, “promises to eradicate sickness, suffering, and death.” (Pollak, 2007, p. 257) The poem is a negation of suffering; indeed, reading “Song of Myself” generates a multitude of icons, indicating positivity; for this study we limit ourselves to three most illustrative ones: the song, the grass and the God.

Already the very initial opening word “sing” (I sing of Myself) in the poem is symbolic; unlike narrative, which (in the Western tradition) is organized and logical, a song is free, unbound, out of regulations and so is Whitman’s free verse. The semantic “typical realization” of the song-motif opening the poem is iconic, i.e. symbolizes freedom and democracy that will affect the tone of the whole poem. Folsom agrees, “This was poetry […] a true literary declaration of independence, but also a contract between the author and the reader, between the I and the you: “[W]hat I assume you shall assume” (Folsom, 2007, p. 15). This cooperative and sharing atmosphere is a navigational emotion through the whole poem; Whitman himself feels at one with *kosmos*, with the Other, with himself and repeatedly with democracy: “I give the sign of democracy; By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms.” (Whitman, 2019, p. 1)

Angelou’s tone and subject-matter differs from Whitman; in her poem “Still I Rise” she counts specific injustices (being written down in history with lies, being trod on in dirt, being shot with words, being killed with hatefulness). Angelou mentions black history “in pain” and “shame”. The source of suffering, just like in Wheatley’s poem is race-bound, yet, the reader cannot fail to notice the strong determined, almost optimistic tone of the poem, intensified by many symbols. Angelou rises like a “black ocean” and she is not afraid of the word “black”, returning to it its original non-judgmental meaning in the sense “black is beautiful”. The readers also feel the strength and authority: “I bear the tide”. The speaker of the poem is not a passive sufferer; instead, he or she is the active agent, the one who controls the situation from now on. Angelou also effectively uses unconventional, private symbols. She wishes to rise “like dust”, using “dust”, a traditional symbol of worthless dirt as a miraculous entity that is given new enhanced abilities. The overall tone of the poem completely divorces itself from “moaning” and “groaning”; the reader does not sense any tones of “undeserved” suffering; instead, they sense a strong urge to pro-activeness.

Semiotic analysis of iconic imagination in both Slovak and North-American discourse generated a multitude of icons, i.e. literary symbols of suffering, creating mental images and intensifying the reader’s experience. Whereas the Slovak poems contain passive symbols (beaten child, imprisoned youth, tortured old woman), the symbolism of the selected American poems (I sing of Myself, I rise like a black ocean, I may join the angelic train, I celebrate myself) is more active and activating.

1. **Diagrammatization**

Diagrammatization is “abstractive, systematic and concerned with the totality of the text, not focusing on details”; it looks at a text as an “algebraic structure” (Johansen, 2002a, p. 212). Johansen specifies, “During conversation or reading, (the reader or speaker) simply [does not] translate all parts of the text into still or moving pictures (i.e. images), nevertheless, we understand it (Johansen, 2002a, p. 332). Johansen further notes, “Unlike symbolic analysis, diagrammatization represents a more global view of a text” (Johnsen, 2002b, p. 332). Semiotic diagrammatization of the selected texts requires a global understanding of them without paying attention to individual icons. In a way, diagrammatization is an opposition to imaginization.

In the corpus of Slovak texts, diagrammatically, suffering is repeatedly epitomized as a distinguisher, something that elevates the Slovaks and distinct them from other nations. It is long term, endless, an “ordeal”. Suffering is what makes the Slovaks exceptional and God-like. For example, Chalupka muses on the exceptional nature of the Slovaks: “We [The Turks] managed to have victory over the Hungarians but not the Slovaks; therefore, the Slovaks were taken into slavery7”. These lines show the extraordinary stubbornness and sustainability of the Slovaks who cannot be beaten, just taken captive – and suffer captivity. Similar tone of Slovak exceptionality is present in the poem “Branko”. Branko is a youth who is flawless, except for loving his nation “too much” (Chalupka, 2009a, p. 1). His exceptionality is stressed by his physical strength (he alone can beat twelve enemies) and further intensified by the fact God is on his side. Even though Branko fatalistically accepts God’s will, he bravely, tragically fights with his opponents. His death is thus heroic, almost God-like. The tone of the poem is pompous and celebratory for the best youth of the generation will have die. “Zuzanka Hraškovie”, on the other hand, does not give such strong impression of heroism; the orphan is exceptional only in her loneliness and ability to bear the unbearable.

The diagrammatic interpretation of the global impression of Wheatley’s poem stresses the aversive tone of the poem. In spite of the poem being written in 1773, Wheatley, herself a slave, does not sound subdued or submissive. The speaker proves her courage using many words and lines ironically, (Pagan, Christian, Saviour) and addressing them to both African-American and white readers. What is more, in the last couplet, she gives a command (Remember) to the white Christians. Wheatley’s African-American sufferer is not passive when subjected to racial injustice. The tone of the poem is much more active and activating compared to that of Hviezdoslav’s “Zuzanka Hraškovie”; also it does not support heroism and heroic death. Instead, the author provides a warning to the oppressors that one day Negroes and whites may reunite on the “angelic train”. In this, Wheatley is visionary of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement that led to racial equality in the US.

Diagrammatically, Whitman is also proactive; he does not count his sorrows, instead he completely ignores them and calls for self-revelation. A literary critic Ed Folsom in his study “What We’re Still Learning about Leaves of Grass” also writes on the overall proactive spirit and total absence of negativity in the poem, “Whitman always sought to find a way to value the self without de-valuing others, to value others without devaluing the self, to balance pride and sympathy.” (Folsom, 2007, p. 2)

Angelou, in the similar fashion, draws a firm line between her and her past. At the same time, the “I” of the poem stands for the whole African-American race; “Maya Angelou used the word “You” to Whites and “Me” to herself as black race”, Permetasari notices (2016, p. 163). Divorcing herself and her “race” from the negative “history”, Angelou concentrates on the present of the African-American, on their potential (rise like dust, like an ocean). Interestingly, she only uses the future tense (I’ll rise) in the initial stanzas of the poem; the last, strongest stanza repeatedly switches to the present tense (I rise) as for Angelou, the future is happening now. That is perhaps also the author’s legacy to the reader – the change is happening now, you are the agent of the change. Triple repetition of the same line (I rise) at the end of the poem confirms the *status quo* of this change. Unlike in Slovak poems, from the diagrammatical point of view, the tone of Wheatley, Whitman and Angelou is activating, giving instructions of how to live better, how to actively contribute to one’s wellbeing.

1. **Allegorization**

Allegorization is relating of elements and relationships of the universe represented in the text to other conceptual structures (Johansen, 2002a, p. 205). In this fashion, the political interpretation of the Slovak poetry is almost self-navigational. In Hviezdoslav’s poem “Zuzanka Hraškovie”, the icon – beaten child – allegorically represents the tortured Slovak nation that is not helped by anybody – neither by those who can nor by those who want to or even by God himself. The stepmother allegorically represents the enemies of the Slovak nation – the Turks or the Hungarians. The same allegorical paradigm may be seen in “Branko” and “Mor ho!” – the sufferers are either individual (Branko) or collective (youth in Mor ho!), in both cases they represent an opposition to the Other. Allegorically, certain isolation of the Slovaks is stressed in all three poems – those who can help the Slovaks are either indifferent or powerless. Further, the “destiny” of the Slovaks lies in victimization; they are the innocent, those “to whom the wrong is done”.

In the American culture-forming texts, the argument is the opposite: allegorically, the sufferers are also the “doers”. Wheatley serves as the prophet of change in the last couplet: “Remember, *Christians, Negros,* black as *Cain,* May be refined and join th’ angelic train.” (Wheatley, 2019, p. 1) The whole poem, however, serves as an allegory; the savage and allegedly pagan and uncivilized “blacks” are, in fact competent in worldly, biblical and moral affairs. The proof lies in Wheatley’s poem, in the very fact a “pagan” savage slave-girl is capable of exquisite, well-articulated poetry, using elaborate metaphors (angelic train), allusions (Cain), puns and irony (sable race).

Angelou’s poem “Still I Rise” is also an allegory of white man’s history maneuvering. In her lines “you may write me down in history”, the author addresses the white man’s version(s) of history, traditionally underrepresenting women and minorities, Permetasari points out (2016, p. 163). “Song of Myself” also places the speaker in the opposition with the world, which is negative, causing and bearing multiple forms of sufferings (physical, mental, religious, sexual and many others). Myself (Subject) is in direct opposition to the Object, it suppresses and denies it. Each of the selected canon-shaping North American poems is thus political, critical in the allegoric manner.

**Conclusion**

Iconization refers to the term or rather a concept derived from the term of icon in the classic meaning of Charles Peirce, meaning “portrayal, representation, semiotic model of the world in a text” (Peirce, 1931–1936, pp. 49-58). National literatures are mostly very diverse both synchronically and diachronically, it is indeed ambitious to grasp a single tone or mode in them. Nevertheless, there are certain re-occurring patterns that tend to appeal to the readership regardless of the current literary taste or mood. Čechová and Plesník explored this idea and suggest what they call archnarratives (Čechová and Plesník, 2016b). We did not attempt such ambitious project in this study as to set which texts are archtexts or archnarratives; instead, we focused on those texts that are traditionally presented as representative of certain national traits or features. With the use of representative texts from Slovak and North American Literature, comparative semiotic analysis reveals that suffering plays a very distinctive role in both cultures: In Slovak culture-forming texts, suffering is symbolically depicted as undeserved, ungrounded, non-pragmatic and irrational. Diagrammatically it is conceptualized as a distinguisher, something that elevates the Slovaks and distinct them from other nations, making them almost “God-like”. Such comprehension of suffering only allows its long term or endless nature; it is a kind of “ordeal”. Allegorically, the Slovaks in poetry are portrayed as the good ones, the sufferers, whereas the evil may be understood allegorically as the Other. Needless to say, the allegorical interpretation of suffering may be politically dangerous. Nationalists often abuse the idea of a country as a “sufferer” for their own goals.

In North American key documents and works of art, suffering is symbolically depicted, as coming from an outside source and here it is undeserved and unjust. Diagrammatically, suffering is not a distinguisher; it is either suppressed (Whitman) or serves as an incentive for a change (Wheatley, Angelou). Allegorically, suffering, however serious, is portrayed within the thought-frame of the “American Dream” as a temporary discomfort necessary to achieve one’s goals. Few works of art stress its long-term nature; instead, they stress its temporariness and the ability of people to overcome it. Suffering is not connected with some divine nature and indicating the exclusivity of a nation.

Semiotic analysis of selected representative texts forming the cultural consciousness of each country helps us to understand the gist of national literatures. Icons creating “individual realizations”, i.e. literary symbols, overall diagrammatic structure and allegorical interpretation of icons contained in the research corpus point out to the most intensive emotions navigating each nation through its history and establishing its basic axiological and moral patterns. North American literature with its culture-shaping texts has been defined as follows: “American literature, as a whole, depicts the diverse and revolutionary forthcoming of a nation to what it is today. The history of America is gifted with making itself from nothing, building on new and radical expectations, and rivaling the rest of the world for respect and independence. At one time, this ability to completely remake a country was viewed as a burden and the constant hardship and suffering it took to create this country is everything American literature is now known for across the globe. […] To define American literature is to recognize how harsh, detached, and insensitive it stands, and that it cannot even be defined fully…” (Burns, 2019, p. 1)

Experts divert from such ambitious definitions when talking about the gist of Slovak literature. However, we can refer to Burns’ thoughts in attempt to define the gist of Slovak literature: it is also literature that, via extensive symbolism, diagrammatization and allegory, tries to grasp the diverse and revolutionary forthcoming of a nation to what it is today and redefine the country and its values through hardship it went through. The history of Slovakia is also gifted with making itself from nothing, struggling with defining its own (perhaps not so radical) expectations, and rivaling the Other; however, the country often places itself into the position of the passive sufferer, somebody who bears suffering to excess and counteracts only in most extreme circumstances. These paradigms translate themselves to everyday conduct of the people and nations in debate (Slovaks and the Americans); it is thus essential to understand their historical and artistic roots as well as decode their semiotic codes to understand more about the role each nation attributes to itself. For these icons may constitute all what the countries are, were and will be.

**Endnotes:**

1 Some scholars (Čechová et al, 2016a; Čechová, Plesník, 2016b) use the term “archnarrative” (Slovak: arcinaratív). This term complies with out understanding of culture-forming texts. The definition of archnarrative is given as, “… it is a story which, from the point of view of development of various cultures, their subsystems etc. has a fundamental meaning. It can also reveal certain constituent determinants of human dewelling in the world in the Heideggerian sense of Dasein.”

2 Unless stated otherwise, all translations of Slovak texts and poetry come from Peter Petro’s 1995 publication *A History of Slovak Literature*).

3 English translation by: Aquilas, 2019.

4 Branko and Turčín Poničan were first published in “Spevy Sama Chalúpky” (Vocals of Samo Chalúpka) in 1868.

5 „Bulo dobre — ale dávno: žil na svete Slovák slávno; oj, žil si on vo slobode, ako ryba v tichej vode…” (English translation by the autor)

6 “...Hromy divo bijú, zastavme ich bratia, veď sa ony stratia, Slováci ožijú…” (English translation by: Slovak national anthem, 2019).

7 “Maďarov sme pobili, a Slováci sa nedali, preto sme ich zrabovali…” (English translation by the author)

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**Author’s address and e-mail**:

*Doc. PaedDr. Jana Javorčíková, PhD.*

*Matej Bel University, Faculty of Arts*

*Department of English and American Studies*

*40 Tajovského, Banská Bystrica, 97401*

*Slovakia*

*jana.javorcikova(at)umb.sk*

*(0)421-(0)48-4465032*

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