

## **The concept of the literary image in poetics: historical evolutions and theoretical foundations**

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**Abstract:** This article examines the evolution of the concept of the artistic image within literary theory and aesthetics, tracing its development from classical philosophy to contemporary critical thought. Beginning with Aristotle's notion of *mimesis* as the idealized reflection of reality, the study considers Hegel's interpretation of the image as the unity of content and form and Belinsky's view of the image as the living embodiment of abstract thought. The twentieth century introduced new perspectives: structuralist and semiotic theories (Saussure, Barthes, Lotman, Eco) redefined the image as a system of signs and cultural codes, while post-structuralist and deconstructionist approaches (Derrida) emphasized its open-ended, dynamic, and multilayered nature. The analysis demonstrates that the artistic image cannot be confined to a single meaning but remains a versatile and evolving construct that generates its own reality through the interplay of signs. This conceptual trajectory reflects broader shifts in aesthetics and highlights the enduring significance of the image in understanding literature, culture, and human creativity.

**Keywords:** Artistic image; poetics; aesthetics; mimesis; structuralism; semiotics; intertextuality; deconstruction; cultural codes.

**Introduction.** In literary scholarship, the concept of the image constitutes one of the central scientific categories. Defining what an image represents is essential for understanding both the very nature of literature and the aesthetic value of a literary work. The image serves as a core component of artistic creation, embodying the subjective perception of existence and its transformation into artistic expression. Within a literary text, the image emerges through the author's reinterpretation of life events, personalities, phenomena, and ideas, reworked in accordance with the laws of art and presented in an aesthetically shaped form.

The literary image is not a simple reproduction of reality; rather, it represents an artistic generalization formed through the writer's aesthetic selection, ideals, and worldview. The origins of this concept may be traced back to antiquity. The Greek

philosopher Aristotle's *Poetics* is among the earliest treatises to articulate the philosophical and aesthetic essence of the artistic image. In this seminal work, Aristotle views the image not only as the primary element of art but also as a crucial means of comprehending and systematizing human experience. He defines the artistic image in terms of *mimesis* – an imitation of nature and life which simultaneously discloses their ideal essence. For Aristotle, the image constitutes an inseparable aspect of the object itself.

According to Aristotle, “In literature, the only image that can ascend to the level of character is the image of man. Not every image becomes a character. A character essentially embodies four objectives: the nobility of the hero, courage or manliness (primarily associated with men), credibility – that is, lifelikeness and consistency.” [1, 43] Thus, the image is not merely a reflection of reality but that which defines the essence of the object and ensures its completeness. “Reality is the foundation of the artistic image, that is, its primary form. A literary work does not aim to reproduce this or that image in a simple, direct manner. Rather, a work of art must always compel us to compare the artistic image with its foundation.” [2, 103] So, the artistic image is not a mere copy of the real world, but an ideal form that expresses its essence. Aristotle's reflections on the image profoundly influenced the literary and aesthetic thought of subsequent periods and remain relevant even today. In the development of Western European aesthetic thought on the concept of the image, G. Hegel's *Aesthetics* played a decisive role. For Hegel, the artistic image represented the complete correspondence between an idea and its material manifestation — the embodiment of the idea in a concrete form. Hegel interpreted the image not merely as an appearance or a copy, but as the unity of content (idea) and form. According to him, beauty in art is “the perfect expression of the idea through the artistic image.” [7, 225] Hegel's aesthetic views on the image made a significant contribution to the development of European and world literary theory. In Russian literary scholarship, Vissarion Belinsky deeply explored the philosophical and aesthetic essence of the image. He defined the image as “the living and complete expression of an abstract thought,” emphasizing in particular its qualities of concreteness and typicality. As Belinsky wrote: “*Poetry, or artistic literature, does not think scientifically or logically, but imagistically. The artist thinks in images; he perceives truth not as abstraction, but as a living synthesis of concrete, individual states, and he presents it as such.*” [4, 308]

In twentieth-century European literary theory, the rise of structuralism (F. de Saussure, C. Lévi-Strauss, R. Jakobson) and later semiotics (R. Barthes, J. Lotman, U. Eco) shifted the study of the artistic image beyond the framework of “reflection,” directing it toward an analysis of the image as a sign and a system. Based on the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes regarded the artistic image as a complex semiotic system – a set of signs that convey meaning. In his view, the image is not merely a copy of the real world but also a cultural construct that generates meaning. As Barthes emphasized, the literary image is not an imitation of reality, but rather a system that produces its own reality. While Saussure had interpreted language as a system of signs, Barthes applied this concept to literature, treating the artistic image as a network of codes and signs that transmit meaning. For Barthes, the image is a “cultural construction” [3, 51] that does not simply reproduce reality artistically, but reconstructs it on the basis of new signs. His approach also highlighted the role of the reader in the reception of a text. The image, therefore, is no longer confined to the author’s artistic intention but functions as a system of signs that exists within a cultural context. In this sense, the image is not a mere reflective copy, but a cultural sign that actively generates meaning. These approaches laid the groundwork for intertextual and discursive perspectives. However, within such theoretical frameworks, the referential connection between reality and the artistic image (the relationship between the image and the reality it denotes) tends to weaken, which raises the risk of neglecting the socio-aesthetic dimensions of the image. Yuri Lotman, the leading figure of the Moscow School of Semiotics, also interpreted the image as a cultural code and a semiotic space. According to his theory, a literary work exists at the boundary between different languages (cultural codes), and the image emerges as a product of this borderline phenomenon. Lotman wrote: *“The functional assimilation of a conventional sign to an iconic sign leads to interesting consequences for literature. Although the material of natural language is conventional, it is so well understood by the whole society that its conventionality becomes imperceptible against the background of other, specialized languages. In this process, a secondary iconic sign arises (corresponding to the concept of the ‘image’ in traditional literary theory).”* [8, 55 – 56] In Lotman’s view, the image differs fundamentally from the ordinary word. A word is merely a conventional sign, the agreed-upon name of a thing. For instance, when we say “tree,” everyone imagines a tree, though the word itself does not resemble an actual tree. The image,

however, emerges when the word is used in an artistic manner, transforming into a representation.

After Lotman, within the frameworks of post-structuralism and deconstruction, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida interpreted the image not as a sign with stable meaning, but as a sign in a state of play. According to him, images in a text never possess a final or fixed meaning; rather, they exist in an endless network of relations with other signs. In his famous essay “*Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*”, Derrida wrote: “*The central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification ad infinitum.*” [5, 351 – 370] This means that meaning is never fully present or finalized; it is constantly deferred and generated through differences and relations among signs, making the artistic image an open-ended and dynamic construct. The image never possesses a single, fixed meaning; rather, it remains in continuous interaction with other images, symbols, and signs, constantly renewing its content. Therefore, the artistic image always remains an open, multilayered, and dynamic construct, generating its own reality through the play of meanings.

## Conclusion

The historical development of the artistic image reveals its fundamental role in literary theory and aesthetics. Aristotle viewed it as *mimesis*, an idealized reflection of reality, while Hegel emphasized the unity of content and form. Belinsky deepened this view by defining the image as the living embodiment of abstract thought. In the twentieth century, structuralist and semiotic approaches (Saussure, Barthes, Lotman, Eco) redefined the image as a system of signs and cultural codes. Barthes saw it as a cultural construction that generates meaning, while Lotman described it as a boundary phenomenon shaped by multiple codes. Later, Derrida’s deconstructionist perspective portrayed the image as an open-ended sign, never fixed but always in play with other signs. Thus, the artistic image cannot be reduced to a single meaning; it remains open, multilayered, and dynamic, creating its own reality through the play of meanings. This evolution reflects the broader shifts in literary and aesthetic thought and affirms the image as a central, ever-relevant category of artistic creativity

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