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The Artistic Image of the Kazakh Steppe in K. Paustovsky's Prose

Abstract. In contemporary humanities, there is growing interest in understanding artistic space as a cultural and symbolic code capable of representing not only topographical but also axiological categories. Within this context, the image of the steppe – a geographical environment bearing archetypal, national, and ethical meanings – occupies a special place. This article analyzes the image of the steppe in K. Paustovsky's prose as an artistic representation of Kazakhstan. The aim is to identify the poetic, semantic, and cultural functions of the steppe image in Paustovsky's short stories "Trial by Desert", "Night in Dossor", and "Argument in the Railway Carriage". The study focuses on the evolution of the image of the steppe from a space of existential trial to a space of human participation and intercultural dialogue, revealing the dynamics of its artistic and cultural functions of the steppe space in Paustovsky's works devoted to Kazakhstan. The study is based on an interdisciplinary methodology that includes poetic-structural, motif, chronotopic, and symbolic-semiotic analysis. The results show that in Paustovsky's work the steppe functions as an independent participant in the narrative – an animated space endowed with the functions of ethical insight and cultural memory. This allows us to speak of the steppe not as a background element, but as a cultural and conceptual category capable of structuring the narrative and representing national identity in twentieth-century literature. The value of the present study lies in its disclosure of an artistic model of the steppe as a cultural concept expressing the author's humanistic views. The findings have practical significance for courses in literary studies, for intercultural communication in teaching Russian and Kazakh literature, and for the study of the poetics of space and time and the chronotope of identity.

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Keywords: narrative, chronotope, historical memory, intercultural dialogue, concept.

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К. Паустовский прозасындағы Қазақстан даласының көркемдік бейнесі

Аңдатпа. Қазіргі гуманитарлық зерттеулерде көркемдік кеңістікті тек топографиялық емес, аксиологиялық категорияларды бейнелеуге қабілетті мәдени және символдық код ретінде түсінуге қызығушылық артып келеді. Бұл тұрғыда архетиптік, ұлттық және этикалық мәндерді бойына жинақтаған географиялық кеңістік ретіндегі дала образы ерекше орын алады. Мақала К. Паустовский прозасындағы дала бейнесін Қазақстанның көркемдік образы ретінде талдауға арналған. Зерттеу мақсаты

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– К.Паустовскийдің «Шөл сынағы», «Доссордағы түн» және «Вагондағы әңгіме» әңгімелеріндегі дала бейнесінің поэтикалық, семантикалық және мәдени функцияларын анықтау. Талдауда дала бейнесінің эволюциясы адамдардың өзара ықпалдасуына негіз болатын кеңістік әрі мәдениетаралық диалогты қалыптастыратын көркем орта ретінде қарастырылады. Зерттеу поэтикалық-құрылымдық, мотивтік, хронотопиялық және символдық-семиотикалық талдауды қамтитын пәнаралық әдістемеге негізделген. Зерттеу нәтижелері К. Паустовский прозасында дала бейнесінің оқиға өрбуіне белсенді ықпал ететін дербес көркемдік компонент ретінде көрінетінін көрсетеді. Дала мұнда этикалық таным мен мәдени жады қызметін атқаратын жанды кеңістік ретінде сипатталады. Бұл даланы тек фондық элемент ретінде емес, нарратив құрылымын қалыптастыратын және XX ғасыр әдебиетіндегі ұлттық бірегейлікті репрезентациялайтын менталдық-мәдени категория ретінде қарастыруға мүмкіндік береді. Осы зерттеудің құндылығы даланың көркемдік моделін автордың гуманистік көзқарастарын білдіретін мәдени тұжырымдама ретінде ашады. Зерттеу нәтижелерінің практикалық маңызы оларды әдебиеттану пәндерінде, орыс және қазақ әдебиетін оқыту барысында мәдениетаралық байланыстарды түсіндіруде, сондай-ақ әдеби кеңістік пен уақыт поэтикасын және бірегейлік хронотопын зерттеуде пайдалануға болатындығымен айқындалады.

Алғыс: Зерттеу BR27101897 «Қазақстан әдебиеттануы, фольклортануы және өнертануы экожүйесінің цифрлық трансформациясы: пәнаралық зерттеулер» жобасы аясында орындалды.

Кілт сөздер: нарратив, хронотоп, тарихи жады, мәдениетаралық диалог, концепт.

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Художественный образ казахской степи в прозе К. Паустовского

Аннотация. В современных гуманитарных исследованиях возрастает интерес к осмыслению художественного пространства как культурного и символического кода, способного репрезентировать не только топографические, но и аксиологические категории. Особое место в этом контексте занимает образ степи – географической среды, несущей в себе архетипические, национальные и этические смыслы. Статья посвящена анализу образа степи в прозе К. Паустовского как художественная репрезентация образа Казахстана. Целью исследования является выявление поэтических, семантических и культурологических функций образа степи в рассказах К. Паустовского «Испытание пустыней», «Ночь в Доссоре» и «Спор в вагоне». В центре исследования находится эволюция образа степи – от пространства экзистенциального испытания к пространству человеческой сопричастности и межкультурного диалога, что позволяет проследить динамику его художественных и культурных функций в произведениях К. Паустовского, посвящённых Казахстану. В фокусе анализа эволюция степи к пространству сопричастности и к полю межкультурного диалога. Исследование строится на междисциплинарной методологии, включающей поэтико-структурный, мотивный, хронотопический и символично-семиотический анализ. Результаты исследования демонстрируют: степь у К. Паустовского выступает как самостоятельный участник повествования – одушевлённое пространство, обладающее функциями этического прозрения и культурной памяти. Это позволяет говорить о степи не как о фоновом элементе, а как о ментально-культурной категории, способной структурировать нарратив и репрезентировать национальную идентичность в литературе XX века. Ценность настоящего исследования заключается в том, что оно раскрывает художественную модель степи как культурного концепта, выражающего гуманистические взгляды автора. Практическая значимость результатов проявляется в возможности их применения в литературоведческих курсах, межкультурной коммуникации в процессе преподавания русской и казахской литературы, при изучении поэтики пространства и времени, хронотопики идентичности.

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Ключевые слова: нарратив, хронотоп, историческая память, межкультурный диалог, гуманизм, степь, пустыня, концепт.

1. Introduction

Artistic space in literature is not neutral. It not only records external reality, but also becomes a bearer of value codes, a marker of identity, and a means of cultural self-expression. In this context, the steppe is significant as a cultural symbol deeply rooted in historical, ethnographic, and existential memory. In Kazakh literature, the steppe is an integral part of collective memory, a locus sacer of national mythology, a space of participation, loss, and rebirth. In the Russian literary tradition – especially in the prose of the twentieth century – the steppe was often treated as an “other” territory: mastered or unmastered, romanticized or demythologized, yet invariably significant as a sign of contact with alterity.

In Russian prose, including K. Paustovsky’s work, the Kazakh steppe is represented as a semiotically saturated space that functions not only as a landscape backdrop but also as an artistic-philosophical code. Papers by participants of the International Academic Conference in Moscow marking the 130th anniversary of Paustovsky’s birth were devoted to “the basic concepts of his artistic world, the literary and cultural context, and the reception of Paustovsky’s work” (*The Creative Legacy of Konstantin Paustovsky in the 21st Century*, 2023: 1). Yet not a single paper or presentation addressed the Kazakh steppe or the theme of Kazakhstan, nor was this topic addressed at previous conferences. To the best of our knowledge, no dissertations specifically devoted to this subject have been defended either in Russia or in Kazakhstan.

Despite the sustained scholarly interest in Paustovsky’s poetics, his image of the steppe associated with the Kazakh space has remained on the periphery of academic attention. Both domestic and foreign studies have focused mainly on the writer’s “sea” cycles, on urban scenes, or on natural landscapes of central Russia, while texts connected with the Kazakhstani chronotope have been mentioned only episodically or within broad overviews. At the same time, contemporary literary scholarship has increasingly approached artistic space through the concepts of literary geography, the poetics of landscape, cultural memory, and imagology. These approaches make it possible to consider landscape not only as a descriptive element but also as a bearer of cultural meanings and value systems. However, the image of the Kazakh steppe in Paustovsky’s prose has not yet been examined from this integrated perspective. Yet it is precisely in the writer’s works selected as the object of this study that a unique image of the steppe is formed – as a space of ethical transformation, cultural participation, and historical memory. It is important and timely to “reveal the specifics of interpreting the Kazakh theme in the prose of a twentieth-century Russian writer whose life and work were linked to Alma-Ata and Western Kazakhstan” (Ananyeva, Isaeva, 2025: 236).

The relevance of the study is determined by several factors. First, by the growing interest in modern humanities in studying landscape as text, as chronotope, and as a bearer of narrative and ethnic identity. Second, by the need to comprehend the mechanisms of Kazakhstan’s cultural representation in Soviet-period Russian literature not from a position of external exoticization, but as a space of participation and dialogue. Third, by the

insufficient exploration of the steppe in Paustovsky's work at the intersection of poetics, anthropology, semiotics, and cultural memory.

The practical significance of the article lies in the possibility of incorporating the proposed interpretation into broader research programs on intercultural interaction, postcolonial literature, and chronotopic analysis, as well as into educational courses on twentieth-century Russian and Kazakh literature.

The object of the study is the artistic image of the steppe in K. Paustovsky's prose. The subject is the poetic, semantic, and cultural-symbolic functions of the steppe within the narrative structure of the stories "Trial by Desert", "Night in Dossor", and "Argument in the Railway Carriage". Taken together, these three texts constitute a coherent analytical corpus that makes it possible to trace the gradual transformation of the artistic functions of the steppe. Their comparison is based on common narrative, chronotopic, motif and symbolic characteristics, which reveal different stages in the representation of Kazakhstan within Paustovsky's artistic world. The aim of the research is to identify how the steppe in Paustovsky's prose functions as a symbolic space of Kazakhstan, representing key categories of national identity, the ethics of participation, and existential transformation. To achieve this aim, the study addresses the following objectives: to define the theoretical and methodological foundations for analyzing artistic landscape as a cultural and semiotic phenomenon; to identify the evolution of the steppe image in Paustovsky's stories and its axiological and narrative functions; to establish how the steppe in Paustovsky's poetics serves as a mediator between Russian and Kazakh cultures; and to develop an interpretative model of the steppe as an ethnocultural code that reveals the humanistic potential of his prose.

The hypothesis is that the steppe in the Russian writer's prose is not merely an aesthetic category but a universal semiotic construct that allows Kazakhstan to be represented as a space of inner transformation, participation, and cultural dialogue. In this process, the usual binary "nature – human" is dissolved, and the steppe becomes a structural element of an ethical-anthropological narrative. "Recognizing the diversity of the modern world as an integral part of cultural dialogue helps to form a respectful attitude toward the heritage of our culture as a value belonging to all humanity" (Kulbayeva, Ananyeva, Mizankbekov, 2025: 99).

Thus, this study is aimed not only at identifying the poetic function of the steppe in Paustovsky's work, but also at analyzing how the literary text can actualize space as a bearer of meanings and cultural participation. We consider his prose an important link in the formation of a humanistic view of Kazakhstan in twentieth-century Russian literature.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Materials

The research is based on an analysis of the short stories "Trial by Desert", "Night in Dossor", and "Argument in the Railway Carriage" in which the image of the steppe functions as a meaning-forming element that determines not only the artistic space of the narrative, but also creates a deep axiological layer. The literary analysis of these works, considered as a single analytical corpus, makes it possible to explore the evolving artistic functions of the steppe in Paustovsky's prose. Throughout the texts, the steppe emerges

as a culturally meaningful image that not only shapes the representation of Kazakhstan but also conveys ethical values and reflects the interaction between human beings and the surrounding landscape.

Primary attention is paid to textual structure, the organization of the system of images, and the functioning of motifs and symbols connected to the concept of the steppe. Central to the analysis are the linguistic means by which the author shapes the landscape as an artistically significant space: metaphors, epithets, syntactic constructions, and compositional devices that embed the steppe into a moral and philosophical context.

2.2 Methods

In the philological analysis we rely on poetic-structural analysis, aimed at identifying the functions of the steppe within the composition of the stories and its role in organizing artistic time and space. The works of V.V. Vinogradov, M.M. Bakhtin, and T.V. Zolotukhina-Abolina reveal the semantic significance of landscape and chronotope as form-giving elements of narrative. For Vinogradov, it was important to show “what constitutes the unity of a work’s style” (Vinogradov, 2000: 322).

Isolation or detachment, according to Bakhtin, frees the content “from certain necessary connections with the unity of nature and the unity of the ethical event of being” (Bakhtin, 1975: 32). Motif analysis makes it possible to trace how the symbolism of the steppe is formed through recurring semantic constants (road, solitude, memory, participation, overcoming). Attention is given to the artistic chronotope, and a symbolic-semiotic approach is applied, necessary for understanding the steppe as a stable artistic sign bearing cultural and philosophical meaning. The author’s personality and the personalities of the literary characters are considered “as part of the being of culture” (Zolotukhina-Abolina, 2024: 36).

The comparative analysis of the three stories is carried out according to four common criteria (1) the narrative function of the steppe; (2) the organization of artistic space and chronotope; (3) the system of recurrent motifs; and (4) the symbolic representation of Kazakhstan. The consistent application of these criteria makes it possible to identify the evolution of the steppe image across the selected corpus.

The novelty of the approach lies in analyzing the steppe not as a static element of description, but as a dynamic artistic category that can transform depending on the internal logic of Paustovsky’s narrative.

3. Discussion

I.A. Letokho considers the specificity of Paustovsky’s short prose: “The author’s concept of personality was formed on the basis of the writer’s philosophical-aesthetic ideas about the indissoluble unity of nature, the human being, and creativity” (Letokho, 2009: 12).

In Paustovsky’s “Trial by Desert” the steppe appears as the semantic core of the narrative, organizing the artistic space. In the logic of the Russian realist tradition, going back to Turgenev and Bunin, landscape in Paustovsky is not a passive decoration. It is an active participant in the narrative, shaping the conditions of perception, the ethical perspective, and the value structure of the text. The steppe chronotope unfolds as a topos of testing: “sandy dust settled on everything”, “sand cracked between the teeth”, “the heat scorched my lungs and pressed on my brain”.

The poetics of the landscape depends on an alternation between extremely concrete description and symbolically charged imagery. To engineer Yablonsky, the desert is “dust, and again – nothing but dust. And gnats. And once more hot and salty dust”. A key motif is the mirage, an effect of wavering and optical deception: “The whole steppe... was flooded with dull, opaque water”; “the water kept running away from the car”. The driver, unaware of the term *mirage*, observes: “That’s nothing! Sometimes it’ll even show you a sea and a whole forest”.

A turning point in the organization of space comes at night in the steppe. The description slows smoothly: “It seemed the last silence had descended upon the earth”. “The constellations floated, barely revolving, around the invisible axis of the universe”. The steppe becomes not just a setting, but a space of “great silence”, where the hero comes into contact with the rhythm of time and the cosmos. Human individual being “is recognized as an ‘I’ through the prism of sociocultural ontology” (Zolotukhina-Abolina, 2024: 36).

The character’s inner movement proceeds from a naive, external gaze (“I was driving to get materials”) to an understanding of nature as a subject with ethical and aesthetic agency. He notes: “One must simply live, without trying to remember everything... then impressions will enter you directly”.

Crucially, the steppe for Paustovsky is not a destructive force. On the contrary, it shapes, educates, demands silence and inner work. The hero watches the sunset: “The sun was setting, but it clearly lingered... perhaps it wanted to see the thinnest thread of light”. This visual miniature, built on the almost imperceptible movement of light, leads the reader to understand the steppe as a milieu of overcoming and participation, where silence takes on the features of action. The landscape absorbs experience, dissolving the subjective into a common rhythm. The steppe’s property of being a symbolic mirror of human experience allows it to be interpreted as a space where the boundary between human and nature is not destroyed, but becomes the basis of a new ethical and aesthetic participation. Unlike the subsequent stories, the steppe here primarily functions as a space of existential trial, where personal experience becomes the basis for ethical transformation. This initial stage provides the starting point for the subsequent evolution of the steppe image in Paustovsky’s Kazakhstan- related prose.

If in that story the steppe is a space of ultimate trial that transforms the hero, then in “Night in Dossor” Paustovsky deliberately shifts the emphasis from struggle to participation, from heroic overcoming to rooted everyday life filled with the rhythm of labor, care, and the ethics of human presence. The steppe chronotope is constructed as a living, inhabited, and welcoming space saturated with ethnocultural and domestic codes that reveal deep forms of participation between human and landscape. The steppe is not opposed to the human but exists in conjunction with him, reflecting the historical realities of Kazakhstan during the Soviet period while preserving its cultural and ethical significance.

The characters do not battle it; they live in it, measuring their movements by its breathing. At the beginning of the story, the everyday environment is sketched: “A steady, springy wind worked with the persistence of a motor fan”, “the netting on the windows of the bachelors’ dormitory was arranged against the gnats”. This is a practice of co-existence

in which the desert becomes part of everyday life. The routine of the steppe settlement is fixed as a normative value. This approach fits into the tradition of twentieth-century Russian prose in which quotidian detail bears meaning (Bunin, Leonov, Astafyev).

The landscape is not separate from the human but is reflected in actions, glances, and words. When the old man goes out to work, the steppe seems to answer him: "The desert breathed in even yet shallow sighs", "the stars winked in the heavy sky as if trying to shake off the dust". Thus Paustovsky develops a way of including nature within the horizon of human perception. The steppe is animated; it accepts labor, presence, and pain. The monotony of the oil worker's labor is conveyed as: "Diesels sang plaintively", "the pumps snored drowsily". A chronotope of the steppe-as-home is created – poor, dusty, but alive. A promise gives hope: "In autumn we'll take down your mud-brick huts... bring reeds. It will be spacious". The steppe is transformed by human care.

A particularly meaningful episode concerns Said's family. The culmination is the scene where the old man comes into a mud-brick hut: "A light bulb smoldered in the room", "the poisonous reek drew the mouth tight like lye", "the boy asked for water". Paustovsky conveys the tragedy of the everyday – illness, poverty, ignorance, despair. The woman "believes the tabibs", "burns a felt mat", "applies dog meat". Turkic culture "is based on a ritual-mythological syncretism tightly interwoven with the people's practice – what Deleuze and Guattari call a system of local operations: various spells, incantations, laudations, appeals, etc." (Sagyntayev, Ananyeva, Valikova, Demchenko, 2024: 1409).

The author's task is to show how different types of knowledge coexist in the space of the steppe, and how the character assumes responsibility for a fragile world. The key becomes an act of care: "The doctor was surprised – Narzan mineral water was considered unheard-of luxury". It is decided to send the wife to Guryev and hospitalize the boy. Thus, the chronotope of "Night in Dossor" is organized as an everyday, ethically charged space in which the steppe loses the status of alien element and becomes an animated territory of participation. Through domestic details, speech, actions, gestures, smells, and sounds, Paustovsky creates a poetics of rooted presence, asserting that true kinship with the land is born not in heroism but in responsibility and care. In "Argument in the Railway Carriage", Paustovsky creates a polyphonic narrative space in which the steppe is not merely a geographical background but a symbolic arena for the collision of cultural identities, worldviews, and historical memory. The characters' dialogue acquires the traits of a deeply metaphorical conflict of interpretations. The opposition between viewing the steppe "from the outside" and "from within" forms the axis of the story's plot and ideas. The problem of "the mutual perception of peoples in the texts of culture" (Khorev, 2011: 62) is resolved in Paustovsky's artistic and publicistic works through depictions of Kazakh life seen by Russian travelers and by the author himself.

For the soldier, the steppe is "emptiness", "a land dried up by the sun". He wonders: "How can a song not fly far, brother, if in your land there's nothing but emptiness?".

Ismail perceives the steppe as a living space. His speech is confessional: "A Kazakh rides and sings... You can't see him in the steppe, he rides so far from you, but you can hear his voice right here, close... The song loves my country". This is a sacred chronotope. Steppe air, silence, and song form a single image of the Motherland. The connection of

nature with the poetic soul is vital: "Few peoples stand as close as the Kazakhs, face to face with virgin nature. This explains the Kazakhs' inclination toward poetry".

Under the steppe's influence, the soldier is transformed. "Low yellow mountains", "the pollen of wormwood", "the antiphony of invisible birds", "stars drawing near the earth" convince him of the diversity of flora and fauna. He admits: "There's spaciousness to live here. I want to live here, do you understand? When the war ends, I'll come...".

The author's sympathies are with Ismail. It is no coincidence that the narrator Paustovsky's alter ego – engages him in a trusting dialogue and heeds his request: "Write about this land. Let our soldiers read it at the front. And let each remember his own steppe...". Thus the Kazakh steppe is represented as a *locus memoriae*, a place where individual and national identity gain force and meaning.

The finale introduces historical material. Ismail mentions the uprising of Isatay Taimanov, thereby rooting the image of the steppe in a historical context of resistance and honor. "My grandfather knew Isatay Taimanov himself... He fought so that the sultans would not rob the poor..." – these words open another layer of perception: the steppe as a space of memory and struggle, as a metatext of Kazakh history. Paustovsky admires "Kazakh voices – strong, melodious, freely ringing across the steppe expanse. He retells the story of the Kazakh people's liberation struggle, inspired by the poetry of Makhambet Utemisov under the leadership of Isatay Taimanov. He is spellbound by the starry sky over the steppe" (Ananyeva, Isaeva, 2025: 241).

E.M. Martynova considers the basis of the writer's work to be "a symbiosis of the scientific and the artistic" (Martynova, 2023: 262). We share this view, since "the alloy of the ephemeral and the material, the fabulous and the real gives his creations their singular individuality" (*ibid.*, 262).

Paustovsky's "Argument in the Railway Carriage" is an artistic *étude* about returning to the Motherland. In the literary text, the steppe is a field of cultural meanings, a point where diverse voices meet and enrich one another, where different images of homeland collide and mutually illuminate.

The image of the steppe in Paustovsky's "Trial by Desert", "Night in Dossor", and "Argument in the Railway Carriage" is not static. A comparative reading of these stories reveals a consistent artistic model of its evolution. In "Trial by Desert" the steppe functions primarily as a space of existential trial, where personal experience becomes the basis for ethical transformation. In "Night in Dossor" it acquires the features of a lived environment that unites people through everyday participation, responsibility and care. Finally, in "Argument in the Railway Carriage", the steppe develops into a cultural space of historical memory and intercultural dialogue, where different perceptions of Kazakhstan enter into meaningful interaction. Thus, the artistic evolution of the steppe image proceeds from a space of trial through a space of participation to a space of intercultural dialogue, reflecting the gradual expansion of its narrative, ethical and cultural functions. It appears as a dynamically developing cultural-semantic complex that consistently moves from natural element to symbol of cultural identity. Each story opens a new facet of the steppe space – from a space of transformation to a space of participation and dialogue. "From ancient times the nomad saw beauty in harmony, which he accepted not so much in the proportional

relationship of components as in the internal, established equilibrium of the whole and of any of its parts" (Auezov, 2020: 47).

In "Trial by Desert", the steppe is presented as an existential element. Nature is neither hostile nor friendly – it is dispassionate. In "Night in Dossor", the steppe is animated. Through images of a modest dwelling, evening tea, gestures and habits, the smells of the steppe, a picture is recreated of human unity with the landscape. The steppe does not demand overcoming; it accepts, includes, and shares daily life. The heroic tension characteristic of the first story is absent. The story's poetics are those of participation.

In "Argument in the Railway Carriage", the steppe becomes an arena of cultural dialogue. Two views collide: an external, reduced and stereotypical one, and an internal one linked with historical memory, poetic consciousness, and an existential sense of homeland. Ismail perceives the steppe as living, singing, full of air, light, and stars. His view is tied to personal history and ancestral memory. The steppe is a symbol, a bearer of identity. From a mute, desiccating element – to a space of stable meanings, a *locus amoenus* of the Kazakh world. The development and evolution of the steppe image demonstrate the multilayeredness of Paustovsky's prose, its striving to integrate cultural perspectives and to humanistically understand another culture as part of a single human experience. A. Rosenholm emphasizes that the steppe "acts as a field of tension between the personal and the historical, the desire for rest and the impulse to movement" (Rosenholm, 2017: 78).

Within the Soviet cultural paradigm, the Russian prose writer preserves a sacral view of nature. In his texts, the steppe is not an arena of struggle or an ideological metaphor but a zone of human vulnerability, beauty, and sincerity.

4. Results

The analysis of Paustovsky's stories confirms the importance of perceiving the steppe not merely as a landscape background and allows us to conclude that the poetics of the steppe spaces perform functions of cultural representation of Kazakhstan. In the writer's artistic world, the steppe travels a path from a natural element to a universal sign of participation, memory, and cultural identity. Its evolution points to the author's desire to comprehend the steppe as a living landscape that carries aesthetic and axiological weight. In "Trial by Desert", the steppe appears as an existential space in which a person is laid bare before the elements, yet through accepting their laws undergoes inner purification. The hero does not conquer nature; he enters into dialogue with it and attains spiritual maturity. This model relies on archetypal matrices of the path, the desert, and overcoming, which find stable embodiment in the narrative structure and the system of artistic means (metaphors of heat, silence, and a sonic hush as "verbal emptiness").

In "Night in Dossor", the accents shift: the steppe no longer frightens or tests; it becomes a home that absorbs elements of everyday life – tea, sheep's wool, the hearth, the rhythm of evening silence. These details are not mere realism but ethnocultural signs of rootedness through which a sense of human participation in the landscape is revealed. We share the view that "the lyrical tone of the narrative is created by the selection of details of nature and domestic space, complicated by emotional attitude, which reflects the inner world of the characters and evokes an associative response, a sense of excitement and empathy in the reader" (Voznesenskaya, 2017: 119). "Argument in the Railway Carriage"

reveals the steppe as an object of cultural interpretation. The opposition of two views of the same landscape – “empty wilderness” versus “land of the fathers” – actualizes the problem of representing and interpreting cultural space, so important in contemporary literary studies. Paustovsky does not assert either position as final, leading the reader to the value of a polyphonic view in which the external can be reworked by the internal and the stereotype overcome by a narrative of memory.

Thus, the concept of the steppe in Paustovsky’s prose brings together ideas of homeland, border, participation, dignity, and memory. The writer constructs a humanistic dialogue between Russian and Kazakh cultures, overcoming binaries of “one’s own/the other”, “wild/mastered land,” and forming, at the level of the artistic text, a space of value-based mutual understanding. The Caspian steppe and desert are “read” by the Russian prose writer as a book. Hence the importance of the book concept: in summer the camels molted, their wool slid off in shreds, exposing “ancient, dusty skin like the binding of old books”.

Taken together, the three stories form a dynamic model of the steppe image in which artistic representation undergoes a consistent semantic transformation and the structure of the text “largely predetermines the semantic vectors of its reading” (Cherneyko, 2022: 85).

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to conceptualize the image of the steppe in K. G. Paustovsky’s prose as a symbolic space representing Kazakhstan through the categories of participation, memory, and inner transformation. Using methods of poetic-structural, motif, chronotopic, and semiotic analysis, we examined “Trial by Desert”, “Night in Dossor”, and “Argument in the Railway Carriage” in which the steppe consistently appears as a living artistic image and as a space of cultural dialogue. Paustovsky’s prose is imbued with ideas of existentialism and romantic idealism. At the center of Paustovsky’s artistic world stands a protagonist who seeks harmony with the surrounding reality and gradually discovers the ethical value of dialogue with nature and other people. The findings confirm the proposed interpretative model: in Paustovsky’s prose, the steppe is not merely a descriptive backdrop but an active artistic image endowed with ethical and cultural significance. The conducted analysis demonstrates that the image of the steppe performs not only a descriptive but also a chronotopic, symbolic and axiological function within Paustovsky’s artistic world. The gradual evolution of this image from a space of existential trial to a space of participation and intercultural dialogue forms the basis of Kazakhstan’s artistic representation in writer’s prose.

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