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The System of Mythical Symbols in The Cognitive Layer of a Literary Text

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of mythical symbols in shaping the cognitive layer of a literary text, using D. Ramazan's short story "The Elder and the White Serpent" as a case study. Mythical symbols such as "serpent," "water," "elder," and "dream" are examined not merely as artistic devices but as elements that reflect cultural memory, traditional worldviews, and cognitive frameworks. These symbols, deeply rooted in Kazakh mythology, serve as semiotic signs that encode collective knowledge and influence the reader's interpretive process. By engaging with symbolic structures, the narrative activates culturally shared schemas, enhancing its conceptual depth. The study employs a combination of semiotic, cognitive, and intertextual analysis to reveal how these mythological elements contribute to the semantic richness of the text. The serpent is interpreted as a sacred figure associated with wisdom and protection; water is viewed as a life-giving and purifying force; the elder symbolizes ancestral knowledge; and dreams function as cognitive messages or blessings. Each symbol creates connections with cultural prototypes and intertextual sources, thereby enriching the cognitive experience of the reader. The article emphasizes that the cognitive layer of literature is constructed through symbolic encodings, which stimulate associative thinking and emotional engagement. Mythological symbols act as dynamic units that transform abstract concepts into tangible meanings. By investigating the symbolic systems embedded in the literary text, this study demonstrates how cultural and cognitive layers are intertwined, shaping both authorial intention and reader perception. Ultimately, the research highlights the relevance of cognitive literary studies in understanding the interplay between myth, language, and thought.

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1. Introduction

Myth is one of the key categories in literature and culture. It emerges from human reflections on the world, the universe, creation, and existence, evolving and integrating into consciousness over centuries. As a result, mythological thinking and mythological consciousness are formed, significantly contributing to the formation of cultural codes. Mythological thought influences the formation of ways of life and highlights national worldviews through episodic narratives embedded in collective consciousness. According to A. Losev[1], myth is not a fictional invention but a meaningful, real reality. Folklorist S. Kaskabasov[2] defines myth as "a type of prose narrative that does not go beyond the boundaries of global mythology, explaining the origin of the world, various natural phenomena, the Earth, the first emergence of humanity, as well as the origins and behaviors of animals and birds." Thus, myth represents centuries-old reflections on the origin of humans and the universe. Consequently, mythic episodes continuously resurface in the collective consciousness. Myth arises from historical events; it does not appear in a vacuum[3]. In other words, certain events or circumstances shape the formation of a myth. Over time, its elements deemed valuable, favorable, or useful by a people become mythologized. Therefore, each myth has a historical origin.

From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, this study examines mythical symbols as conceptual structures embedded in both the language and the cultural worldview of the Kazakh people. These symbols are not merely artistic devices, but cognitive tools that shape how meaning is structured, transmitted, and interpreted. When authors incorporate mythological images into their texts, they engage readers in culturally rooted conceptual mappings that activate mental schemas and frames. Therefore, this paper applies interdisciplinary methods —semiotic, conceptual, and cognitive-semantic— to analyze symbolic representation in literary narrative, aligning the work with current trends in cognitive linguistics and symbolic language studies.

Myth is a primary formative force that assigns archetypal significance to social traditions and rituals[4]. This indicates that myth plays a key role in shaping and explaining cultural customs in contemporary societies. It is not merely a narrative; myth constitutes deep semantic structures embedded within both culture and human psychology[5]. Hence, myth contains markers and features specific to the cultural and psychological frameworks of the societies in which it is embedded.

Mythological thinking also influences how nations construct their mental maps of the world, since the content of myth reflects matters of deep importance to a people. Although mythological consciousness is a part of every nation's cognitive process, its most refined and artistic expressions can be found in cultural works. This is because myth is inextricably linked to culture and to its creators. In particular, mythological thinking manifests clearly and vividly in the symbolic structures of verbal art. Here, the writer's knowledge, cognitive process, linguistic creativity, ability to align image and word, and capacity to encode deeper meanings in symbolic form are all taken into account. Any poet or writer can be considered a bearer of a particular mythological consciousness.

Over time, myth integrates with mythological thinking and acquires symbolic and semiotic meanings. When we examine mythological elements within a specific context, their semiotic features become evident. This is because mythological knowledge enters the context as metaphor, reference, and depiction, thereby attaining symbolic status. In brief, a symbol is a form of figurative speech. It conveys meaning indirectly by representing one concept through the image of another[6]. Symbolism often involves portraying a person's character or behavior metaphorically[7]. The emergence of semiotic understanding, especially the formation of symbols, relies heavily on their conventional nature – that is, the conditional link between real-world phenomena and their abstract meanings[8]. Thus, a symbol does not depart from the real-world features of the object it signifies; instead, it conceals its familiar sign within a poetic image. As Umberto Eco states, "a symbol is not just a sign – it is a means of generating interpretation. It can never be fully explained"[9]. From this perspective, a symbol surpasses a simple sign: it does not merely carry meaning – it generates meaning. A symbol is a dynamic rather than static unit. Its interpretation

varies depending on the reader, culture, or historical era. D. Chandler[10] notes that "a symbol is based on an unnatural, learned, and conventional relationship between the signifier and the signified", reaffirming the idea that symbols are products of human thought.

On the relationship between mythology and symbols, Z. Musaly states: "Mythology is not only the product of ancient thinking, but a unique system of artistic cognition that enters the literary text as a symbol. Symbols are not only meaningful and valuable outcomes of artistic understanding, but also indicators of its development and transformation, because they transcend traditional literary devices, becoming a cognitive form, a model of knowing the world through symbols"[11]. Thus, symbols in literature are not mere stylistic devices – they are conceptually linked to the worldview and cognition of individuals and entire cultures. It follows that mythical symbols are essential carriers of cognitive meaning within literary texts. Z. Aymukhambetova[12] notes, "The essential and primary attribute of myth is the symbol. It is through myth that the symbol emerges and reveals itself". In this way, the use of mythological symbols by authors in expressions, narrative structures, or episodic imagery contributes significantly to the formation of a literary text's cognitive layer. The connection between myth and symbol is aptly captured by the assertion that "to understand a symbol, one must enter into the mythological worldview that gave rise to it"[13]. Without familiarity with the mythological system and way of thinking, one cannot grasp the true meaning of the symbol.

One of the primary characteristics of a literary text is its complex, multilayered structure. Literary scholars often divide the text into internal (deep, semantic) and external layers. The internal form refers to semantic content, while the external form pertains to the linguistic means by which it is expressed. The external form includes the immediately perceptible language tools and the conceptual component that reveals the author's intention. The internal form is a cognitive structure that occurs in the mind and integrates all linguistic components[14]. The external layer represents the verbal surface – the linguistic realization of meaning. It can be further broken down into phonetic, morphological, lexical, and syntactic layers. The deep structure, in turn, encompasses the author's conceptual intentions, worldview, aesthetic perspective, and value system[15–20].

The cognitive approach focuses on the relationship between linguistic patterns and mental structures, as well as on the processes of textual information categorization and conceptualization[21]. Therefore, the inner form – or the semantic content – of the literary text constitutes its cognitive layer. In forming this layer, mythological symbols play a critical role. The symbolic meanings derived from mythological thought enter the semantic structure of the text and convey cognitive information. Thus, in reading a literary work, the reader not only encounters new characters and narrative structures but also enters a cognitive process through symbolic imagery. Figurative devices such as implication, allusion, and suggestion are commonly used in literature to express meaning indirectly[11], and these are often realized through symbolism[22, 23]. Consequently, symbolic meaning – while functioning as a reference – also shapes the cognitive processes within the multilayered structure of the literary text.

Yuri Lotman wrote, "A literary text always constructs a model of the world, and mythological code is one of its oldest forms"[18]. In this context, the mythological symbol within a literary text can be seen as referencing an ancient form of textual construction. The symbolic function of a literary text operates through culturally embedded schematic associations[19]. Thus, the symbolic systems that structure literary texts are grounded in human cognition and contribute to the construction of the work's cognitive framework[24, 25].

In this study, mythological symbols are viewed as cognitive mechanisms that mediate between the surface of the text and its deeper semantic structure. When decoded by culturally competent readers, these symbols activate mental schemas and frames rooted in collective memory.

Drawing on methods from cognitive linguistics, literary semiotics, and intertextual analysis, this paper explores how mythic symbolism constructs the cognitive layer of the literary text. The analysis focuses on D. Ramazan's short story "The Elder and the White Serpent," where symbols such as the serpent, sacred water, the elder, and the prophetic dream are examined as culturally encoded conceptual structures that shape the reader's interpretive process.

2. Methods

This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that integrates cognitive linguistics, literary semiotics, conceptual analysis, and intertextual methodology. The symbolic

elements in D. Ramazan's short story are examined not only as narrative devices but as culturally embedded cognitive constructs that carry conceptual and emotional resonance within the Kazakh mythological worldview.

The analytical framework involves four core interpretive strategies:

• Semiotic Analysis – to decode symbolic structures and trace their embedded meanings;
• Cognitive Modeling – to identify how symbols activate mental frames and cultural schemas;
• Conceptual Analysis – to explore symbolic units as representations of abstract thought;
• Intertextual Mapping – to contextualize symbols within broader mythological and religious traditions.

This methodological integration allows for a comprehensive interpretation of how mythological imagery contributes to the cognitive layer of the literary text.

2.1. Materials

The primary material for this study is D. Ramazan's short story "The Elder and the White Serpent" (Kazakh: "Aqsaqal men aq zhylan"), selected for its rich use of mythological imagery and its reflection of Kazakh cultural consciousness. The text was chosen as a representative example of contemporary Kazakh prose that actively engages with traditional mythic symbols, such as the serpent, water, the elder figure, and dream visions. These elements make the text especially relevant for examining the role of mythical semiotics in the cognitive structure of literary texts.

Supplementary materials include scholarly sources on Kazakh and general mythology, cognitive linguistics, literary semiotics, and intertextual analysis. These theoretical materials provide the analytical foundation for interpreting the symbolic content and its function within the cognitive layer of the literary work.

2.2. Procedure

The research followed a step-by-step qualitative design based on interpretative textual analysis. The procedure consisted of the following stages:

1. Textual Immersion and Annotation
   The narrative was closely read and annotated to iden-tify instances of mythological symbols and culturally embedded semiotic signs. Special attention was paid to recurring motifs and culturally salient terms such as "white serpent," "elder," "sacred water," and "dream vision."

2. Thematic Categorization of Symbols
   Identified symbolic units were grouped thematically based on their mythological origin and semantic function. For example, symbols of purity and blessing (e.g., "white," "water"), ancestral presence ("elder"), and prophetic communication ("dream") were separately categorized.

3. Semiotic and Semantic Interpretation
   Each symbol was interpreted using a combined semiotic and semantic approach. Semiotic tools helped decode the layers of cultural meaning, while semantic analysis focused on the conceptual depth and metaphorical associations conveyed by the symbols.

4. Cognitive Framing
   The role of each symbol in shaping the reader's cognitive experience was analyzed through the lens of cognitive literary theory. The connection between the mythic imagery and the mental schemas activated in the reading process was emphasized.

5. Intertextual Correlation
   The symbolic episodes were further contextualized within traditional Kazakh mythology and broader religious/mythic texts (e.g., the symbolism of water in Islamic sources, the totemic role of serpents in Turkic tradition), establishing a cognitive link between the narrative and shared cultural memory.

2.3. Data Analysis

The data for this study consist of selected textual excerpts from D. Ramazan's short story "The Elder and the White Serpent." A qualitative research design was applied, guided by principles of interpretative textual analysis within a cognitive-semiotic framework.

The analytical process comprised several stages:

1. Close Reading and Annotation
   The text was read in multiple iterations to identify recurring symbolic units and culturally marked expressions. Instances of mythological references and figurative

imagery were systematically annotated.

2. Thematic Coding

   Identified symbols were categorized according to their thematic and conceptual significance. Categories were based on shared semantic domains such as sacred forces, ancestral figures, and visionary experiences.

3. Symbolic Mapping and Interpretation

   Each symbol was analyzed along two axes:

   (a) its semantic value and conceptual metaphor within the narrative;

   (b) its cognitive resonance within shared cultural mem-ory and mythological tradition.

4. Intertextual Contextualization

   The symbolic units were correlated with broader mythological narratives in Kazakh, Turkic, and Islamic traditions to trace deeper layers of meaning. Intertextual parallels served to clarify the cultural encoding of symbolic constructs.

To enhance analytical clarity, a symbolic category matrix was constructed. The table below summarizes the key symbolic units, their semantic cores, cognitive functions, and intertextual references (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Symbolic Categories and Cognitive-Semantic Codes in the Narrative.

Symbolic Unit	Thematic Category	Semantic Core	Cognitive Function	Intertextual Reference
White Serpent	Sacred Animal	Purity, wisdom, esotericism	Guardian frame; cognitive selection schema	Turkic mythology (sacred snake), Sufi symbolism
Sacred Water	Elemental Force	Healing, life source, clarity	Purification schema; transformation trigger	Islamic (Zamzam), Kazakh folk epics
The Elder (Aqsaqal)	Ancestral Figure	Blessing, knowledge, spiritual power	Initiation schema; legitimacy coding	Sufi and Turkic archetypes (wise sage)
Dream Vision	Spiritual Experience	Prophecy, fate, ancestral communication	Visionary revelation; cultural transmission medium	Kazakh dream interpretation, Islamic mysticism
White Color	Cultural Aesthetic Code	Innocence, sacredness, enlightenment	Visual-semantic coding of purity	Universal mythic symbolism, Kazakh poetic forms
Touch (Head Stroking)	Ritual Gesture	Blessing, knowledge transfer	Sensorial activation of sacred meaning	Turkic initiation rites, elder-child rituals
Whispering	Esoteric Communication	Secret knowledge, destiny	Hidden meaning schema; sacred utterance	Mystical Sufi practice, oral storytelling cues

This matrix supported a structured interpretation grounded in empirical textual data and enhanced the transparency of symbolic-cognitive analysis. The methodological triangulation —combining semiotic decoding, cognitive frame theory, and intertextual referencing — ensured analytical rigor and interpretive depth.

3. Results and Discussion

The cognitive layer of a literary text refers to its deep semantic stratum, which encompasses knowledge, ideas, and philosophical concepts that engage the reader's intellect and stimulate reflection. In literature, this layer is often expressed through the author's worldview, the depiction of social issues, life values, historical events, and the use of signs, symbols, and metaphors. It aligns with the theme and purpose of the work and serves as a means through which the author conveys their perspective on the world.

The cognitive layer has become a subject of interest within the emerging field of cognitive literary studies, which explores how literature reflects and shapes human cognition. The term "cognitive" itself implies knowledge and awareness; thus, the cognitive layer essentially denotes a cognitive structure within the literary text. This approach is closely associated with M. Turner[20], who stated that cognitive literary studies are "not merely a variation of literary theory, but a foundation for many possible new theories". This perspective is appropriate, as longstanding literary stud-

ies have traditionally focused on the content of literary texts, their internal structures, and the conveyance of semantic space through external forms. While these aspects have been studied across various branches of literary theory, cognitive literary studies provide a more comprehensive understanding of the informational and intellectual dimensions of the text, intertwining authorial cognition with reader perception.

Kazakh mythologist S. Kondybay[25] asserts: "We can depict this illusory world only through symbols, because one cannot truly see or comprehend the form, scale, substance, or origin of the universe, nor the way it was created by a divine being. The most universal and accessible method of explanation is symbolic representation. Mythology itself is a system of symbols." Thus, the symbolic system employed in literary texts is fundamentally linked to national mythology. Authors create symbols based on information familiar within their cultural and mental frameworks. The creation of symbolic images and the transmission of culturally encoded meanings are closely tied to metaphor, which involves understanding one concept through the lens of another, often via experiential association[17]. As Ernst Cassirer also notes, "symbolic forms mediate between perception and thought, aiding in our understanding of reality"[16].

Kazakh mythological thinking is part of the broader system of global mythological consciousness. While mythical figures and archetypes may be universally recognizable, their symbolic connotations often differ across cultures. For example, the symbol of the serpent in many Western myths is associated with evil and betrayal, whereas in Asian traditions, it frequently symbolizes sacredness, blessing, and protection. For the Kazakh people, the serpent is generally seen as a positive totemic image associated with prosperity and wisdom.

This section presents the findings of the symbolic-cognitive analysis conducted on "The Elder and the White Serpent." Drawing upon annotated data, the study identifies four dominant symbolic categories, each contributing to the formation of the text's cognitive layer. These symbols not only carry cultural memory but also activate conceptual structures in the reader's mind, enabling interpretation through familiar mythic codes.

Each subsection below addresses a specific symbolic unit, illustrating how it functions semantically, cognitively, and intertextually within the narrative structure.

3.1. The White Serpent as a Cultural Frame of Sacred Protection

In D. Ramazan's story, the image of the white serpent operates as a dominant mythological symbol that encapsulates a distinct Kazakh worldview. It serves not only as a narrative device but as a culturally embedded cognitive frame that activates ancestral memory, symbolic thinking, and metaphysical reflection.

> "Don't be afraid. That serpent is always here, it harms no one. It appears only to those who are meant to see it. It never shows itself to malicious people. People say it guards this valley... You're a lucky one! You won't come to harm."
> (D. Ramazan)

This passage introduces the white serpent as a guardian spirit – selective in its appearance, morally coded, and revered. From a cultural-semiotic perspective, the serpent (жылан) in Kazakh cosmology is a totemic creature associated not with danger, but with wisdom, fertility, and sacred presence. Unlike the serpent in Judeo-Christian traditions – often demonized as a deceiver – the Kazakh conceptualization carries positive connotations, reflected in folk sayings such as "Ақ жылан үйге кірсе – құт келеді" ("If a white serpent enters the house, blessings follow").

From a cognitive-linguistic standpoint, the white serpent activates what Lakoff and Johnson[17] would term a conceptual metaphor: SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE IS ANIMAL PRESENCE. It operates within the cognitive frame of sacred selection – appearing only to those "meant to see it," implying an inner purity or spiritual openness. This marks the protagonist as a "chosen one," activating a widespread narrative archetype across mythologies.

The color white amplifies this symbolic resonance. In Kazakh culture, white (ақ) connotes not just cleanliness, but divine favor, honor, and light – evident in terms like ақ жол ("righteous path") or ақ батасын беру ("to bestow a white/blessed blessing"). Thus, the white serpent is a symbolic cluster where both components—serpent and white—work together to encode multiple layers of meaning: protection, transformation, and divine guidance.

Intertextually, the serpent motif appears in various Turkic and Islamic narratives. In pre-Islamic Tengrist beliefs, the serpent symbolized cosmic duality and the bridge between

worlds, much like in shamanic traditions where snakes mediate between realms of earth and sky. In Islamic mysticism (Sufism), serpents appear as trials of faith or as mystical protectors, depending on the context. These layers inform the reader's interpretation by activating shared mythic scripts across cultural memory.

In literature, serpent figures often mark thresholds, moral tests, or revelations (e.g., in the Qur'an, the staff of Moses becomes a serpent as a divine sign). In The Elder and the White Serpent, the animal's presence precedes the protagonist's inner change, functioning as a liminal symbol that signals spiritual passage. It is not merely observed – it transforms the seer.

From the standpoint of prototype theory [26], the serpent in this story represents the prototype of the sacred protector within Turkic-Kazakh cultural knowledge. It meets key features of this category: mysteriousness, sacred location, selectivity, and metaphysical implication. The serpent guards not territory, but meaning – embodying the sacredness of place, ancestry, and fate.

In sum, the white serpent serves as a symbolic and cognitive operator, shaping the reader's perception of the protagonist and the story's moral-spiritual framework. It marks a transition from ordinary perception to sacred insight and embeds the narrative within a culturally coded system of mythological semiotics. This multidimensional role positions the white serpent not just as a metaphor, but as a cognitive frame of mythic destiny – a uniquely Kazakh contribution to the symbolic language of literature.

3.2. Sacred Water as Mythic Element and Healing Prototype

In The Elder and the White Serpent, the motif of sacred water is introduced at a pivotal moment in the protagonist's journey, marking a physical and symbolic transition from ordinary reality to mythologically infused space:

> "And then, before us, a shimmer – water appeared. As we approached, it turned out to be crystal clear, so pure that we could see the coins lying at the bottom.
> – This is sacred water. Drinking it will heal your body, and it cures illness. Drink to your fill, say 'bismillah,' and wash your face and hands." (D. Ramazan)

The purity and clarity of the water signal not only physical refreshment but also spiritual elevation. In the Kazakh cultural context, water is imbued with sacredness – an essential life force and medium of cleansing both bodily and morally. The instruction to say "bismillah" (in the name of God) reinforces this spiritual coding, placing the moment within an Islamic ritual frame.

From a cognitive-semiotic perspective, water functions here as a prototype of healing and renewal. According to Lakoff and Johnson [17], such metaphors emerge from embodied experience – water is necessary for life, thus it becomes a source domain in metaphors like LIFE IS WATER, KNOWLEDGE IS FLOW, or TRANSFORMATION IS CLEANSING. In the story, sacred water initiates a shift in the protagonist's internal state, aligning with the conceptual schema of purification: an encounter with the sacred that results in ontological change.

This schema is reinforced by cultural narratives. In Kazakh and broader Turkic traditions, the motif of miraculous or sacred springs is prevalent. In epic tales like Qoblandy Batyr, a hidden spring is discovered during a moment of despair, saving the hero and signaling divine favor. This mirrors the Islamic narrative of Zamzam water, which appeared miraculously to sustain Hagar and Ismail in the desert. The convergence of these traditions situates the spring in Ramazan's story within a deeply intertextual mythic code.

Furthermore, sacred water often functions as a threshold symbol—marking the boundary between two states: illness and healing, ignorance and knowledge, the mundane and the sacred. In the protagonist's case, encountering this water—in the company of an elder and under the blessing of mythic signs—signifies not only purification but entrance into a new cognitive and moral domain.

Kazakh ethnographic traditions support this interpretation. Practices such as су шашу (splashing water at celebrations or blessings), сумен аластау (ritual cleansing with water), and жолға шыққанда бетін сумен жуу (washing one's face before a journey) reflect water's role as a symbolic initiator. These culturally encoded acts are mapped onto the narrative event, activating the reader's recognition of water as more than an object – as a semiotic and sacred agent.

Additionally, the water's described clarity – "so pure that we could see the coins" – can be interpreted as a

metaphor for moral and spiritual transparency. In Kazakh poetic tradition, clarity of water often stands for truth, sincerity, and divine order. Thus, the spring is not just healing; it is revelatory, allowing both physical and metaphysical sight.

In summary, sacred water in this story is a multilayered symbol: a physical reality, a cultural ritual, and a cognitive metaphor. It mediates between worlds – acting simultaneously as a cleansing force, a cultural code, and a mythic archetype. In doing so, it advances the protagonist's cognitive journey and enriches the symbolic architecture of the text. As such, it exemplifies how elemental motifs, when culturally and narratively encoded, function as cognitive triggers of transformation within myth-oriented literature.

3.3. The Elder as an Embodiment of Ancestral Authority and Spiritual Mediation

The figure of the elder (aqsaqal) in The Elder and the White Serpent serves as a potent cultural and cognitive symbol. Far beyond his narrative role, the elder represents a mythologized archetype embedded in the Kazakh ethnomental system – one that activates associations with ancestral authority, moral wisdom, and sacred legitimacy. The white-bearded elder is not simply a wise man; he is a mediator between worlds, a conduit of inherited knowledge, and a guardian of cultural memory.

This symbolic role becomes especially prominent in the dream sequence:

> "A white-bearded old man in all white was stroking my head and whispering something!"
> "The ancestors are just blessing him. He's destined for a bright future. He is a lucky child!"
> (D. Ramazan)

In Kazakh culture, such imagery is highly significant. The dream encounter with an elder in white clothing (ақ кісі) traditionally signals divine favor or ancestral blessing. The action of stroking the head represents not just affection, but the ritual transfer of symbolic authority or protection – a gesture of legitimation. This act resonates with the cultural practice of elders giving their bata (blessing), often with a hand on the head, which symbolizes the approval of lineage and continuation of honor.

From a cognitive standpoint, the elder functions as a prototype[26] of wisdom and cultural legitimacy. The aqsaqal activates deeply rooted mental schemas that associate age with trust, experience with insight, and white (in both beard and clothing) with moral purity and spiritual elevation. These schemas shape how the reader processes the narrative: the protagonist is not just dreaming – he is undergoing symbolic initiation.

This conceptualization is consistent with traditional Kazakh social structures, in which elders hold advisory and spiritual roles. Proverbs such as "Ақсақал сөзі – тоқсанның сөзі" ("The word of an elder is the word of ninety years") reinforce the idea that elders are vessels of time-bound wisdom. Their presence in narrative settings often connotes both judgment and protection, making them narrative equivalents of ritual figures in oral epic traditions.

Intertextually, the image of the wise elder aligns with mythic figures across Turkic epics (e.g., Қорқыт ата, Абыз, Аруақтардың бейнесі) and Sufi literature, where the pir or master appears in visions to guide the seeker. Such figures operate within what cognitive literary theorists describe as initiatory frames – structural elements that catalyze identity shifts in characters.

In The Elder and the White Serpent, the elder's presence connects the protagonist to a collective lineage – ancestral, spiritual, and national. His role in both the waking world and the dream space affirms his status as a transitional agent – guiding the protagonist from immaturity to awareness, from isolation to belonging. By invoking this culturally saturated figure, the story reinforces the continuity of memory and identity through symbolically charged authority.

In essence, the elder figure performs a dual function: narratively, he advances the plot; symbolically, he embodies cognitive-cultural codes of legitimacy, transformation, and inherited truth. His blessing is not merely individual – it reflects the community's investment in the continuity of values and wisdom across generations.

Let us consider D. Ramazan's short story "The Elder and the White Serpent", representative of contemporary Kazakh prose. Even the title contains embedded symbolic meaning. The author's use of the epithet "white" in both "white elder" and "white serpent" suggests themes of purity, goodness, and enlightenment. In Kazakh mythology, the "white serpent" is often seen as a messenger of peace and abundance. By embedding a mythologeme into the title as a semiotic code, the author prompts the reader to reflect before

the story even begins.

3.4. Dream Vision as a Portal to Collective Mythological Memory

The dream (tüs) occupies a central position in The Elder and the White Serpent, functioning as a cognitive threshold where the protagonist connects with ancestral forces and receives symbolic confirmation of his destiny. Within Kazakh traditional consciousness, the dream is not merely a psychological episode but a legitimate epistemological event – a culturally sanctioned way of receiving knowledge from the spiritual realm.

> "I was dreaming!"
> "What kind of dream?" – My grandmother rushed in, breathless.
> "A white-bearded old man in all white was stroking my head and whispering something!"
> "The ancestors are just blessing him. He's destined for a bright future. He is a lucky child!"
> (D. Ramazan)

This exchange reveals the communal validation of the dream: its interpretation is immediate, culturally fluent, and affirming. The grandmother's reaction suggests that the dream aligns with ancestral patterns of prophecy and sacred favor, deeply embedded in Kazakh folklore and oral tradition. According to traditional beliefs, a visit from an elder in a dream often signifies the presence or message of an ancestor (аруақ), a practice mirrored in sayings like "Жақсы түс – жарым ырыс" ("A good dream is half a blessing").

From a cognitive-literary perspective, the dream operates as a narrative template of initiation – what Herman[27] would describe as a storyworld portal, where the protagonist is momentarily removed from linear time and enters a mythic space of revelation. The dream is not an escape but a symbolic frame that allows for the reconfiguration of identity. In this case, the boy is marked not only by the elder's words but by the cognitive shift that the dream initiates.

In terms of frame theory, the dream activates what can be called the blessing schema – an abstract structure that associates divine visitation with future greatness, protection, and purpose. The symbolic gestures within the dream (touching, whispering, appearance in white) each reinforce layers of spiritual coding. These markers align with shamanic and Sufi dream traditions, where visions often involve contact with white-clad figures delivering cryptic yet potent signs.

The dream also carries intertextual weight. In Islamic tradition, prophetic dreams (such as those of Joseph/Yusuf in the Qur'an) serve as vehicles for truth and foretelling. In Kazakh epics like Ер Төстік or Алпамыс, dreams guide heroes toward fateful encounters or forewarn them of trials. Ramazan's story draws upon this tradition, offering a contemporary literary realization of a mythic dream frame.

Moreover, the dream vision connects with the earlier symbolic elements in the story – the white serpent, the sacred water, the elder – forming a semantic cluster that completes the protagonist's symbolic initiation. The dream crystallizes prior signs into a cognitive model of destiny, granting the protagonist not only recognition but narrative legitimacy.

In sum, the dream vision functions as a portal to collective mythological memory, drawing upon symbolic systems shared across Kazakh cultural space. It links the protagonist to ancestral wisdom and situates his identity within a larger cultural framework. As a narrative and cognitive mechanism, the dream conveys transformation, alignment, and belonging – key functions in any mythologically structured literary text.

3.5. Integrative Discussion: Symbolic Systems and the Cognitive Layer of Narrative

The analysis of The Elder and the White Serpent reveals a highly structured symbolic system that operates across narrative, cultural, and cognitive dimensions. The symbols of the white serpent, sacred water, the elder, and the dream vision do not function in isolation; rather, they form an interconnected semantic network that constitutes the cognitive layer of the literary text.

This layer is not merely the sum of thematic or stylistic devices. It represents what cognitive literary scholars define as a deep structure of meaning-making, where cultural knowledge, emotional resonance, and conceptual abstraction converge. Each symbol activates culturally embedded schemas – such as blessing, initiation, purification, and chosen fate – which are not taught directly, but are learned through cultural immersion and narrative exposure. In this way, the story becomes a repository of collective cognitive structures shared by members of a linguistic and cultural community.

The four key symbols analyzed in this study function as narrative nodes through which mythological logic is restored

in a modern literary context. The serpent marks the beginning of the protagonist's symbolic journey, representing sacred presence and selective vision. The water reinforces themes of transformation and cleansing, acting as both a literal and metaphorical threshold. The elder formalizes this transition through ancestral blessing, while the dream serves as cognitive closure – confirming the protagonist's destiny and embedding his personal story within a transpersonal mythic framework.

This symbolic architecture exemplifies what Lotman[18] called the mythological code of literature – a set of recursive, culturally rooted symbols that map individual experience onto shared cosmologies. The cognitive layer of the text emerges precisely at this intersection: between the personal and the collective, the visible and the hidden, the literal and the symbolic.

Moreover, this framework affirms the value of combining cognitive linguistics with semiotic and intertextual analysis. It demonstrates that symbolic content is not decorative but structurally essential – functioning as a cognitive interface that mediates between narrative form and cultural memory.

Ultimately, The Elder and the White Serpent exemplifies how contemporary Kazakh literature retains the symbolic systems of its mythological heritage, reactivating them within the reader's mind as cognitive tools for interpreting identity, fate, and moral order.

4. Conclusion

This study examined the role of mythological symbols in constructing the cognitive layer of D. Ramazan's short story The Elder and the White Serpent. Through the combined use of cognitive linguistics, literary semiotics, and intertextual analysis, the research revealed how four central symbolic elements – the white serpent, sacred water, the elder figure, and the dream vision – function as culturally encoded conceptual structures that shape both the narrative trajectory and the reader's interpretive process.

Each symbol was shown to activate specific cognitive schemas rooted in Kazakh mythological consciousness: protection and chosenness (serpent), purification and transformation (water), legitimacy and ancestral blessing (elder), and visionary insight (dream). Together, they formed an integrated symbolic system that operates within a broader cultural framework, mapping individual experience onto collective memory.

The findings demonstrate that the cognitive layer of a literary text emerges not through abstract theorization but through the reader's engagement with symbolically rich narrative elements. These symbols function as cognitive triggers – invoking mental models, evoking shared cultural knowledge, and guiding the construction of meaning. The story thus becomes a semiotic field where national identity, mythological logic, and personal transformation converge.

This approach also highlights the utility of cognitive literary studies in the analysis of culturally specific texts. By treating symbols not merely as stylistic embellishments but as conceptual operators, we uncover deeper levels of narrative structure and ideological encoding. The research contributes to ongoing efforts to integrate cognitive science with literary interpretation, particularly in non-Western literary contexts.

Moreover, the study underscores the continued relevance of myth in contemporary Kazakh literature. Far from being relegated to the past, mythological symbolism persists as a dynamic cognitive resource – enabling authors to encode complex ideas about fate, memory, and morality in compact, culturally resonant forms.

Future research may apply this symbolic-cognitive model to other narratives within Turkic or Islamic literary traditions, thereby deepening our understanding of how collective mythological systems continue to shape narrative form and human understanding.

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Data Availability Statement

No new data were created or generated during this study. The datasets analyzed in this research were derived from publicly available sources. Further details on accessing specific corpora used in this analysis can be provided by the authors upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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