

Play as a Literary Device and Psychological Pattern in Milorad Pavic's *The Last Love in Constantinople*

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Abstract

This publication aims to evaluate how play can serve as both a literary device and a psychological pattern of behavior by examining Milorad Pavic's novel *The Last Love in Constantinople*. Play permeates the entire semiotic universe of the text, structuring not only its external narrative architecture but also shaping character interactions, plot development, and the interplay between reality and fiction. The study examines the novel's transformation into a card game, wherein each section corresponds to a tarot card from the Major Arcana, establishing rules that govern the reading experience and the author-reader relationship. Methodologically, the research applies psychoanalytic and semiotic analysis, drawing on Johan Huizinga's theory of play, Roger Caillois' classifications of game types, and Carl Jung's theory of archetypes. The analysis considers both external and internal manifestations of play, including intradiegetic character-driven games encompassing war, revenge, love, and mystical interactions. The research further investigates the interplay of tarot symbolism, archetypal representation, and narrative structure, demonstrating how Pavic merges multiple modes of play to create a complex, labyrinthine literary experience that implicates the reader as an active participant in the game of meaning.

Introduction

At various stages of life, every reflective individual confronts questions pertaining to human reason and consciousness. Reason, often considered the foundation of existence, prompts further inquiry, producing an intricate web of questions and reflections. In examining the relationship between homo sapiens and homo faber, the creative human, it becomes evident that both rational and irrational beings share certain tendencies, among them an inclination toward play.

The study of play as a behavioral semiotic forms the basis of this paper. In Pavic's novel *The Last Love in Constantinople*, the entire semiotic universe is infused with play, shaping not only the

structural and narrative aspects but also character behavior and interpersonal dynamics. The novel's division into 21 sections functions like a card deck, turning the reading experience into a literal card game. Each card carries its own rules, inviting readers to engage with the text in multiple ways: sequentially from beginning to end, according to chance, or according to a card-based system of deliberate choice. By participating in the reading process, whether consciously or unconsciously, the reader engages in a game whose outcome depends on the progression of play. This game extends to plot development, character relationships, the interplay of reality and fiction, and temporal structures.

The primary objective of this study is to examine the features of play as both a literary mechanism and a psychological phenomenon: play as a narrative and structural device within the novel, and play as a cultural and psychological pattern often operating beneath the surface of conscious experience. Pavic's novel, written in 1994 with elements of magical realism, presents a significant contribution to world literature yet remains underexplored in scholarly analysis. Existing metatexts largely provide brief critical commentary rather than in-depth literary analysis, and Armenian-language studies are virtually nonexistent, as the novel was only translated into Armenian in 2018. This paper represents a step toward a comprehensive literary and psychoanalytic examination of the text.

Discussion

Play as a Structural Foundation: External Play and Narrative Architecture

As a prominent representative of postmodernism, Pavic frequently diverges from the orthodox paths of novelistic convention. By bending conventional rules, he creates narratives almost unparalleled in the history of literature. Though inspired by classical masterpieces, Pavic preserves an experimental spirit, and one of his most striking devices is the abandonment of linear narrative in favor of a play-like structure. This engages the reader in the creative process, allowing them to become an active participant in the story, since the progression of the narrative often depends on the reader's choices. In some works, the narrative transforms into a crossword puzzle where solving it is necessary to reach a conclusion, as in *Landscape Painted with Tea*. In others, a branching structure offers three independent yet complete perspectives on the same story, as in *The Khazar Dictionary*.

Perhaps Pavic's greatest game with the reader culminates in *The Last Love in Constantinople*. Dividing the work into 21 chapters, Pavic assigned each chapter a corresponding tarot card from the Major Arcana. By attaching the cards to the book, the author breaks the fourth wall and signals his

authorial demise. The creation becomes a collaborative process between three agents: the writer, the reader, and the tarot cards. The author creates the fabula, the reader selects the tarot cards, and their arrangement determines the course of the plot, generating an endless number of possible endings from the same 21 chapters.

Tarot Cards as the Structural Basis of the Novel

The use of tarot as the novel's structural framework brings several dimensions of analysis into focus. Tarot originated in 15th-century Central Europe and only began to be used for divination in the 18th century. Roger Caillois, building on Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, classified games into four categories: *agon* (competitive), *alea* (chance-based), *mimicry* (role-playing), and *vertigo* (stimulating). Card games naturally fall under *alea*, being entirely dependent on randomness. If one sets aside the psychoanalytical dimensions of tarot, it functions as a game of chance, and its use in the novel to construct plot becomes a game entrusted to fortune, free from strict sequential rules.

However, Caillois himself observes that a key feature of tarot is that each card carries a specific meaning, and despite the player's seemingly random selection, the meanings of the cards are interconnected such that any combination will yield a coherent outcome. These assigned meanings presuppose an end result: even if the player feels that the outcome depends on them, the answer ultimately lies with the game master. One can thereby decipher the first phase of the tarot-novel game, where the author creates the illusion that the reader controls the development of events, while in reality it is predetermined. The 21 chapters of the novel are structured so that no matter the order in which they are read, they will inevitably result in one of the preordained endings.

Psychoanalytic Approaches: Jung and the Archetypal Game

To study the second phase of the tarot-novel game, one must examine the occult dimension of tarot, which Caillois and Jung both approached as a system of psychological codes. Jung himself was deeply interested in tarot and during a lecture at Princeton University stated:

These are sequences of images and symbols, where playing with them is equivalent to interacting with the content of the unconscious. Various combinations correspond to historical events in human development. These represent archetypal ideas of different kinds, which, when combined with ordinary elements of the unconscious flow, become an intuitive method of application. (Jung, Princeton lecture, as cited in Zatikyan, 2021)

The Major Arcana cards in particular depict Jungian archetypes, and by comparing these with the corresponding chapters of the novel, one can fully decode the game embedded in the structure of the work. The Fool, the novel's main character Sofroni Opuyich, belongs neither on earth nor in

heaven, living perpetually in his father's shadow. The Magician chapter introduces a clairvoyant who directs Sofroni toward Constantinople, where his father's prophecy is to be fulfilled. Across all 21 chapters, each card's archetypal meaning is faithfully embodied by the narrative events and character dynamics of the corresponding section, constructing a closed symbolic system in which narrative progression and fate are governed by a pre-established mythic logic rather than conventional realist causality.

Inner-Textual Play: Rules, Rivalry, and the Game of Glory

Having decoded the external game, one finds that play also penetrates the internal layers of the novel through both obvious and subtextual means, turning the narrative into a series of individual games. These games interact to create layered codes within the text, which must again be approached through Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*. Huizinga identifies several characteristic features of games: their voluntary nature, their separation from ordinary life in time and space, and their non-mercenary quality, wherein any reward must be exclusively spiritual.

The first major internal game involves Pakhom Tenetski, who, guided by the belief that he who takes the most lives lives the longest, devotes himself to military life despite being a gifted musician. Tenetski fundamentally detaches from reality, turning life itself into a game and attempting to live by its rules. The idea that each life he takes prolongs his own is an illusion that cannot hold within the limits of reality. As Huizinga argues, the game cannot follow the laws of life, and violating the boundary between game and reality has disastrous consequences, not only for Tenetski but for his opponents and future generations. Tenetski loses, yet the game continues, and by drawing his supposed victim Opuych into the game, the story initiates the famous conflict between the two families.

The Futility of the Game, Revenge, and Incompletion

The chain of competition between the Tenetski and Opuych families continues with Harlamp Opuych, who carries the game forward without hesitation, killing his opponent and taking the latter's lover as a reward. Huizinga argues that a game can sometimes be purposeless: it proceeds in and of itself, and its outcome does not form part of a vital process necessary to the group. Opuych's readiness to continue the game embodies precisely this principle. He simply plays, without concern for the rules, stakes, or possible outcome. The only purpose of playing was to bring it to an end. In doing so, however, Opuych tacitly accepts the lover of his victim as a reward, which initiates yet another game across the younger generation.

As a representative of the defeated side, Pana Tenetski pursues a game motivated entirely by revenge and honor. Huizinga notes that virtue, honor, nobility, and glory initially exist within the sphere of competition, that is, within the domain of the game, and Pana's pursuit exemplifies this. He devotes himself entirely to the role of the warrior, erasing his own identity in the pursuit of victory, ultimately defeating Sofroni and hanging him upside down from a tree in a deliberate echo of the Hanged Man tarot card. Meanwhile, Sofroni's role in the conflict is fundamentally coercive: he has no personal motivation to fight but is drawn in solely because his entire identity is constructed upon his father's. He participates because the game is hereditary. Ultimately, Sofroni leaves the game voluntarily by abandoning the idea of revenge, definitively ending the conflict between the two lineages.

The Freedom of the Game and Non-Competitive Forms of Play

Not all characters are consumed by the competitive games at the novel's center. Erisena Tenetska, daughter of Pakhom Tenetski, not only refuses to participate in the family's rivalry but actively saves the half-dead Sophron and enters a romantic relationship with him. Where other characters are defined by their roles within the game, Erisena exercises radical freedom. She describes herself as the third shoe, choosing what pleases her rather than what her father, husband, or brother cannot endure. By choosing free will, Erisena not only refuses the logic of the conflict but helps Sophron bring the competition to its conclusion. The result is that despite Pana Tenetski's battlefield victory over Sophron, the conflict ends without a true winner or loser, because the game's terms of victory have been disrupted from within.

The Interrelation of External and Internal Play

Having decoded war and the conflict born from it, it is necessary to examine how the novel's external and internal games interact. Secrecy functions as one of the most expressive modes of play in the text. As Huizinga observes, the game finds its most exclusive form in secrecy, with which it loves to cloak itself. In the novel, secrecy is shared between Erisena and Sophron, becoming a game whose reward is their union.

Prophecy constitutes another significant mode of internal-external interplay. The prediction of characters' destinies floods the pages of the book, and the fate of every character is already known to the recurring fortune-tellers, priests, and hermits. This is a form of play through which the author hints the course of the narrative to the reader, and it is here that external and internal expressions of the game most visibly intersect. Although prophecy is an internal narrative element, it sustains the progression of the author-reader game. Similarly, a theatrical performance within the novel titled

The Last Love in Constantinople recounts the entire plot within a single page, functioning as an intertextual device that reinforces the interrelation between structural and intradiegetic games and draws the reader ever deeper into the narrative.

The novel's chronotope, the interrelation of time and space within the fictional world, also becomes a means of expressing the game. The non-linear plot structure disrupts the relationship between time and space, and temporal leaps within the narrative, such as a sudden movement from Troy to Soviet Russia during the reading of *The Iliad*, create a third type of game that supplements the novel's overall playful stratification. Through such devices, Pavic constructs a literary space in which play becomes simultaneously a narrative mechanism and a psychological model of human behavior.

Ethics, Discussion, and Limitations

This analysis engages with a limited range of secondary sources, primarily reflecting critical commentary in German and Armenian. The absence of substantial scholarly literature specifically dedicated to *The Last Love in Constantinople* in English or other major academic languages represents a significant limitation, as it restricts the extent to which this paper's findings can be situated within a broader critical conversation. The study relies principally on theoretical frameworks, namely Huizinga, Caillois, and Jung, developed outside the context of literary analysis and applied here to a specific literary work. While this cross-disciplinary application yields productive interpretive insights, it carries the inherent risk of over-systematizing a text whose primary value lies in its productive ambiguity.

Future research might productively examine the novel's reception across different cultural and linguistic contexts, particularly given the significant delays in its translation history. A comparative study of play in other works by Pavic would also allow for a more nuanced understanding of how the devices identified here function across his broader body of work, and whether the tarot-narrative game represents a unique experiment or a recurring structural commitment.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that play functions not merely as a decorative postmodern strategy in Milorad Pavic's *The Last Love in Constantinople*, but as a foundational organizing principle that permeates the novel's structure, narrative logic, and psychological architecture. The transformation of the text into a tarot-based game system situates the novel within a tradition of ludic literature,

where chance, repetition, and symbolic structures replace linear causality. Drawing on Caillois' theory of play and Jung's archetypal psychology, the analysis has shown that what may initially appear as the withdrawal of the author is in fact a controlled illusion of randomness, carefully engineered through symbolic archetypal patterns embedded in the tarot structure. Each chapter's correspondence to a specific card constructs a closed symbolic system in which narrative progression, character motivation, and fate are governed by a pre-established mythic logic rather than conventional realist causality.

At the intradiegetic level, the novel reproduces this ludic structure through a network of interrelated games enacted by the characters themselves. War, revenge, love, prophecy, and mystical knowledge are presented not as isolated narrative motifs but as overlapping game systems governed by rules, wagers, and symbolic rewards. The Napoleonic conflict emerges as the largest competitive game, generating a chain of derivative games that entrap the characters within cyclical patterns of rivalry, honor, and inherited guilt. Simultaneously, non-competitive games such as romantic, mystical, and spatiotemporal play offer moments of resistance to these cycles, allowing for the possibility of exit, refusal, and transformation.

Most significantly, the novel extends this freedom beyond the plot by incorporating the reader into the game itself, granting the option to follow, disrupt, or abandon the narrative order. Thus, Pavic constructs a literary space in which play becomes both a narrative mechanism and a psychological model of human behavior, redefining the novel as an interactive system of meaning rather than a fixed sequence of events. The interrelation between the external tarot-narrative game and the internal character-driven games ultimately produces a text that is greater than the sum of its parts, a work in which the act of reading is itself a form of play.

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