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MYTH, COLLECTIVE MEMORY, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF TRUTH: THE CITY AS HUMANITY'S FUTURE LEGEND IN CLIFFORD SIMAK'S CITY

The article examines the interaction between myth, cultural memory, and historical truth in Clifford Simak's novel City, emphasizing the transformation of human civilization into a legendary narrative transmitted by non-human descendants. The study argues that Simak deliberately blurs the boundaries between documented history and mythological interpretation, demonstrating how collective memory reconstructs the past according to the values and worldview of those who inherit it. The City, traditionally understood as the central symbol of civilization, gradually loses its material significance and survives primarily as a cultural image preserved through stories and legends. This transformation reflects the instability of historical truth and reveals the dependence of historical knowledge on interpretation, narration, and memory.

Drawing upon literary, mythopoetic, and cultural approaches, the article analyzes the narrative structure of City, in which the framing "Notes" create uncertainty concerning the authenticity of historical events. The legends about humans are interpreted not merely as fictional tales but as mechanisms of cultural continuity that preserve fragments of historical reality while simultaneously reshaping them. Particular attention is devoted to the symbolic opposition between urban and pastoral spaces, the changing status of humanity in posthuman civilization, and the role of storytelling in constructing cultural identity. Simak's vision anticipates contemporary discussions in memory studies and posthumanist criticism by presenting civilization as a phenomenon whose meaning depends less on material achievements than on the narratives through which future generations remember it.

The article concludes that City represents history as an evolving cultural construct rather than an immutable record of facts. Myth does not replace truth but becomes one of its forms of preservation, allowing collective memory to reinterpret humanity's legacy across historical and biological transformations. Consequently, the city emerges not as a physical location but as a symbolic monument to civilization, existing primarily within cultural memory and future legend.

Key words: Clifford Simak, City, myth, collective memory, cultural memory, historical truth, posthumanism, science fiction, mythopoetics, narrative, civilization.

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МІФ, КОЛЕКТИВНА ПАМ'ЯТЬ ТА КОНСТРУКЦІЯ ПРАВДИ: МІСТО ЯК МАЙБУТНЯ ЛЕГЕНДА ЛЮДСТВА У РОМАНІ «МІСТО» КЛІФФОРДА СІМАКА

У статті досліджується взаємозв'язок міфу, культурної пам'яті та історичної істини в романі Кліффорда Сімака «Місто». Основну увагу зосереджено на тому, як письменник моделює процес перетворення людської цивілізації на легенду, що передається вже не людьми, а їхніми постлюдськими нащадками. Доведено, що композиційна структура твору, побудована як цикл оповідей із редакторськими примітками, навмисно розмиває межі між документальною історією, художньою вигадкою та міфологічним мисленням. Завдяки цьому минуле постає не як сукупність незмінних фактів, а як результат інтерпретації, колективної пам'яті та культурної трансмісії.

Проаналізовано символіку міста як одного з центральних образів роману. Встановлено, що в процесі розвитку сюжету місто поступово втрачає своє матеріальне значення й перетворюється на символ людської цивілізації, який існує переважно у формі легенди. Така трансформація засвідчує зміну способів осмислення історичного досвіду та підкреслює залежність історичної істини від культурного контексту її збереження. Особливу увагу приділено взаємодії міфу та пам'яті як механізмів конструювання культурної ідентичності, а також художньому переосмисленню традиційної опозиції між містом і природою.

У дослідженні використано літературознавчий, міфопоетичний, герменевтичний і культурологічний підходи, що дозволяють розкрити багаторівневу систему символів роману та його філософське осмислення майбутнього людства. Зроблено висновок, що Кліффорд Сімак репрезентує історію як відкритий процес безперервного переосмислення, у якому міф не заперечує істину, а стає одним зі способів її збереження. Образ міста набуває значення культурного архетипу, який існує насамперед у колективній пам'яті, перетворюючись на легенду про людство для майбутніх поколінь.

Ключові слова: Кліффорд Сімак, «Місто», міф, колективна пам'ять, культурна пам'ять, історична істина, наукова фантастика, міфопоетика, постгуманізм, цивілізація, образ міста, наратив.

Problem statement. Contemporary literary studies increasingly explore the relationship between fiction, memory, and historical consciousness, particularly in speculative literature that reimagines humanity's future. Clifford Simak's *City* occupies a distinctive place within science fiction because it presents civilization not from the perspective of its creators but through the recollections and legends of their successors. Despite considerable scholarly attention to Simak's humanism, ecological philosophy, and posthuman imagination, comparatively little research has focused on the interaction between myth-making, collective memory, and the construction of historical

truth in the novel. This gap necessitates a comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms through which historical reality is transformed into cultural legend and the symbolic function of the city as an image preserved within collective memory rather than physical space.

Analysis of recent research and publications. Modern scholarship interprets Simak's *City* from several complementary perspectives. Researchers investigating posthumanism emphasize the novel's decentralization of the human subject and its representation of intelligent non-human communities as legitimate successors to civilization. Studies in ecocriticism examine Simak's rejection of technological expansion

in favor of ecological harmony and coexistence with nature. Scholars of science fiction have also analyzed the philosophical dimensions of the novel, particularly its critique of anthropocentrism, violence, and political institutions.

At the same time, memory studies provide productive theoretical tools for understanding the novel's narrative organization. Concepts developed by Maurice Halbwachs (Halbwachs, 2013) concerning collective memory, Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory (Assmann, 2011), and Paul Ricoeur's reflections on memory, history, and forgetting (Ricoeur, 2009) demonstrate that historical knowledge is inseparable from processes of interpretation and transmission. These approaches reveal that Simak constructs history as a sequence of narratives whose authority depends upon communal belief rather than empirical verification. Nevertheless, the symbolic transformation of the city into a future myth and its role as a repository of cultural memory remain insufficiently investigated, making further research particularly relevant.

Aim of the Article. The aim of the article is to investigate the interaction between myth, collective memory, and historical truth in Clifford Simak's *City*, to determine how the novel transforms the image of the city into a future legend of humanity, and to demonstrate how narrative strategies reconstruct civilization through the mechanisms of cultural memory and mythopoetic reinterpretation.

Outline of the main material. Clifford D. Simak's *City* is not just a future history – it's presented as a future myth. The book's unique framing device invites us to imagine sitting far in the future, listening to Dogs tell old stories about the strange creatures called Man. In fact, each chapter is delivered as if it were an ancient Dog legend, complete with commentary from a dog historian who introduces and analyzes the tale. The commentary openly frames the stories in that way: "STILL ALIEN by all other standards, the second tale strikes a more familiar note than did the first. Here, for the first time, the reader gains an impression that this tale might have been born about a Doggish campfire..." (Simak, 1952: 11). By the time the Dogs relate these stories, so many millennia have passed that even the existence of humans has become doubtful lore. For the Dogs, these are "Doggish myths" (Simak, 1952: 41). That is, tales so shrouded in time that their scholars earnestly debate whether humans ever really existed or are purely symbolic. The frame notes make that uncertainty explicit: "Tige points, too, to this seventh tale as proof that if there is no historic evidence of Man's existence it is because he was forgotten deliberately, because his memory was wiped

out to assure the continuance of the canine culture in its purest form" (Simak, 1952: 53). Simak frames the decline of humanity not as a factual chronicle, but as a legend recounted around proverbial campfires, with all the warmth, distortion, and wonder that legend implies. This becomes clear from the way the stories are told: the Dogs gather, tell stories "when the fires burn high and the wind is from the north," (Simak, 1952: 1) and then argue about them like scholars. That setting matters because it shifts the reader's attention away from human greatness. The future is no longer narrated by human winners, or even by human survivors, but by a species that has inherited the planet and is trying to understand a vanished predecessor (Brown, 2019; Holmes, 2020).

Dog frame commentaries form an integral part of the novel's meaning. In the book version as opposed to the original magazine stories, each tale opens with a note by future Dog scholars – characters with names like Bounce, Rover, and Tige – who speculate about the origin and meaning of the story we're about to read. These canine commentators function like folklorists or theologians examining a half-remembered scripture. They provide short "literary analysis" essays before each chapter, weighing different interpretations of the legend. Even among Dogs there are academic debates: the dog archivists treat the human race as mythical beings, and one eccentric scholar, the bold Tige, is ridiculed for suggesting that humans might have actually existed in historical fact. We see a future culture struggling to sift fact from allegory in stories passed down over thousands of years. This structure reflects how cultures reinterpret the past over time. Just as modern historians comb through legends for kernels of truth, Simak's Dogs compare different "old songs" about humanity, trying to determine what really happened and what's a moral parable. The dog-gish editors remind us at every turn that these could be just stories – that time and retelling have eroded the clarity of truth (Brown 2019; Bruncvik, 2021).

The importance of this structure lies in the fact that myth is not treated merely as error. The Dogs do not remember humanity accurately, yet their legends preserve something essential about human civilization: its violence, its ambition, its creativity, and its failure to live ethically with power. Simak, therefore, suggests that memory becomes culturally useful not by remaining perfectly factual, but by carrying forward patterns of meaning.

One interesting thing about this structure is how historical events are transformed into myth before our eyes. For example, when the Dogs discuss the tale "Desertion," they are baffled by its setting on Jupiter, which to them is literally another world shrouded in

mystery. The things that were concrete reality for the characters (cities, cars, wars, even planet Earth itself) have, in the Dogs' time, become exotic lore. One of the few Dog scholars speculates that the tales of humans might have been allegories all along – perhaps stories invented to teach the young Dogs ethical lessons, rather than faithful histories. In their time, “Webster” has even become the Dogs' word for human, as if the proper names of people turned into generic mythical creatures. This is mythmaking at work: historical figures like the Webster family or the robot Jenkins are remembered not as individuals but as archetypes in a fable (Brown, 2019).

Simak's choice to structure the book as a series of framed legends was very much intentional, and it carries both narrative and philosophical weight. Part of the reason lies in Simak's own disillusionment with humanity by the 1940s. He was writing *City* during and after World War II, grappling with the horrors of war and mass killing. By letting Dogs literally inherit the Earth and the storytelling, Simak could cast a critical eye on human nature. The far-future Dogs look back on humans with a mixture of awe and disappointment – exactly the tone you'd expect if an author had lost patience with his own species. Science fiction grandmaster Robert Silverberg noted that, for all its gentleness, *City* is at heart “an excursion into misanthropy – the quiet cry of someone who has lost patience with his own species”. (Silverberg, 1995). Indeed, across the eight tales, we witness humanity making a series of selfish or short-sighted decisions that ultimately erase our own legacy, leaving the planet to our successors. Humans don't stand at the center of *City* telling you their mistakes; instead, Dogs stand on the periphery, remembering those mistakes with that mix of reverence and regret usually reserved for myth.

The Dogs in *City* preserve these tales for a reason. Storytelling, in their society, becomes a way to carry forward lessons and grapple with the past. But as with any oral tradition, the act of telling also reshapes the tale. In *City*, memory is not stored in databases or history books; it lives in spoken or perhaps telepathically shared stories, subject to embellishment and omission. This makes the narrative framing inherently unreliable – and pointedly so. Throughout *City*, there is a tension between fact and belief. The Dogs treat these stories as meaningful even when their literal truth is uncertain. The Dogs are not “good” because the author says so; they are “good” because their society is built around habits that refuse the old human shortcuts—fear, violence, extermination. “The world is going nuts – suicides, murders, a wave of violence are sweeping the world” (Ewald, 2006: 33). This suggests that Simak is commenting on how cul-

tural memory works in any civilization. On one hand, the legend of humanity clearly serves as a warning to the Dogs: they take from these tales the lesson that violence and “Human” ambition nearly destroyed the world, and that their own society must avoid those pitfalls. The strange effect is that the Dogs begin as a human project and end as something humans cannot control. Their intelligence does not remain a tool; it becomes a seed of independence. “In *City*... with the help of other intelligent beings, Simak seemed to be prophesying another “giant step for mankind,” a chance to prove that such a precious gift as life cannot all have been for nothing” (Ewald, 2006: 22). Jenkins, who appears in every tale, functions as a living repository of memory that the Dogs themselves don't fully have. He is a character who bridges the gap between the real events and the Dogs' later recollections. As a robot who survives across millennia, Jenkins carries the factual memory of what truly happened, even as the Dogs around him view those events through legend. In a world where “Man” has faded into myth, Jenkins's personal witness is what keeps the moral truth of history accessible to the future. This dynamic between Jenkins' undying memory and the Dogs' evolving folklore beautifully illustrates the philosophical questions Simak is asking: What is the value of remembering the truth? How do we pass down wisdom without distorting it? And is truth less significant than meaning?

The Dogs treasure the meaning of the tales – the ideals of peace and community they infer – even if the truth of the tales is uncertain. Storytelling, then, is shown as a double-edged sword: it preserves meaning but warps fact. This is also visible in the first tale's commentary, where even the city itself is treated as doubtful and almost mythic: “Most authorities in economics and sociology regard such an organization as a city an impossible structure...” (Brown, 2019).

In one sense, Simak is gently suggesting that all civilization is transient. Given enough time, the cities we build, the wars we fight, even the entire human race could fade away, leaving behind only echoes in story form. It is, as John Ower noted, an ambivalent and layered work. Yes, it condemns human brutality and exalts canine pacifism on the surface, but it also reveals the shortcomings of both cultures – the Dogs' utopia has its fragilities, and humanity, for all its faults, had moments of courage and creativity. It nudges us to reflect on our own myths – how the stories we tell about our past simplify or distort what actually happened, and yet how those stories shape our values going forward (Ower, 1979).

In the end, “Myth, Memory, and Truth” in Simak's *City* are all entwined. The Dogs' mythologized com-

mentary provides the memory framework for the novel – it's how the future remembers or misremembers the truth of humanity. And Simak, by choosing this structure, invites us to contemplate the fate of all truths in time. What becomes of our deeds, our cities, our very species, when enough years have passed? Perhaps they all turn into tales – some accurate, some fanciful, but each serving a purpose for those who tell them. *City's* layered narrative suggests that while factual truth may not survive the ages, meaning might. The Dogs derive meaning from the legend of Man: cautionary meaning, aspirational meaning, and even existential meaning (wondering where they themselves came from). In the end, *City* presents myth, memory, and truth not as opposites but as overlapping forms of cultural survival. Factual history becomes unstable across millennia, yet narrative continues to preserve ethical meaning. Simak's future Dogs do not inherit humanity's world as simple conquerors; they inherit it as interpreters. For that reason, the novel suggests that what survives a civilization is not its certainty, but the stories through which later beings attempt to understand it.

Conclusion. The analysis demonstrates that Clifford Simak's *City* presents civilization as a phenome-

non that survives not through material continuity but through cultural remembrance. The framing legends and editorial notes intentionally undermine the certainty of historical facts, illustrating that every reconstruction of the past is mediated by interpretation and collective memory. Within this framework, myth functions not as the opposite of truth but as a cultural mechanism that preserves and reshapes historical experience.

The symbolic image of the city undergoes a significant transformation from a tangible center of human civilization into a legendary cultural concept transmitted across generations of non-human beings. This shift reflects the instability of historical narratives and highlights the creative role of memory in constructing cultural identity. Simak ultimately suggests that humanity's greatest legacy is not its technological achievements but the stories through which future civilizations continue to imagine and reinterpret its existence. Therefore, *City* may be understood as both a philosophical reflection on the destiny of civilization and a literary exploration of the dynamic relationship between myth, memory, and historical truth.

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