This investigation takes as its starting point the cliché notions concerning the place of Turgenev’s novels as part of his overall output that have been generally maintained in Turgenev criticism over time. The novels are set apart from the rest of Turgenev’s work on the basis of their supposedly different concerns. It is generally maintained that, in his novels, Turgenev aimed to depict the major social and political currents of his age, thereby complying with the demands of Russian Realism. The novels are often especially contrasted with the short prose, which touches upon the more universal themes of the significance of man’s life and the influence of supernatural powers. In those periods of literary history during which, to use Jakobsonian terms, the poetic function of literature was specifically focused on (as was the case in the first decades of the twentieth century), there was a particular tendency to regard the short prose as more representative of Turgenev’s writing skills than the novels.

However, such a division misses a fundamental aspect of Turgenev’s work. The many similarities between the short prose and the novels, especially with regard to character types, plot elements and the use of imagery, hint at a common poetics informing Turgenev’s work as a whole. An increasing number of poetic studies of the novels over the past twenty years have drawn attention to several aspects of universal themes that can be traced in the novels’ poetic structures, thereby already going some way towards invalidating the idea of the novels’ purely contemporary orientation.

Still, poetic reading does not offer a fully satisfactory solution since it fails to formulate the place of the novels’ contemporary settings with regard to these poetic structures. Thus, poetic reading, although most of the researchers involved do not make the claim explicitly, implies that it is only the poetic devices that communicate Turgenev’s world view, ‘from under the surface’ of the contemporary scene so to speak. Such an interpretation suggests that the novels are something like the products of two unrelated elements: the discussion of contemporary questions and the discussion of universal questions.

What that interpretation neglects is a consideration of the novels’ structures. I have developed a model of analysis that is geared to a formulation of how the structures as a whole communicate Turgenev’s vision on the world. At its basis lies Jurij Lotman’s theory that Turgenev’s novels develop on the basis of multiple ‘levels’ of meaning, creating several perspectives on man’s life. I have slightly simplified Lotman’s model into one with only two perspectives, contemporary and cosmic, and have tentatively connected their representation in the text to the textual mechanisms of narrative and verbal art that have been developed as tools for textual analysis by Hansen-Löve and Schmid. This has enabled me to trace how the meaning-generating mechanisms of the texts function in the presentation of the philosophical messages of the novels.

It has proved to be a successful instrument for approaching the novels. An analysis of the narrative and verbal art mechanisms reveals in each of the novels, with the exception of Rudin, a double, contemporary and cosmic, perspective on the hero and his fate. The contemporary perspective shows the hero within the framework of his age; the cosmic perspective links him to archetypes. The logical-causal orientation of the contemporary level connects the hero’s fate to his concrete (psychological, cultural, socio-political) features; the non-contiguous, paradigmatic orientation of the cosmic level links his fate to that of recurrent types. The contemporary level provides the human perspective on life, presenting man’s evaluations and rational models as bases for the interpretation of life. The cosmic level counters this view with a supra-personal ‘perspective’. This is not a perspective in the sense that it is communicated by an entity in the narrative that can convey perspective, such as the
characters, or the narrator. The verbal art mechanisms, on the basis of which the cosmic level is conveyed, do not rely on a perspective within the text. Nevertheless, it is possible for the narrator or one of the characters to formulate a view of life that can be associated with the cosmic perspective. In these cases the cosmic view is made explicit on the narrative level. Examples include the narrator’s concluding remarks in On the Eve, and Bazarov’s observations on the insignificance of his own life. The rule, however, is that the cosmic level presents itself in the text through associations, equivalences, cyclic spatial patterns and repetitive elements. It presents life as being ruled by irrational, cosmic laws, submitting the individuals’ lives to an endless pattern of creation and destruction.

In each of the novels, again with the exception of Rudin, there is a clash of some kind between the two levels. In A Nest of Gentry, On the Eve and Fathers and Sons, the logical-causal course of the events presents the reader with motivational gaps. The return of Varvara Pavlovna and the deaths of Insarov and Bazarov do not follow logically from the development of the events, but rather present a sudden breaking-off of these developments. In the cases where the gap is created by the death of the hero, it is connected with the meaning of death within the two-perspective model: death is the manifestation of the cosmic level that breaks into the contemporary level. It is the annihilator of the human concepts of meaning.

Motivational gaps are not the only examples of the influence of non-logical-causal patterns on the narrative structure of the text. In the analyses, I have examined several cases in which characters are grouped on the basis of patterns of similarity and opposition, such as the division of the main characters in Fathers and Sons into the pastoral and the anti-pastoral. Another example is that of the symbolic connotations of space, such as Lavreckij’s estate Vasil’evskoe, which has the quality of an atemporal locus, and the city of Venice, which is a symbol of impending death.

Furthermore, linear developments are countered by cyclic or repetitive patterns. The simultaneous marriage of the Kirsanov father and son, their equally simultaneous fatherhood, and the fact that Arkadij’s baby is named after Nikolaj, each communicate an image of life as a continuous cycle. Also of interest is the habitual lack of ‘purposeful’ movement in the plots of the novels: the hero often travels back and forth, or roams without really going anywhere. Rudin, for example, wanders aimlessly through Russia; Lavreckij restlessly moves from one place to the other without finding a place where he wants to stay. A variant of this scheme is found in On the Eve, in which Insarov, having set himself the goal of travelling to Bulgaria, becomes ‘stuck’ in Venice, which is the symbol of his inescapable death and, as such, may be deemed his actual destination from the cosmic perspective.

These examples bear witness to the interweaving of contiguous and non-contiguous textual elements that characterizes the structure of Turgenev’s novels and facilitates the communication of his world view.

Within my investigation as a whole, the results of the analyses of Smoke and Virgin Soil are of particular interest because they are commonly considered to deviate from Turgenev’s manner of writing in the previous novels, and are therefore often omitted from studies of his work. I have included them in order to investigate whether the generally-assumed change in Turgenev’s novelistic manner is reflected in the use and function of the narrative and verbal art mechanisms and in the presentation of his world view. The answer is both yes and no. On the one hand, the supposed change in Turgenev’s novelistic approach is countered by a continuation as far as the presentation of his world view is concerned. Smoke and Virgin Soil, like the previous novels, present a contemporary and cosmic view of the hero’s life by means of narrative and verbal art mechanisms. On the other hand, however, the influence of cosmic forces is expressed more directly than in the previous novels. The plots of Smoke and Virgin Soil explicitly present the heroes’ confrontation with the determinative influence of cosmic
laws on their lives. I would therefore maintain that the differences between these novels and the previous ones are not absolute and should not be described in qualitative terms; rather, they are relative, following from certain developments in the means by which Turgenev has chosen to present his world view.

The analyses have revealed an evolution in Turgenev’s novels as far as the expression of his world view is concerned, which we can observe primarily through the increasingly explicit expression of the influence of cosmic laws on man’s life. In *Rudin*, the idea of the influence of such forces is virtually absent; the focus is on the portrayal of *Rudin* as contemporary type. The ensuing novels, *A Nest of Gentry*, *On the Eve* and *Fathers and Sons* each present a double view of the hero’s life. Each presents motivational gaps in the development of the fate of the hero, hinting at the importance of extra-contemporary features determining man’s fate. In *A Nest of Gentry*, the importance of historical factors is countered by the suggestion of man’s life being ruled by predetermined patterns of fate. As I have argued, the return of Varvara Pavlovna cannot be explained from the development of the events, and is understandable only in the light of the associations suggesting that she forms an embodiment of fate.

In *On the Eve*, there are two motivational gaps: the hero lacks a comprehensible contemporary portrait that could conceivably motivate his character and deeds, and his death remains unmotivated. This rather strong reduction of motivation on the narrative art level is ‘compensated’ for, not only by an extraordinarily dense verbal art structure, linking the hero to an archetypal victim of destructive love, but also by an explicit philosophical discourse. This element is introduced in the opening scene of the novel – the conversation between Šubin and Bersene concerning man’s position within creation – and returns at the end of the novel in the form of the narrator’s concluding remarks about the insignificance of human life. Thus, a philosophical framework is created within which the developments of the plot can be interpreted.

Unlike *On the Eve*, *Fathers and Sons* features a hero whose contemporary portrait is very detailed. Nevertheless, here too, a motivational lacuna arises in the form of Bazarov’s unexpected death. The verbal art structure suggests links between Bazarov and a number of heroes from archetypal transgression plots. The elimination of the transgressor in such plots suggests a motivation for Bazarov’s death.

Like *On the Eve*, *Fathers and Sons* presents a discussion of the individual’s position within the whole of nature in the form of an explicit philosophical discourse between the characters. In both scenes, the insect features as a symbol of the relativity of man’s life, which is as important in relation to the whole of nature as the insect’s life is in relation to man. In particular, the imagery used in *On the Eve* shows a strong affinity to that which Turgenev uses in his philosophical expositions – his Aksakov review, and his essay on Hamlet and Don Quixote, dating from 1853 and 1860 respectively. Particularly interesting is the concurrence of the philosophical discourses in *On the Eve* and *Fathers and Sons* with practical changes of perspective that form part of the action in these novels. In *On the Eve*, Šubin looks at the insects as a detached observer, and this explains why he does not value their lives. In *Fathers and Sons*, we find Pavel Kirsanov, as a similarly detached observer, looking at infusorians through a microscope. Both images convey a notion of mental distance between the observer and the observed. It is exactly this view ‘from outside’, resulting from a shift in perspective, that the novels’ contemporary and cosmic levels realize. The contemporary level shows human life ‘from within’, as something important and having intrinsic meaning. The cosmic perspective shows it ‘from outside’, rendering intrinsic human values and concerns irrelevant and inconsequential, just as the individual concerns or identities of infusorians and insects are inconceivable to man.
The last two novels comprise a development toward the ‘emplotment’ of the influence of cosmic laws. The plot of *Smoke* is initiated and propelled by the influence of irrational forces, brought to bear on the hero’s life, that present themselves in the form of destructive passion. The absence of a contemporary embedding of the hero – the lack of an ideological profile, and the setting outside Russia – are features of the novel’s narrative structure that stress the universality of its theme. The focus is on the psychological effects that the events have on Litvinov: his initial belief that life can be planned as a series of logical, rational steps is totally shattered.

*Virgin Soil* externalizes the idea of archetypality since its hero’s characterization is determined by his own acknowledgment that his life is defined by an archetype (Hamlet). His characterization is determined largely by his philosophical pondering over the question of why he cannot be whom he wants to be. By means of this philosophical characterization of the hero, the novel communicates the idea that man is unable to change his life in a substantial way. Accordingly, the plot scheme of the novel presents itself as an anti-plot. The plot scheme of the traditional nineteenth century novel shows a development from an initial situation via a number of events to a changed situation. The position of the hero at the end of the novel is substantially different from what it was at the beginning. *Virgin Soil* initially presents such a plot scheme: Neždanov’s encounter with Sipjagin enables him to change his environment and brings him into contact with the populists and with Marianna. However, these changes do not influence the hero’s personality: he is still the same ‘Hamlet’. Thus, the connection between a change of circumstances and a change in the hero’s personality, the rule for traditional plot schemes, is broken. There is no possible further development. The hero’s suicide cuts off the plot, and thus serves as an anti-climax. From the perspective of cosmic laws, however, his death is of no more consequence than the usual denouement would have been.

These qualities of *Virgin Soil* make it the most overt example of Turgenev’s demythologizing of the nineteenth century Russian notion that the hero can be transformed from evil to good. Turgenev’s personal ‘myth’ is determined by the confinement that an impersonal universe imposes upon any developments in man’s life. The possibility of substantial, lasting change is denied and replaced by a scheme of endless repetition of a tragic fate, determined by the inescapable annihilation of the individual and his view of life.