

## Artículo de investigación

**Folklore tradition in the art world of chekhov: part one**

Фольклорная традиция в художественном мире А. П. Чехова: часть первая

La Tradición del folklore en el mundo del arte de A.P. Chekhov: Primera parte

Recibido: 14 de mayo del 2019

Aceptado: 15 de julio del 2019

Written by:

**Marianna A. Dudareva**<sup>158</sup>

SPIN: 5362-0507

**Yulia V. Karpova**<sup>159</sup>

ORCID: 0000-0003-1992-2307

SPIN: 8330-3207

**Evgeniya A. Polyantseva**<sup>160</sup>**Abstract**

The article is devoted to the study of A.P. Chekhov's works in the context of folklore tradition. The topic itself is interesting and productive from the viewpoint of the folklore tradition manifestation in the work of the classic, since Chekhov is often considered a "non-folkloric" writer. More recently, the theme "Chekhov and folklore" began being referred by researchers. The article raises the question about various folklorism forms in poetics, stylizations and borrowings, and latent folklorism forms. The object of research is a later work, the novella "Steppe". The subject of the article is folklorism principles in poetics.

**Key words:** Chekhov, folklore, myth, tradition.

**Аннотация**

Статья посвящена изучению творчества А. П. Чехова в контексте фольклорной традиции. Сама тема интересна и продуктивна с точки зрения проявления фольклорной традиции в творчестве классика, так как Чехова часто считают «не фольклорным» писателем. Сравнительно недавно исследователи стали обращаться к теме «Чехов и фольклор». Поднимается вопрос о разных формах фольклоризма в поэтике, о стилизациях и заимствованиях, о латентных формах фольклоризма. Объектом исследования выступает позднее произведение, повесть «Степь». Предметом статьи являются принципы фольклоризма в поэтике.

**Ключевые слова:** Чехов, фольклор, миф, традиция

**Resumen**

El artículo está dedicado al estudio de las obras de A.P. Chekhov en el contexto de la tradición del folklore. El tema en sí es interesante y productivo desde el punto de vista de la manifestación de la tradición folclórica en la obra del clásico, ya que Chekhov a menudo se considera un escritor "no folclórico". Más recientemente, el tema "Chéjov y el folclore" comenzó a ser referido por los investigadores. El artículo plantea la pregunta sobre varias formas de folklorismo en poética, estilizaciones y préstamos, y formas de

<sup>158</sup> Candidate of Philology Senior lecturer Russian Language Department No. 2, the Russian Language and General Education Faculty RUDN University Build.3, 10, Miklukho-Maklaya st., Moscow, 117198, Russia Moscow, Russia. marianna.galieva@yandex.ru

<sup>159</sup> Senior lecturer Russian Language Department No. 2, the Russian Language and General Education Faculty RUDN University Build.3, 10, Miklukho-Maklaya st., Moscow, 117198, Russia

<sup>160</sup> Assistant Russian Language Department No. 2, the Russian Language and General Education Faculty RUDN University Build.3, 10, Miklukho-Maklaya st., Moscow, 117198, Russian Moscow, Russia

folklorismo latente. El objeto de la investigación es un trabajo posterior, la novela "Estepa". El tema del artículo son los principios del folklorismo en la poética.

**Palabras clave:** Chekhov, folklore, mito, tradición.

### Introduction

A researcher dealing with the issues concerning functioning of folklore tradition in literature should bear in mind some points. First, folklore tradition is manifested in the text in different ways: external forms, stylizations and internal forms. The latter is due to the fact that a writer does not follow folklore but begins a dialogue with folklore tradition. On the second hand, a question of "folklore" concept denotation arises. What can we consider to be folklore? Is it only texts, fairy tales, epic and riddles? Or else is it a complex of formations consisting of rites and rituals? O.M. Freudenberg, a famous ancient literature expert, demonstrated in her works how myths, folklore and literature interact (Freudenberg, 2008). Here in this article we are also going to proceed from the same dialectical triad, i.e. take into account the complex of pre-genre formations, the ritual reality.

### Materials and methods

There are no evidence of any direct impact of folklore and myth on the poetics, figurative system of A.P. Chekhov's works, but this does not prevent the researches from posing "Chekhov and folklore" question, which began to worry researchers in the 1930s-1940s. Let us mention the method that we apply analyzing the classical texts of Russian literature. Literature can involve different types of folklorism. Of course, it is the most convenient to study the external forms of folklorism, stylization, borrowings, direct orientations, folklore motifs sources of one or another writer, but there are other forms of folklorism. The latter are usually called internal, latent, intuitive. It seems that the hidden forms of folklore tradition penetration are relevant to Chekhov's work. The history of Chekhovian folklorism study shows that the researchers considered mainly the external forms: folklore and ethnographic elements, pronounced in poetics, or archetypal structures associated with symbolic overtones. Of course, a number of works attempts to examine a specific folklore motif functions in the work (Rogovskaya, 1974), but mainly early stories were the research object (Tumilevich, 1978), since they illustrate the connection between literature and folklore the most obviously. In contemporary articles and dissertations literary scholars also try to refer,

first of all, to folklore texts, to identify the books the writer read (Terekhova, 2002).

In these works, Chekhov's works were analyzed from the point of view of mythopoetics and folklorism (less often) that allows raising the question of the relevance of the topic. In addition, much attention was paid either to early stories, since they illustrate the connection with folklore the most obviously, or the plays filled with symbolic meaning, to which the poetic symbolists turned their attention. Although, for the sake of justice, it is worth noting that the step towards the *comprehensive* understanding of folklore as applicable to Chekhov's works on the part of researchers has still been made – an example of this is an article of M. Ch. Larionova (2006). Mythopoetics was often given the first place, but, for example, the work of N.I. Ishuk-Fadeeva also applies to systematic approach: the researcher refers to ritual tradition, analyzing the archetypal structures of "The Seagull" (Ishchuk-Fadeeva, 2001). In our chapter, the later Chekhov's novels are considered in the context of folklore tradition, manifested mainly latently that is of particular interest.

The question of folklorism in Chekhov's "The Steppe" has already been raised. An article of D.N. Medrish compares this complex Chekhov's work with the composition of a lyric song having an open ending at the level of poetics, in sacral-ritual discourse (Medrish, 1978). But the essence of this ending (in contrast to the classical ones, which are more typical) consists in the *ritual transformation of the character*, who must grow into himself but new one. After traveling to the steppe Yegorushka, apparently, should be initiated to start a new life. M.Ch. Larionov also paid attention to the transitional ritual element of the novella drew having compared the locus of the steppe with the place of "temporary death", since the steppe for the Russian man and Chekhovian characters is the place of "physical and spiritual pilgrimage, formation, ordering, testing, liberation from the past and preparation for the present" (Larionova, 2009).

### Results

This is what Chekhov himself wrote about his work, "I took a steppe, which has long been

remained undescribed. Each separate chapter is a story ... I tried to write them so that they have general smell and general tone...” (Chekhov, 1974-1982a). This judgment, the intention expressed in the letters to D.V. Grigorovich, states one of the basic principles of poetics – the writer’s immanent perception of his own works. The third and fourth part of the novella make us think about the tradition in which Chekhov continues to create: the description of the steppe itself, of people described so fantastically and symbolically that the steppe performs the function of a special *topic*, that is, reality on the verge of existential world, “Broad shadows move across the plain, like clouds across the sky and in the inconceivable distance, if you look long and intently at it, misty, monstrous shapes rise up and huddle against each other... It is rather uncanny” (Chekhov, 1974-1982b) [translated by C. Garnett]; “You go and suddenly see a *silhouette*, similar to a monk in front of the road; he does not move, he waits and holds something . . . Is he a robber? The figure is approaching, growing, so she came up to the chaise, and you see that *this is not a man, but a lonely bush or a big stone*” (Chekhov, 1974-1982b) – Yegorushka is in a borderline state, he comprehends the reality in a different way than Kuzmichov, Moisei Moiseich and others. After all, it is the boy’s imagination to which both the “The Black Monk” and “stone women” are directed. But a legitimate question arises, “Why did Chekhov use exactly these comparisons? Can they be conditioned by cultural paradigms and its entire creative laboratory?”. Curiously enough, but we find the answers to these questions in the figurative system of the poets of the Silver Age. In this case, we will analyze in detail some fragments of the novella “The Steppe”, story “The Black Monk” and Khlebnikov’s poem “The Stone Woman”.

Khlebnikov had a fine appreciation of Chekhov’s literature, especially his poetics (Loshchilov, 1999), his poems directly refer to Chekhov’s stories, they feature a commonality of the image that may have been found by the writers’ “gut feeling” (a detailed analysis of the Khlebnikov’s poem “The Dog Waves its Tail, Barks”, in which the reminiscence to the works and personality of Chekhov is hidden, is presented in the article by I. E. Loshchilov). In this context, Balmont’s remark about Chekhov seems to be insightful, “...over decades Chekhov’s *spiritual forethought* became more visible and charming, it gains more and more strength of virtuous magic” (Balmont, 2007). If to refer to the two well-known texts, Chekhov’s “The Steppe”, which expresses the main principles of his poetics, and to Khlebnikov’s poem “The Stone Woman”, we

will see that the thing that Chekhov perceived as a mere detail, an element of the steppe landscape (let us denote it so), Khlebnikov considered the core for the figurative system of the poem. In the cognominal poem of Khlebnikov the main character is a stone woman. What is the reason for that? Let us turn to an ethnographic commentary, without which it is difficult to understand the poet’s works at all. Khlebnikov, who certainly knew myths and folklore, borrowed certain images from ancient culture, but he always created his own world, his own myth (Vykhortsev, 1983). Analyzing the so-called “mythological poems” of Khlebnikov researchers often come to the conclusion that this is a single but not finished “epic poem” (D. Mirsky). The artistic fabric of the poem “The Stone Woman” is fastened by the image of a stone maiden, an idol that connects two realities, one of which is *cosmic*, leading to eternity (combining lyric and epic), and the second one is vernacular, profane:

The stone women of the fields  
are tales told in books of stone.  
Ancient cults erected you.  
You stretch to heaven and back again.

.....  
A bent old man, his twisted stick,  
the stillness of a magic spell (Khlebnikov,  
1986b) [translated by Paul Schmidt].

The chronotope is “stillness” and steppe; the opening of the space and the disappearance of the character are followed by the description of the “stone woman”, but the question which, at first sight, does not comply with the artistic fabric of the text, arises:

I expect to be shot. Every day.  
But why? For what? After all, I have loved all  
creation,  
and spent my childhood here in the steppe,  
amid plume-grass and stones (Khlebnikov,  
1986b) [translated by Paul Schmidt].

From these lines, the images of the old man and the virgin begin to become clear. The old man is a traveler who aspires to heaven:

What does the child want in the stillness  
that overlies this silver murmur?  
Cry because the Milky Way isn’t mine?  
(Khlebnikov, 1986b) [translated by Paul  
Schmidt].

What is the “stone figure” in Chekhov’s novella “The Steppe” – just a road mark or it is culturally connected with Polovtsian sculptures, sacrificial

rituals? If in Khlebnikov's poetics, which suited for a synthesis of "Balkan and Sarmatian artistic thought" (Khlebnikov, 1986a) this is so, is it characteristic of Chekhov's art system, while many researchers even "deny" his folklore tradition (Emelyanov, 1978)? "A silent old barrow or a stone figure put up *God knows when and by whom*, a nightbird floats noiselessly over the earth, the stories of some old nurse from the steppe, and all the things you have managed to see and treasure in your soul come back to your mind (Chekhov, 1974-1982a)" – in this case the stone figure is a sort of a "landmark" for Egorushka, who observes the surrounding reality and associates it with "the stories of some old nurse from the steppe". These parallels suggest that the both masters created this image involuntarily, probably, it can be said that the archetype is associated with the *complex of burial rituals*. This is indicated, first of all, by the fact that the stone figure performed in the Slavic tradition was a sort of totem-conductor for the spirits-ancestors, who came to shamans, wizards and cultural characters.

In another Khlebnikov's poem under the characteristic title "Shaman and Venus", the shaman comes to the cave of Venus, but the action is developing on it was / it was not verge. What stands out, is that the ritually similar situation is depicted in Pushkin's "The tale of the Golden Cockerel"<sup>161</sup>. The subject of the poem "The Stone Woman" as well as of the poem "Shaman and Venus" is eastern philosophical. The actions take place "in the South Russian nature" (Alfonsov, 1982) (Khlebnikov uses archetypes and plots inherent in the East and stylizes them under the Slavic tradition). Moreover, if to talk about receptions and typologies in Chekhov's works of the 20th century, it should be noted that the difficult and mysterious Yesenin's poem "The Black Man" is often compared with the story "The Black Monk" and it seems to be reasonable, but in this case the most important thing is the whole immanent perception of Chekhov's works, which make us wonder whether two late complex stories "The Steppe" and "The Black Monk" were conceived within the framework of a single story. And here is why. Let us pay attention only to some details in the three texts, the plot of the character's encounter with the black man / monk / lady (the

latter occurs at Moisei Moiseich's inn). Let us start with a fragment of Esenin's poem, which is often unambiguously interpreted by researchers. The second part of the poem is notable for its sound pattern:

Somewhere a night bird,  
Ill-omened, is sobbing.  
The wooden riders  
Scatter hoofbeats (Yesenin, 1997) [translated by Geoffrey Hurley].

From the viewpoint of folkloric tradition, the ritual behavior of ancestral spirits visiting the character with the purpose of opening the veil to another world is revealed (for more details about fainting, phenomena of *volochebnichestvo* (spring round of houses with majestic and spellbound songs, an ancient rite of farm cycle, performed before the beginning of sowing, held usually on the evening of Easter Sunday, sometimes on the eve or on Monday), buffoonery, see Z.I. Vlasova "Skomorokhs and folklore"<sup>162</sup>). The black man in Yesenin's poem visits the patient in the night, when "a night ill-omened bird is calling" and "the wooden riders scatter hoofbeats", laughing at their chosen one. By Chekhov, Yegorushka feels the presence of some strange bird in the house of Moisey Moiseich, "Yegorushka felt a draught of cold air, and it seemed to him as though some *big black bird had* passed by him and had fluttered its wings close in his face" [translated by C. Garnett] (Chekhov, 1974-1982a). How to explain "such" coincidences in the plot? Of course, one could ignore this detail by mistaking all this only for the boy's "fantasies" (often mentioned by the researcher of Chekhov's works), but here arises some archetypal model associated with the cult of woman, with a reference to ritualistic reality through initiatory sleep, sleepy soul creativity, which happens to Egorushka in reality. In addition to the basic coincidences, consisting in the "appearance" of the nightbird, sleepy state of the character, the man in black, at the very time of day, we are interested in the metaphysical meaning of the situation, expressed in a laughing opening – Solomon's ominous laughter and the countess's smile. We see that the boy overcomes cheerful chaos, meets a beautiful lady – and all this occurs in the steppe, in the "plain space". This is bound to lead us to the idea that

<sup>161</sup> In Pushkin's fairy tale: With the chariot fell Dadon - Gasped again, - And he died. The queen suddenly disappeared, As if at all had happened. In Khlebnikov's poem: And with a blessing smile *She* disappears by a gentle mistake

<sup>162</sup> "According to folk beliefs, the souls of ancestors fly inaudibly, invisibly, leave no traces letting know about their

appearance only by the creaking of steps or the appearance of a bird in the room". In folklore, this is due to the phenomenon of "fainting", for a time the soul leaves the body and wanders through the other world in order to cognize it, or a person is visited by spirits who want to inform him about something, if it's a ritual, then information from "the other world" is sacred.



Chekhov's situation is not accidental, that this is a natural sign of poetics. In the story "The Black Monk", the main character Kovrin meets The Black Monk outside the garden, at the exit, "Letting Tanya go back to her visitors, he went out of the house and, lost in meditation, walked by the flower beds. The sun was already setting. The flowers, having just been watered, gave forth a damp, *irritating fragrance*" (Chekhov, 1974-1982b). The garden smells of not the same flavors as the first time, it irritates Kovrin, but the new space where he finds himself gives the character a sense of freedom and elbow-room, and this space is a field, "Before him *lay a wide field* covered with young rye, not yet in blossom<...> "How *open, how free, how still is here!*" thought Kovrin, walking along the path. "And it feels as though all the whole were watching me, hiding and waiting for me to understand it..." (Chekhov, 1974-1982b). It is in this topos where miracles happen to Kovrin, like Yegorushka from the novella "The Steppe" the character enters into a natural-philosophical dialogue, "... all the *whole world were watching me*, hiding and waiting for me to understand it..." (Chekhov, 1974-1982b). In addition, let us pay attention to the fact that nature also interacts with Kovrin, "But then waves began running across the rye, and a light evening *breeze softly touched his uncovered head*" (Chekhov, 1974-1982b), in "The Steppe", "*Something warm touched Yegorushkina's spine*; the streak of light, stealing up from behind, darted between the chaise and the horses <...>" (Chekhov, 1974-1982b). Let us recall that Yegorushka meets mysterious figures in the steppe: Solomon, lady in *black*, finally, he grows up in the steppe as a cultural character. As for Kovrin, he meets The Black Monk in the field (the structure of the space field model / only steppe). It is characteristic that the image of The Black Monk was at first a sort of blurred, it is not clear, "At once a murmur rose from the grass and last year's dry herbage, the dust curled in spiral eddies over the road, raced over the steppe, and crying with it straws, dragon flies and feathers, rose up in a whirling black column towards the sky and darkened the sun. <...>" (Chekhov, 1974-1982b), in "The Steppe", a scene in the house of Moses Moiseich, "*In the middle of the room* there really was standing an Excellency, in the form of a young plump and very beautiful woman in a *black dress* and a straw hat. Before Yegorushka had time to examine her features, the image of solitary graceful poplar he had seen the day on the hill for some reason came into his mind" (Chekhov, 1974-1982a). The lady arose quite unexpectedly (as we judge also by the reaction of Moisey Moiseich, who appeared to no longer notice "neither Kuzmichev nor Father

Christopher" (Chekhov, 1974-1982a) when the countess appeared), she was moving towards the boy to kiss him, "She was standing in the middle of the room and watched him go out, *smiling at him and nodding her head in a friendly way*" (Chekhov, 1974-1982b), we note that The Black Monk also moves towards Kovrin, "<...> moving straight to Kovrin, and the nearer it came, the smaller and the more distinct it was" (Chekhov, 1974-1982b). The Black Monk, like a lady in black, came just for Kovrin, it was he Kovrin was smiling at, like the Countess, giving kisses and a smile to Yegorushka, "After he had floated twenty feet beyond him, he looked round at Kovrin and *nodded to him with a friendly but sly smile*" (Chekhov, 1974-1982b). We can assume that Yegorushka and Kovrin turned to be in one position, as evidenced by the archetypal structure of the plot: the both characters meet with important people in the open space (field / steppe), while being in a "dozing", sick state, enter into dialogues with these people, and, after all, these people are different from all other characters – the lady in *black* and The Black Monk. In this context, it seems necessary to refer to the unusual landscape of the Steppe in general. L. P. Gromov draws attention to the importance of the Chekhovian steppe image, the essence of which can be understood only by revealing "not only the features of the Chekhovian landscape, but all the ideological and symbolic associations that the Chekhov steppe elicits to the thoughtful reader. The depth of the "inner content" of the novella "The Steppe" consists in the very fact that the pictures of steppe nature are saturated with a great social and philosophical content" (Gromov, 1951).

### Conclusion

So, the parallels with the poets' works of the early 20th century allow us to take a different view to imagery of Chekhov's two stories. On the one hand, we can compare Chekhov's "Black Monk" with Yesenin's "Black Man". On the other hand, Chekhov's "The Steppe" and Khlebnikov's "The Stone Woman" are comparable at the level of the internal plot. However, the point is not so much in the plot as in some details and lyrical intonation which is inherent to Chekhov's "The Steppe". Recreation of a folklore context and reference to a lyric song, as another article deals with, helps to reveal the ontological beginning in Chekhov's poetics.

### References

Alfonsov, V.A. (1982). "For the word boldly goes after painting" (V. Khlebnikov and

- painting). Literature and painting. Leningrad: Nauka. P. 221.
- Balmont, K.D. (2007). In the name of Chekhov. Russian literature. Memories and meditations. 1892-1936. M.: Algorithm. P. 304.
- Chekhov, A.P. (1974-1982a). Complete works and letters: In 30 vols. Writings: In 18 vols. Academy of Sciences of the USSR. Institute of World Literature named after M. M. Gorky. Moscow.
- Chekhov, A.P. (1974-1982b). The Steppe. Complete works and letters: In 30 vols. Writings: In 18 tons. Academy of Sciences of the USSR. Institute of World Literature named after M.M. Gorky. Moscow.
- Emelyanov, L.I. (1978). On the Problem of Literature Folklorism // Emelyanov L.I. Methodological problems of folkloristics. Leningrad. Pp. 171-197.
- Freudenberg, O.M. (2008). Antiquity myth and literature. Ekaterinburg: U-Faktoriya.
- Gromov, L.P. (1951). Etudes about Chekhov. Rostov-on-Don: Rostov Regional Book Publishing.
- Ishchuk-Fadeeva, N.I. (2001). "The Gull" A.P. Chekhov: myth, rite, genre. Chekhoviana. The flight of "The Gull". Moscow: Nauka. Pp. 221-231.
- Khlebnikov, V. (1986a). Svoiyasi. Works. Moscow: Soviet writers. P. 36.
- Khlebnikov, V. (1986b). Works. Moscow: Soviet Writers. P. 255. [Hereinafter Khlebnikov's texts are cited by the mentioned publication with page indication].
- Larionova, M.Ch. (2006). Fairy tale and rite in the early stories of A.P. Chekhov // Science. Innovation. Technologies. P. 136-141.
- Larionova, M.Ch. (2009). The works of the writer and folklore in the aspect of the all-Russian and regional traditions. Proceedings of Volgograd State Pedagogical University. P. 145.
- Loshchilov, I.E. (1999). About one humorous poem by Khlebnikov. Russian Literature XLV 167-179, North - Holland.
- Medrish, D.N. (1978). The plot situation in the Russian folk lyric poetry and in the works of Anton Chekhov. Slavic literature and folklore. Russian folklore. Leningrad: Nauka. Vol. 18.
- Rogovskaya, M.E. (1974). Chekhov and folklore ("In the Ravine"). In the creative laboratory of Chekhov: proceedings. Moscow: Nauka. Pp. 329-335.
- Terekhova, E.A. (2002). "Works of A.P. Chekhov and folk culture": diss. of cand. philol. sciences. Volgograd.
- Tumilevich, O.F. (1978). Chekhov and folklore. Works of A.P. Chekhov: proceedings of R/D: RSPI. Pp. 102-108.
- Vykhortssev, P.S. (1983). Velimir Khlebnikov. Russian Literature. No. 2. P. 69.
- Yesenin, S.A. (1997). Coll. Works: In 7 vol. Moscow: Nauka: Golos. P.191. [Hereinafter, the texts of Yesenin's works are quoted from the publication with the indication of the volume and the page]. (Hereinafter the examples are spaced by the authors).