

## Artículo de investigación

**Apophatic elements in the poetry of S. A. Yesenin: Thanats' characters<sup>14</sup>**

Апофатические элементы в поэтике С. А. Есенина: Фигуры Танатоса

Elementos apofáticos en poética de S. A. Esenin: Cifras de Tanatos

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**Abstract**

The article pays great attention to the concept of "apophatic theology", which started to be used in philological science not so long time ago. The apophatic tradition, which has settled in the depths of Christian thought, has also developed in Russian philosophy and literature. The object of this article is the early works of S.A. Yesenin. The subject of the research is the mortal images, thanatological formulas and their connection with folklore aesthetics. The folkloristic commentary of the texts allows to reveal the peculiarities of the theme of death in the artistic world of the poet more deeply. The search formula of "another Kingdom" that we find in Russian tales, become apophatic in the poetry of Yesenin.

**Keywords:** Apophatic theology, Russian literature, Yesenin, folklore, Thanatos, cultural-philosophical context

**Аннотация**

В статье уделяется большое внимание понятию "апофатика", которое не так давно стало использоваться в филологической науке. Апофатическая традиция, обоснованная в недрах христианской мысли, получила свое развитие и в русской философии и литературе. Объектом нашей статьи выступает раннее творчество С. А. Есенина. Предметом исследования являются смертные образы, танатологические формулы и их связь с фольклорной эстетикой.

Фольклористический комментарий текстов позволяет глубже раскрыть особенности темы смерти в художественном мире поэта. Формулы поиска "иного царства", которые находим в русской сказке, приобретают апофатический характер в поэтике Есенина.

**Ключевые слова:** Апофатика, русская литература, Есенин, фольклор, Танатос, культурфилософский контекст

**Resumen**

El artículo presta gran atención al concepto de "teología apofática", que comenzó a usarse en la ciencia filológica no hace mucho tiempo. La tradición apofática, que se ha asentado en las profundidades del pensamiento cristiano, también se ha desarrollado en la filosofía y la literatura rusas. El objeto de este artículo son los primeros trabajos de S.A. Yesenin. El tema de la investigación son las imágenes mortales, las fórmulas tanatológicas y su conexión con la estética del folklore. El comentario folclórico de los textos permite revelar más profundamente las peculiaridades del tema de la muerte en el mundo artístico del poeta. La fórmula de búsqueda de "otro reino" que encontramos en los cuentos rusos, se vuelve apofática en la poesía de Yesenin.

**Palabras clave:** Teología apofática, literatura rusa, Yesenin, folklore, Thanatos, contexto cultural-filosófico

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## Introduction

The term "apophatic theology" came to philological science from the philosophical sphere, or rather from theology. The apophatic tradition was established in the framework of Christian thought, in the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite. Today, researchers actively use this term in humanitarianism. Under apophatic theology they understand not only the denial of the definitions of God; they also include the category of the inexplicable, the ineffable, undetectable in words in the apophatic theology. Pierre Ado, one of the modern researchers of the apophatic tradition, very accurately expressed the meaning and scope of this concept, speaking about the difficulties in the language: "apophatism is a symbol of the unspeakable mystery of existence" (Ado, 2005). Turning to folk art and fine literature, the theme of death, which has long been banned in the early stages of the development of Russian philological science, distinctly stands out. Of course, Thanatos is apophatic by his nature, it is always difficult to explain the phenomenon of death. However, all the great writers have carried a genuine interest to the topic of death in their works and gave understanding to death. In this article, we discuss the early works of Yesenin, in which there are many formulas related to the borderline, liminal state of the hero.

## Literature review

It has been written a lot about the death in S. A. Yesenin's works. The poet's figure and the mysterious departure from life are pushing the researchers to turn to the mortal images. However, a detailed discussion of poetics requires an analysis of the poetic structure, rather than a lengthy diversion into the field of the biography. Of course, one can not ignore the context of the beginning era and the literature of modernism, quite unlike the literary process and the life of the nineteenth century. Man was forced to get used to the new system of cultural coordinates at the beginning of the non-calendar 20<sup>th</sup> century. Discoveries in the field of psychoanalysis, physics, and the philosophy of cosmism had shaken the rational structure of the world.

The metaphysical sense of the world became sharper than the physical, which was clearly showed in literature, in which one of the cross-cutting themes was the theme of death. In her detailed article "About the artistic stylistics of death" E.A. Samodelov shows the relevance of this topic and its manifestation in various

variations of A. Mariengof's, V. Shershenevich's and other imagists' poetry (Samodelova, 2006). The researcher focuses attention on lexemes "death", "coffin", "cemetery", "graves", "corpse", etc., connected directly with the memorial and cemetery subjects. Such a revealing of the "death symbolism" is justified and permissible, but it significantly limits the notion of morality in the aesthetics and the Imagists' and Yesenin's poetics. In another article "The Rural Cemetery in Yesenin's Work and in the Ethnography of Ryazan Region" (Samodelova, 2016) Samodelova refers to the same concepts and approaches of the essence of the issue from the ethnographic point of view, which is quite true, but, in our opinion, it is also not enough. Another vivid work devoted to the theme of death in the artistic world of the poet is the article by V. I. Hazan titled "Notes to the theme" death in S. Yesenin's world of art" (Hazan, 1995). The researcher pays much attention to the ontological aspect of the topic, to the inclusion of the mortal images in the mythological and folklore context (the mythologeme revealing "earth as coffin and cradle"). "Yesenin's poetry has been inscribed long and firmly by researchers into the picture of people's ethical and aesthetic ideas about the world. However, it is still impossible to talk about the restoration of all possible correspondences, especially those that go beyond the limits of the Slavic range, between Yesenin's philosophy of death as archetypal paths embodying lyrical means of thinking and feeding it with the world mythological culture" (Hazan, 1995). But it is necessary to continue the exploration of this topic in the aspect of the world and especially the folklore of the thanatological tradition.

S.M. Gorodetsky in his memoirs about Sergei Yesenin (1926) stressed the need to identify the "otherworldly stream" in the creativity of the Imagists: "... it would be interesting to trace in the verses of other Imagists and in all imaginism this stream of otherworldliness. It should be there. But the difference is that what literature was for others, for Yesenin it was life itself" (Gorodetsky, 1990). But here it is necessary to make one important addition that Yesenin, referring to the theme of death in the treatise "The Keys of Mary", pointing to the need for a "message to death," immediately stipulated: "Of course, sisters did not kill their sister; she was killed in our hearts by our creatively cruel people, so that it is easier to merge ourselves from the mystery of sounds and words and to master it as

an image" (Yesenin, 1997) (here and further in our italics – M. D.). Thus, death for a poet is not a physical manifestation, it is not the fact of a material world, but a temporary experience, necessity, in a ritually ceremonial key, broken by the people themselves (and here the cruel one is not with a negative sign) in his work. To master death in the imaginative, that is, in the figurative sense, to break it in the symbols accessible to the soul. These symbols, ethno-poetic constants are described by Yesenin in "The Keys of Mary" and used by him in his creation. Here it is necessary to take into account the theoretical side of the question of folklore formula and poetic common places, topos associated with "that world", and it should not be attracted by certain Yesenin's lines such as "in the green evening under the window...", "self-deceased", the provocative beginning of "Black man" to the poet's biography and questionable departure from life.

Although, Gorodetsky tied the finale of the poet's life with his philosophy and outlook which were already apparent in "the Keys of Mary", but something was missed by him. Yesenin really saw the combination of real and cosmic reality behind the ornament, the symbol of the cockerel, the embroidery, but all these were represented in the artistic context. And it is not about that for someone it remained literature, but "for Yesenin it was life itself", but it is about that different talents play and live this archetypal reality differently. Stylization, reflections on the topic, a direct appeal to the theme of death for example in Mariengof's, which affects already at the lexical level, is on the one hand; but on the other hand there are the organic perception of folklore reality, the living in the system of thinking of an archaic person in Yesenin's poetic world, which he wrote himself in the article "Life and art" (statements about organic thinking). It follows that the poet missed the topic of death, both through a filter and through a folkloric perception of the world and constants, while the folklore formula and codes were processed and not used in a pure form, which greatly hampers their isolation and analysis.

### Materials and methods

The methodology of this work is connected with a holistic analysis of a literary text using structural, typological and comparative methods of research. These methods allow us to go on to describe the deep layers of literature, the penetration of the folklore tradition into art and, together with it, the thanatological complex. The concept of "folklore" is not understood narrowly, we are not limited only to verbal forms of

creativity, but we take into account myth, ritual, and ritual. In a theoretical aspect, we proceed from the dialectical triad "myth - folklore - literature", which was written about at the beginning of the 20th century by O.M. Freudenberg (Freudenberg, 2008). It is such a broad understanding of folklore that allows us to speak not about the external manifestation of the folklore tradition in the text, that is, stylizations and borrowings, but about the dialogue of the writer with folklore. This is due to the fact that for a "mature narrator the formula does not mean the same as for a young student, just as it has a different meaning for a skilful and for an inept, less inspired singer" (Lord, 1994). This is what epic researchers pay attention to when revealing and structuring ethno-poetic constants. It should be taken into account that according to S.Yu. Neklyudov the more "common places" of folklore narrative are plastic with regard to the combination of elements, but they are always stable in content (Nekliudov, 2005). This is possible and ubiquitous in folklore, which means that it is possible in the author's word, in fiction. From theoretical positions, it can be designated as latent forms of folklore in the literature. Thus, the analysis of the mortal images in Yesenin's poetics requires the theoretical reinforcement and consideration of this metaphor in a broad folkloric aspect.

The folkloristic commentary of some apophatic passages in the text, which are difficult to explain from the point of view of everyday logic, helps to clarify the meaning of the whole work. By apophatic elements we mean such difficult details in poetics that require the involvement of a wide cultural-philosophical context, appeal to folk art.

### Results and discussion

Samodelova appealed to the direct manifestations of the topic at the lexical level, to texts such as "Silver Bell", in which, in the opinion of the researcher, a contradiction is concluded, the dichotomy of life and death. However, it is worth looking at this poem from the point of view of folklore formality. The beginning of the poem is attractive:

Is a silver bell now singing?  
Or may be that is a dream?  
Of my heart?..  
(Yesenin, 1995)

This text fragment contains all the semantic tension of the poem: the bell sings or does it just dream to the character? Here a half-dreamed

reality is set, which immerses the lyrical character's consciousness into another, non-existent reality. In addition, the sound of a bell, strings in Russian folklore, for example, in a fairy tale it marks the space performing either the function of the amulet or meaning of violation of the prohibition, which indirectly entails subsequent tests for the character (Dobrovolskaia, 2009). A person finds himself in a threshold situation, which breaks the habitual course of things allowing a different look at the ordinary. On the one hand, the lyrical character is asleep:

My dream's mild and light joyful  
In no-here state of real.  
(Yesenin, 1995)

On the other hand, he does not sleep, because he sees himself, observes himself from the outside:

.....The icon pinky  
Gilded my eyelashes dim.

Though I'm not a young boy  
In a splash of the dove's wings,  
My dream's mild and light joyful  
In no-here state of real.  
(Yesenin, 1995)

And then there is no unsolvable antinomy here concluded in the idea of eternal sleep and "living grave" at the same time, as Samodelova pointed out:

I'm not seeking for the grave breath,  
Word's not worth to the secret gleam,  
But teach me, how I'd make an attempt  
Not to wake up from my dream.  
(Yesenin, 1995)

In the folkloric genre of dying (byl, scenes about visiting another world), the character stays in the borderline state achieved through forced sleep. And such a liminal position corresponds to the state of initiation which means that the character attaches to the higher reality, achieves sacral knowledge (the terminology is understood by us, after V. Turner, as "rapacity" (Turner, 1983)). This could be expressed by the Vyacheslav Ivanov's formula as "a realibus ad realiora". Besides, Gorodetsky also pointed to it with regard to Yesenin's philosophy: "Yesenin's end turned out to be a practical application of the Vyacheslav Ivanov's formula as "a realibus ad realiora" that is from the real to the higher reality, i.e. from the earth to another world". But he did not quite correctly understand the very formula and its realization in Yesenin's creation. Both

Ivanov and Yesenin talked about the transformation of everyday reality, its refraction in the artistic through the Logos, in such a way that everyday life became imbued with a sacred meaning in the ordinary it was foreseen eternal, metahistoric and cosmic, but "this must not mean retreat from the dense and tangible reality to something that is illusive and unreal" (Vatman, 2015). And the ornament, the cockerels, the flowers on the bed linen are just signs, but for the poet this is an eternal sign system, which preserves the archetypal meaning. "Sisters did not kill the girls!" (Yesenin, 1997). It happened in the heart of the people or, in other words, in the soul and consciousness of the artist's words. There is no question about another world in his direct appointment. Imaginative, that is, figurative, vision of reality is "ad realiora", it is a breakthrough from life to being through a word, a poetic word. However, for this, the narrator himself needs to grasp this state between life and metaphysics, as if to fall into it. This justifies the appeal to some folklore formulas sending both the narrator (the poet) and the character to the search for "another kingdom", his living in an artistic reality.

The poem "Silver Bell" says exactly about this state which is the search formula expressed in doubt ("Is a silver bell now singing? Or may be that is a dream?"). Potentially it is related to the topic of another world. Let us recall "common places, stable phrases (dark woods, a straight-legged path, a hero's voice, good horses, etc.), traditional formulas of a fairy tale (Once upon a time... In a certain kingdom... It is fast said in the tale... etc. ), the formula of the poetic language of an epic or lyrical song (As in the gentle prince of Vladimir ..., And the horse beneath him, like a fierce beast., I'll get up early, etc....)" (Nekliudov, 2005). Only Neklyudov himself, for example, explains in detail the semantics of the "road" combination (Nekliudov, 2015) in byl and fairy tales, and G. I. Maltsev analyzes the formula of "early" in the ritual text, in the puzzle (Maltsev, 1989). A certain semantic stability lies behind every formula of the poetic language and its modifications. The poet, referring to such combinations, can be relatively free in combining elements (it is not a question of simple linguistic phraseology), and it would be foolish to lead him to swear allegiance to the folklore tradition, but on the whole, he observes the laws of ritual logic and the semantics of formulas.

The idea of eternal sleep does not contradict the concept of "a living grave", since these are different things. Sleep is conceived as another reality, the boundary of the accessible and the

unknown. It is not accidental that in the structure of the poem and the expression "about the unearthly coppice," that is, the place beyond the visible. Such semantics of the ontological world, the eidology of another kingdom in folklore is possessed by the topos of the edge of the forest, the fields, and places on the boundary of anything else (Nekliudov). Here topos is transformed into a topic, that is, the real is into the real. Similar ritual semantics of transition occurs in other poems. For example, in the famous "I trample the first fallen snow..." (1917):

I can't tell – is that darkness or light,  
 Singing winds or the cock on the hill?  
 Instead of winter, maybe, the white  
 Downy swans have covered the field?  
 (Yesenin, 1995)

The lyrical character also resides in the borderline state which allows one to see a foreign reality. And this is not a drop of insanity or a hint of illness, alcoholic intoxication which somehow persistently can be seen in the same formulaic beginning of the poem "The Black Man", although Samodelov, analyzing the image with a wagging head, accentuates attention on the neck (after all, Neck on leg, not on nights), as on the borderline element (Samodelova, 2006). However, the poet's work is permeated with such a formula of the transition which carries in itself a mortal imagery pointing to the topic of death in various variations. One way or another, it is precisely this folklore and poetic complex that exists both in the early works, in the poems of 1917, and in the later ones. It is associated with different images that indicate the ritual reality in the text. So, in the poem "Listen! Sleds rushing past in a row..." a ritual reality is given with images of a sleigh and a drunken maple, with which a character with a beloved start dancing:

Oh, you, sleigh, sleigh! You are my horse!  
 Somewhere in the glade a maple is dancing drunk.

We will approach him, we will ask - what is it?  
 And we'll dance together under the trumpet three.  
 (Yesenin, 1995)

This is an inverted reality; of course, there is essentially no drunken dancing maple, but the appeal to the situation of sledging and the inclusion in this paradigm of the third figure refers to the transitional ritual. Horses, sleighs and rooks are three mediator symbols, according to Slavonic concepts. F.M. Dostoevsky in the "Demons" recreated a similar situation: Stavrogin and Liza were also invited by Petrusha

Verkhovensky to ride in a boat with maple trees where the organizer of the tour, ritual chaos was Verkhovensky, and Kormchim was Stavrogin (Smirnov, 2001). Dostoevsky directly in this fragment sent the reader to the motives of folk bandit songs. Yesenin is also not so simple, he did not reduce the plot of the poem solely to a love topic behind the metaphor of a "drunken maple" he hid the familiarization of the two to another, higher reality. Love is not vulgar, and ordinary, it acquires the status of cosmic love. A maple can be a thought of as the World Axis, a sleigh and a knight of a bouquet as symbols of a transitional ritual complex. And all this is also on the verge of real and cosmic reality.

The topic of death in Yesenin's poetics is as simple and connected with such words as "corpse", "coffin", "cemetery" etc. in certain lexemes, as in ethno-poetical constants, folklore formulas associated with the search for another kingdom or its models. In the poem (1916-1922) "The night and the field, and the roar of cocks..." it is important not just the mention of kutya, memorial food, and the topic of the place:

Quietly quiet in the corner,  
 A month I knead on the floor...  
 But worry only a trace of quiet  
 Out of the bake is a shy mouse.  
 (Yesenin, 1995)

The angle in the structure of the hut, according to archaic ideas, which Yesenin addressed in the treatise "The Keys of Mary", symbolizes the boundary between the house and other people's space, shows the ratio of the periphery and the center (Krasnoperova, 2002). The window, the furnace window, the corners and doors are marked places in the ritual plan. The arrival of ancestral spirits in memorial days is carried out precisely through these boundaries. Besides, to see the phenomena of a different world, one should sit in silence on the stove (compare with V. Rasputin in "Farewell to Mother" the scene of sitting on the stove of old Darya (Galieva, 2014)).

Mortal imagery manifests itself in poems, especially in "Pugachev" and "The Dark Man". In the first thing it is as it were supposed to be because the poem is dedicated to historical events, a riot. However, for us images that genetically ascend to folklore reality and are associated with the idea of death which is cosmic ascension are attractive to us. First of all, it is the image of the canoe / sail. The head of Emelian Pugachev is compared with the canoe, the body with a sail:



They failed on the aspen shaft  
To pierce the head of my sail.  
(Yesenin, 1998)

Pugachev represents the figure of the deceased  
Peter in the form of a sail, a ship:

I want to teach them to laugh at the saber  
Tighten that sinister skeleton with sails  
And let him through the waterless steppes,  
Like a ship.  
(Yesenin, 1998)

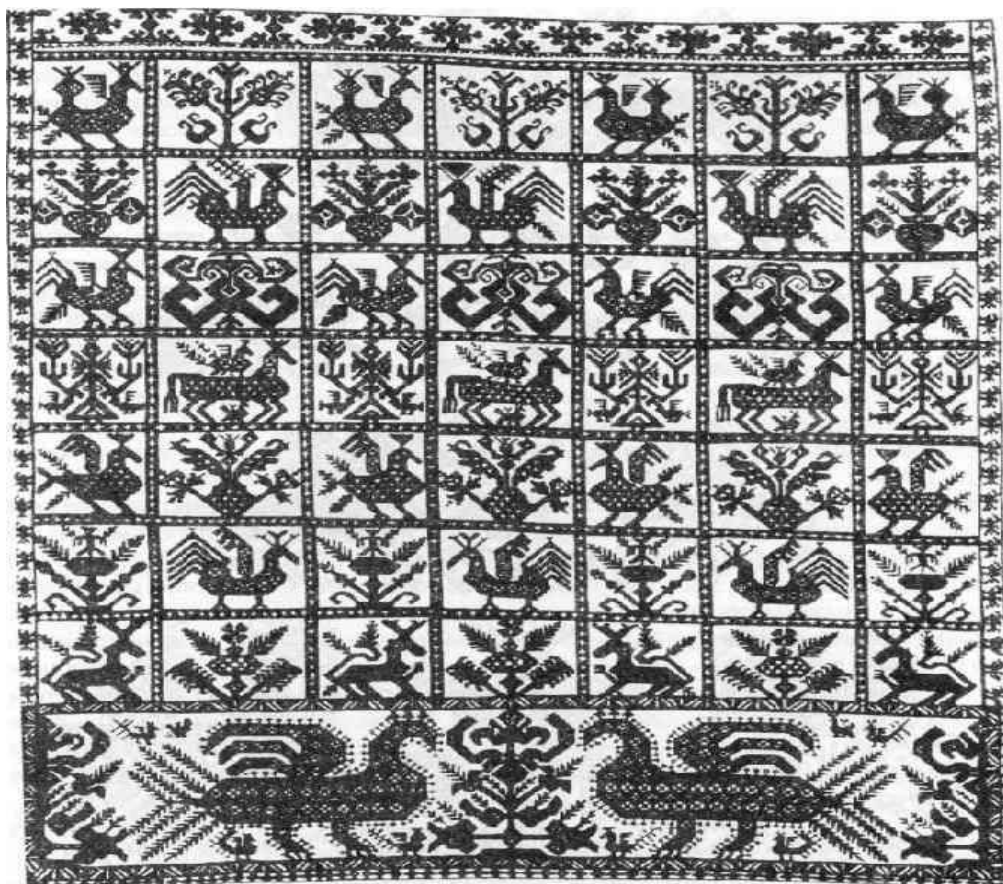
This is a travesty motive. The person is equated to the ship and to the helmsman at the same time (we will meet similar reincarnation in the well-known "Letter to the Woman"). Besides, the archetype of the ship / boat itself is conjugated with a funeral ritual complex. And in the context of the historical poem, the bloody events that seem to remain behind the text, this image intensifies and its mortal significance is confirmed. However, the representation of the

head in the form of something non-standard, a sail, for example, as in this poem, occurs in another work. Thus, in the poem "The Dark Man" many disputes have been raised in philological science the following metaphor:

As if wind whistles, listen  
Over desolate, vacant, still field.  
Like a grove, leaves blazing I feel.  
And the drink sheds my leaves as I bend.

Head of mine is a-flapping my ears  
Like a migrating bird – wings.  
(Yesenin, 1998)

And it is not about domestic intoxication, in other words, drunkenness, but it is about the transformation of oneself through this intoxication. This state is clearly reflected in folklore, in the ritual-funeral complex and it is connected, according to experts, with the ritual change of a person.



Picture: "boat-shaped" compositions with birds. The cult of birds is one of the central in the system of pagan representations.

## Conclusions

We see that the moral implication arises sometimes in Yesenin's poetics in the most unexpected way. In poems, this is especially evident in the course of the folkloristic commentary. In the image of the ship and the head, transformed into a boat / bird, the ideas that lead the reader to the folk ritual element are hidden. In this there is no crude primitive idea of death and certainly no hint at conscious withdrawal from the poet's life (biographical plan which the researchers are fond of). This is how the combination of real and cosmic reality manifests and this is precisely what we have identified in our article as the topic of death.

The folklore formulas related to the borderline state of the hero, his stay on the verge of reality and sleep, which we distinguish in the early works of Yesenin, are apophatic. The topic of death is not reduced to lexemes that have a direct relationship to the mourning symbols ("coffin", "cemetery", "dead man", etc.), and is associated with folk aesthetics, the folk ideology of the poet.

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