

## Artículo de investigación

## Folklore tradition in the art world of Chekhov: Second part

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

La tradicion de folklore en el mundo del arte de chekhov: segunda parte

Recibido: 14 de mayo del 2019

Aceptado: 14 de julio del 2019

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## Abstract

This article continues a large study on folk tradition functioning in Chekhov's poetics. The study subject is the forms of folklore tradition in his late stories. Much attention is paid to amusical aspect of "The Steppe". In this case a Russian lyric song having a non-outlined composition is typologically significant. The story with its open end is like a song which allows the hero growing over himself. The main method of the article is structural-typological one.

**Keywords:** Chekhov, poetics, Russian literature of the early 20th century, symbol, ceremonial reality, lyrical folk song.

## Аннотация

Данная статья продолжает большое исследование о функционировании фольклорной традиции в поэтике Чехова. Предметом исследования являются формы фольклорной традиции в поздних повестях. Большое внимание уделено музыкальному аспекту повести "Степь". Типологически значима в этом случае русская лирическая песня, которая имеет неоконтурную композицию. Повесть похожа на песню своим открытым финалом, который позволяет герою вырасти над самим собой. Основным методом статьи является структурно-типологический.

**Ключевые слова:** Чехов, поэтика, русская литература начала 20 века, символ, обрядовая действительность, лирическая народная песня

## Resumen

Este artículo continúa un gran estudio sobre la tradición popular que funciona en la poética de Chéjov. El tema de estudio son las formas de tradición folclórica en sus últimos cuentos. Se presta mucha atención al aspecto musical de "La Estepa". En este caso, una canción lírica rusa que tenga una composición no esbozada es tipológicamente significativa. La historia con su final abierto es como una canción que le permite al héroe crecer sobre sí mismo. El principal método del artículo es estructural-tipológico.

**Palabras clave:** Chéjov, poética, literatura rusa de principios del siglo XX, símbolo, realidad ceremonial, canción popular lírica.

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## Introduction

In the first part of the large study dedicated to folklore and literary traditions, the researchers drew attention to the fact that folklore contains pre-genre formations: rituals and rites. We have convinced of this fact by the example of analysis of Chekhov's poetry and his stories: the space of steppe, as a place of action, performs functions of ritual topos. The image of steppe is important and semiotically significant for this story. It is in the steppe where the boy Yegorushka must become wise and come his initiation path.

## Materials and methods

The architectonics of Chekhov's works, both plays, stories and novels, is due in many respects to the rhythm of a special organization. Here researchers, speaking of musicality, associate this, on the one hand, with the writer's biography – the significance of music in Chekhov's life and works (I. Eiges, E.B. Balabanovich), on the other hand, musicality is regarded as a special poetry (N.Ya. Berkovsky, T.K. Shah-Azizov). "Musicality" was in the focus of not only literary works' attention, but what is especially important, within composers' sight. Thus, D. Shostakovich in his time defined the story "The Black Monk", as a special "sonata form" (Fortunatov, 1974). Finally, the literary critics, comparing the novella "The Steppe" with its adaptation, note that in the film it was possible to recreate the true nature of the musical in Chekhov's poetics, "Thus, the director remarkably found an equivalent for the musical motif of the quiet song" (Mikhailova, 2009). Theater and cinema caught the most characteristic sign of Chekhov's poetics – rhythm, "underwater current", not perceived by symbolists. Is not this the discovery of Chekhov, who predicted many of the poetics principles of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and even outstripped his time? It is interesting to regard a thesis stated in the works of A.N. Panamareva on the connection of Chekhov's musicality with the ontological views of the writer himself. Not only Chekhov's dramas which have already been studied in rather *intermediate aspect* are indicative namely from these perspectives but also his novels, especially "The Steppe", around which there have always been philological discussions. "A.M. Linin, who studied Chekhov's work on "The Steppe", came to such a convincing conclusion, "Sincere lyricism, pervasive emotionality of descriptions, "warm" and gentle words and subtle musical tectonics of the phrase make "The Steppe" an artistically harmonious poetic composition. The way Chekhov selected the words, which are more

accurate and harmonizing with the general lyric tone of the description is extremely illustrative" (Gromov, 1951). The lyricism of "The Steppe" was expressed in a special musicality, manifested in style. "Apparently, Chekhov meant namely this feature, when he named his "happiness" "a quasi-symphony", and when he said that reading "The Steppe" we find "prose poems" (Gromov, 1951). "The Steppe" is interesting both for its special rhythm and for its "inner plot", according to the remark of the famous folklorist, D.N. Medrish, connected partly with a composition, reminiscent of the lyric song architectonics. In the article "The plot situation in the Russian folk lyric poetry and in the works of Anton Chekhov" Medrish notes the "neo-contour" of composition in the lyric song and the Chekhov's novella (Medrish, 1978), and therefore, with such a statement of the question, it is also possible to talk of Chekhovian folklorism of a special type (internal folklorism) and the ontological views of the author.

## Results

In view of all the above, we can admit an unexpected, at first glance, parallel with the works of "new peasant poets" and in particular, with S.A. Yesenin – both at figurative and ideological levels. As noted by a number of researchers of "new peasant poetry", the poets of this direction contrasted the "iron" with the onslaught of civilization, an organized cosmos, at the heart of which lies feminine demiurgic principle – these are the Mother Earth, the Great Goddess herself, the Mother of all beings in her various manifestations (Dementiev, 1984). "A bloody connection with the world of nature and oral creativity, adherence to myth, fairy tale, determined the meaning and "sound" of the new peasant lyric poetry and epic", writes L. K. Shvetsova (Shvetsov, 1994). It seems that this involvement in the folk element, in the natural-philosophical language, was expressed by Chekhov, especially in his anthropological notions. The principles of Chekhov's folklorism can be understood through the language of artistic space, which is organized through the collision of two types of locus, closed and open, sacral, magical and common ones, and, accordingly, "The Steppe" characters are also opposed to each other. Chekhovian folklorism appears at the level of poetics implicitly.

Chekhovian folklorism is somewhat different, hidden – cosmism, the unity of man with nature, grows out of artistic space model, the

architectonics of which shows the structure of the characters division into “luminal” and initiated into sacred knowledge. Proceeding from the idea of Cosmosophy about Russia and from the model of “plain space” put forward by G.D. Gachev, we can talk about the presence of such a model in Chekhov’s “The Steppe”. Another problem is the problem of memory, “A Russian person *likes to remember*, but does not like to live ...” (Chekhov, 1974-1982a). Memory in this case is sacral, ritual, because it is connected with the “fleeing distance”, which characterizes the Cosmos of Russia, for which Egorushka aspires, “Yegorushka floated after the flying *distance*” (Chekhov, 1974-1982a). Drawing a parallel to Yesenin’s work, we note that the space of his poems is a flat space, *ornamental*, embodying *national idea* (“Feather-grass sleeps...”, “The golden grove” and many others, where the model of the horizontal space is preserved). Chekhov’s cosmos is also oriented towards this model. Egorushka is fascinated by *distance*, he sees a different world. As the researchers note, Yegorushka is “a mediator between the real world, cruel and harsh, and the hidden, bright Chekhovian ideal of life” (Silantieva, 1981). At the time of initiation to the higher, Yesenin’s lyric character was “enchanted by the distance”:

I see off all the men  
For whom I fell sorry  
Gazing ever onerously  
Into *distance smitten* (Yesenin, 1997).

All the symbols in “The Steppe” – mill, water, stars – accompany Egorushka and no one else. I. N. Sukhikh, referring to the chronotope in Chekhov’s works, notes, “Usually the Chekhovian characters live side by side, but they cannot break social and psychological partitions, enter into full contact” (Sukhikh, 1987), hence they are also spatially limited. In “The Steppe” works the system of open and closed locus, which in the ritual situation allows some characters “to rise above the reality”, as in a lyric song or leaves them in a liminal state. Yegorushka, as a cultural character, “was growing” throughout the journey, comprehending the symbols given to him by nature. From the very beginning, the natural language of the *four elements manifests* itself in the text: <earth>, <water>, <air>, <fire>. Yegorushka feels the natural forces, “something warm touched Yegorushkina’s spine, the streak of light, stealing up from behind, darted between the chaise and the horses” <...> (Chekhov, 1974-1982a) “the action of “fire”, which infects with its energy the air as well, “the air was stagnant and depressing!” (Chekhov, 1974-1982a).

The characters of “The Steppe” are in a closed, strictly limited space – the earth, “stretched out”, endless, bottomless sky and hills that do not allow people to go beyond this. In the novella there are two chronotopes – the world of “the living” (there are much less of them) and the world of memories, of the past, the world of “the dead”. So all the living things (they always beckon, call Egorushka) is moving in a certain direction – to the *left*, “The chaise drove straight on, while the windmill, for some reason, began retreating to the left” (Chekhov, 1974-1982a); water “fell to the ground and <...> flowed swiftly away to the left” (Chekhov, 1974-1982a), and when most of the events have already happened, we again notice, “the moon rises to the left” (Chekhov, 1974-1982a). The motion vector of this world is at odds with the movement of the chaise, which so far did not “decide” where to go, “as though it [chaise] was going backwards and not forwards” (Chekhov, 1974-1982a), although the external goal is set – Kuzmichov and Father Christopher are going to sell wool. B. Turner calls such a state “liminality”, that is, the object that resides in it is “half and halfer”, they are neither here, nor there; they are in the gap between the positions” (Turner, 1983).

Yegorushka himself is “from the other world” (Chekhov, 1974-1982a), as boy Tit regards him. Here we will make a small digression and note that Yegorushka meets Tit when hears a song that comes from the steppe. This is an important detail for understanding the poetics of Chekhov, the detail, which confirms and justifies in many respects the typology *Chekhov - Yesenin*, moreover, speaks of Chekhov’s rootedness in the Russian national tradition. The song that the woman sings is only accessible to Yegorushka’s consciousness, it seems to connect him with another reality, “The song was subdued, dreary and melancholy, like a dirge, and hardly audible, and seemed to come first from the right, then from the left, then from above, and then from underground, as though an unseen spirit were hovering over the steppe and singing” (Chekhov, 1974-1982a). It reminds of an excerpt from Pushkin’s *Captain’s Daughter*, which speaks of the *meaning of the* song heard by the character, “I cannot describe the impression this popular song of the gibbet made upon me, sung as it was by people who, all of them, were destined, sooner or later, to grace it. Their sombre faces, their sonorous voices, and melancholy expression, which they gave to a text already full of meaning – all this produced in me a sort of *poetical shudder*” (Pushkin, 1977-1979) [translated by F. Hollinger]. It is no coincidence that we mentioned namely this excerpt from Pushkin,

since it is this fragment that shows the true meaning of song as a cultural phenomenon, shows the effect produced on the listener – “poetical shudder”. According to the observation of an ethnographer and folklorist P. G. Bogatyrev, it is these songs that strike “poetical shudder” associated with ritualism show us the motif of the death-wedding, common in Slavic lyric-epic and lyric songs (Bogatyrev, 2006). The resurrection, calling of the deceased is possible within the framework of obit, this is interpreted by folklorists in different ways, but the main thing in this sacred act is the ritual situation itself, the participants of which become involved in another reality. The action is accompanied by lamentations aimed at purifying the character through crying, a kind of catharsis. Returning to the Chekhov’s situation, Yegorushka as the boy Tit sees him, the association with the “world of the dead”, the most important thing in this context is the complete perception of symbols. Yegorushka, as “someone who came from the other world”, mournful and resembling crying song, constant turning to the world of the deceased – Egorushka’s memories of his grandmother, the symbol of cross, blossoming trees – all this indicates the formation of a *ritual situation in the novella* that is associated with funerary ritualism. The peculiarity of Chekhov’s folklorism consists in the fact that Chekhov enters into a dispute with folklore, as a result Yegorushka acts as a sort of “deceased”, hears *crying* and lamentations, but, apparently, Chekhov did it deliberately. The reader discovers an *inverted reality*, in which the character grows, rises above himself, “the situation to grow into”.

The song allows the character to be reborn. Let us also say that some researchers of “The Steppe” note that the main feature of the novella is not a series of events, but lyric intonation, as the main means of “revealing a positive, asserting opening” (Silantieva, 1981). Linguistic researches and N. M. Fortunatov’s remarks on the structure of Chekhov’s prose, which the scientist defines as a structure “extralinguistic by its nature” are indicative (Fortunatov, 1974). Of course, the reader does not know what was the song of that woman, which Yegorushka heard, but Chekhov emphasizes that it was like crying, “The song was subdued, dreary and melancholy, like a dirge ...” (Chekhov, 1974-1982a), then the boy “began to fancy that the grass was singing” (Chekhov, 1974-1982a) about his death – a death motive; and then he saw that it was a woman who was singing and sowing something, “Near the furthest hut in the hamlet stood a peasant woman in a short petticoat, with long thin legs like a heron. She was sowing something. A white dust

floated languidly from her sieve down the hillock. Now it was evident that she was singing” (Chekhov, 1974-1982a) – so the motive of birth manifests itself through the agricultural cult (sowing and harvesting was accompanied by the song).

Returning to Yesenin’s poetry, let us note that the poet, in addition to using in his verses the model of plain space, national topic, also speaks of “steppe” singing (by the way, it also refers to his biography):

I am nine years.  
Stove bench, woman, cat...  
And the woman *sang*  
something *steppe*, grievous  
Sometimes yawning  
Baptizing mouth with her hand (Yesenin, 1997).

It is through this *singing*, as a cultural process, the character comprehends *primemory* and the world. Yegorushka feels the world, reveals his secrets, though, he goes through challenges. The trials of “four elements” define his spirit, so he “with swiftness floated after the flying distance” (Chekhov, 1974-1982a) – the boy breaks out from the circle of events, merges with the movement of nature. Despite this, he continues tempting the realm of “the dead”: Yegorushka is between two crosses, which, as he himself observes, were the same, after a while he again returns to that unresolved fire scene (the omen of the boy’s illness) – in the text acts cyclic time. In light of this, we can speak of doubletness, Yegorushka himself always remains between doublets. This principle extends to almost all the characters of the novella, and only the cultural character can escape from the circle of events. Let us recall that sitting by the river, everyone eats fish, crayfish – it is a manifestation of the motive of eating “red” food. In folklore, in myths, such food (berries, fruits, fish and other red food) is banned; it could be eaten only once a year – at the dead day (Graves, 2007).

Everyone eats soup from crayfish, and only the old Pantelei avoids such a meal, since he already belongs to the realm of the “dead”. His symbol is a cypress spoon with a cross – very unusual as everyone notices – it is the symbol of death. Cypress, in accordance with the language of flowers, means “death” (Olenin, 1999).

In the novella Pantelei corresponds to Father Christopher (they are twins), who, let us note, “smelt of cypress” (Chekhov, 1974-1982b). At the end of his travel the boy comprehends the other space, as father Christopher and Pantelei leave

him. Thus, doubletness principle is violated, leading to closedness. The both characters – both Father Christopher and Pantelei feel approaching death, but hereby, through such a sacrifice, Yegorushka finds a new life. The boy comprehends the forces of nature, the earth. After the quarrel with Dymov (a kind of antipode), the main character faces a terrible storm, which becomes a turning point for the both, especially for the first one. Yegorushka feels the elements, like Vassily (the second character of the novella, belonging to the realm of the living) sees a secret world, “Vassya saw the other world” (Chekhov, 1974-1982b), turns his attention to a blooming garden, to cherry trees in blossom, after all, to night, which is a sort of woman, of mother for him (Chekhov, 1974-1982b). At last, he himself does not feel death, as if it is not for him, “...for himself personally he could not admit the possibility of death, and felt that he would never die ...” (Chekhov, 1974-1982b). In terms of narration, in this case, in terms of poetics only, the object of which, as we see, is the steppe itself, man and cosmos, steppe and life appear here as one and the same when it comes to their destiny, not “torn apart from each other” (Frumkina, 1987). It is no coincidence that the steppe requires a singer, she is waiting for such characters as Yegorushka and Vassya, “And in the triumph of beauty, in the exuberance of happiness you are conscious of yearning and grief, as though the steppe knew that she was solitary, knew that her wealth and her inspiration were wasted for the world, not glorified in song, not wanted by anyone; and through the joyful clamour one hears her mournful, hopeless call for *singers, singers!*” (Chekhov, 1974-1982b). Egorushka and Vassya, seeing the “the other world”, joining the forces of mother earth, rise above the reality, like the character of a lyric Yesenin’s song:

Though haven’t learned, I can’t embrace it –  
Nor silent petting, neither depth.  
The eyes that ever saw this Planet,  
They are in love with it to death (Yesenin,  
1997).

As E.G. Etkind writes about Chekhov’s characters, “It’s difficult for people to understand each other – in particular because they don’t speak the common language” (Etkind, 1999). From this position, the division of loci and characters, respectively, becomes clear.

All these small remarks are needed to clarify the picture of Chekhov’s artistic space, which affects the “temper” of the characters. The architectonics of these models (open and closed), in its turn, shows how the internal folklore laws work.

According to D.N. Medrish, “Chekhovian image, echoing with folklore symbols in general” (Medrish, 1978) allows us to talk about the features of the composition, which is internally close to the lyric song. The lyric song, it should be noted, is characterized by psychological parallelism, but both Yesenin and Chekhov transformed this parallelism into a complex metaphor. Let us recall that in the text of “The Steppe” great importance is placed on the description of the starry sky, which affects the fate of the characters: the moonlight grew mistier, as it were dirtier, the stars were even overcast <...>” (Chekhov, 1974-1982a), and before that, that is, before the storm, Yegorushka felt himself *something*, as nature did, “Nature seemed as though languid and weighed down by some foreboding” (Chekhov, 1974-1982a). Yegorushka lives in harmony with nature, so the end of the novella remains open, “What would that life be like?” (Chekhov, 1974-1982a). Here, the main feature of Chekhovian folklorism consists – (let us recall that Yesenin’s character also speaks of “another way” in the poem “Where the secret is always drowsing...”) – in an *uncontoured* composition, inherent in the lyric song, gives rise to a special form of the novella – Chekhovian. Chekhov loved “open” finals, raising the question, but not giving an answer to it. The solution of the question lay in the “subjectivity zone forbidden for the artist” (Polotskaya, 2001). The answer was to be found by the reader himself, rising with the character over reality (as the genres of folklore – lyric song, epic – suggest).

Chekhov’s Steppe is often compared to Gogol’s Dead Souls on the grounds that both artists have shown “an extract of various genres potential” (Silantieva, 1981), but one significant remark should be made, Chekhov is close to Gogol in terms of his own language of artistic space. As M.Yu. Lotman notes, “Gogol discovered all the artistic potential of spatial models for Russian literature” (Lotman, 1997). Indeed, Gogol’s artistic system attaches significance to chronotope, intraspecific connections of the worlds, the grounds in which the characters are placed, play a significant role, since they determine these characters’ temper. This explanation turns out to be substantial for understanding this spatial model, since Gogol’s “functional fields”, the places symbolic for characters, are clearly defined and divided into “common” and “magical”, “Characters of the fixed, “closed” locus are opposed to the characters of the “open” space” (Lotman, 1997). The fact that Gogol’s “steppe” (“The Old-World Landowners”, “Taras Bulba”) appears as a “multi-layered atmosphere floating above the

ground” (Podoroga, 2006). According to some researchers, “All the Gogol’s spaces are poeticized, colored by emotion; their spatiality is transmitted through the images passing through the observer’s field <...>” (Podoroga, 2006). Chekhovian “steppe”, its description is also located in the “artist’s ground”, which often turns into “Egorushka’s ground” and vice versa (Silantieva, 1981). Gogolian “steppe” is yet to become a steppe, moreover, “just those beautiful steppes so beloved by Gogol”, and only then it will become *alive* (Podoroga, 2006), whereas in Chekhov’s “The Steppe” “everything is clear, visibly spiritualized and flown through “the living soul” (Berdnikov, 1985). Yegorushka, a character familiar with open space, is just such a soul.

Chekhovian folklore is expressed in such *signs*, which E. Polotskaya called “means of extra-verbal persuasiveness”, it is these “signs” by which “the reader can judge about the changes in the character’s soul” (Polotskaya, 2001). These signs also lie outside “question solution”, but within artistic space models. Based on all this, one can speak of entelechiness<sup>166</sup> (Knabe, 2000) of Yesenin and Chekhov’s styles, about their rootedness into “other epochs”, which manifests itself at the level of internal interaction of literature and folklore, in the archetypified text.

Chekhov and Yesenin are also close in that they were not “accepted” by the 20th century in the names of some symbolist poets. The Silver Age, as the researchers note, passed under the auspices of “classical pseudo-antiquity” destruction (Knabe, 2000), but there was also a galaxy of poets with “false” mythopoetic consciousness (Merezhkovsky, Gippius, Sologub). Mythopoetical and historical subjects, which poets-symbolists acted out in their works (Polonsky, 2007), did not correspond to the true sacred knowledge. This is one of the reasons why Chekhov’s seemingly “characterless” drama with weak-willed people was rejected. Symbolists did not understand the complex artistic system of Chekhov’s literature, did not understand the “popular aesthetics” of Chekhov’s *peasant* that in and of itself presupposes the presence of a cultural character, though F. Sologub drew attention to the *predominance of internal action over the external one* in Chekhov’s poetics. This main property, noticed but not understood by Sologub and other symbolists in virtue of its complexity

<sup>166</sup> “Absorption by a certain time of the content, character, spirit and style of the past cultural era on the grounds that they

and multidimensionality suggests that Chekhovian “fablelessness” or uncontourness of his works is associated with a lyric song, with pre-genre folklore formations, where the character rises above the reality, becoming a cultural character. This is yet contrary to the proposition of the “weak-willed characters” put forward by the Symbolists in relation to Chekhov’s work. Thus, the Silver Age (in the names of some symbolists) did not accept Chekhov either because of his artistic thinking, or because of their own misunderstanding of the synthetic nature of his works, which revived the new cultural character (as, for example, Yegorushka). Such a character was “taken” by Esenin and Khlebnikov, whose poetry was based on an appeal to true myth and folklore (Yesenin’s article “The Keys of Mary” and “On the Benefits of Studying Fairytales” by Khlebnikov), the fusion of national elements and traditions in their poetics.

Such cultural, folklore parallels make us think about the rootedness of Pushkin, Chekhov, Khlebnikov, and Yesenin in the national tradition, in “the formulas that extend into the distance” (Veselovsky, 1940), in the words of A.N. Veselovsky. For these reasons, we can make a slightly different conclusion both about the nature of the late Chekhov’s prose and folklorism forms in his poetics.

### Recommendations

The question of folklorism in Chekhov’s works enables the researcher not only to take a different look at the art laboratory of the writer, who was often accused of his subject world description, being a portrayer of ordinary life, but also to review the complex history of Chekhov’s relationships with the representatives of the Silver Age. Thus, literature experts can build a literary process based on a different coordinate system, not focusing solely on the biographical method and real commentary. Poetics and the aesthetics of literature and culture are more permeated with Chekhovian modernism than it was suggested. The theme “Chekhov and folklore” is still waiting for its researcher.

### Conclusion

Reference to a lyric song and composition thereof to which D.N. Medrish pays attention allows us to understand the essence and meaning

were consonant with another later era and capable of satisfying its internal needs and demands”.

of “open end” in Chekhov’s story. Yegorushka goes to study and gain knowledge. This knowledge is not only secular but also sacred. Topos of the steppe is a transitional space endowed with ritual and funerary symbols. The stone sculptures serve ritual markers. In this context, the comparisons with V. Khlebnikov’s poems having the image of the Polovets stone statue are typologically significant. Thus, the cultural and literary context of Chekhov’s work allows us to unveil the system of this story images and symbols much deeper.

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