

## A.P. CHEKHOV WORKS AND FOLK CULTURE

**Marina Larionova**  
Russia, Rostov-on-Don  
larionova@ssc-ras.ru

(Translated by Elizaveta Kondratyeva)

*The publication was prepared within the framework of the SA SSC RAS,  
№ project's AAAA-A19-119011190182-8*

**Abstract.** What makes Chekhov a real Russian writer? Apart from depicting social and historical Russian realities we can talk about universals of Russian culture, which have found realization in Chekhov's works, and also about what is the basis for his national identity – his connections with centuries-old traditions and folk culture. The folk culture is presented explicitly and implicitly in Chekhov's works. In the first case, the realities of folk culture are named and define the plot, character's features, etc. In the second case, the elements of folk culture are situated on different text levels and require a specific ethnocultural comment.

**Keywords:** Chekhov, folk culture, national identity.

## ТВОРЧЕСТВО А.П. ЧЕХОВА И НАРОДНАЯ КУЛЬТУРА

Марина Ченгаровна Ларионова  
Россия, Ростов-на-Дону  
larionova@ssc-ras.ru

(Перевод Елизаветы Кондратьевой)

**Аннотация.** Что делает Чехова именно русским писателем? Помимо изображения социально-исторических российских реалий, речь может идти об универсалиях русской культуры, нашедших воплощение в чеховском творчестве, о том, что составляет основу его национальной самобытности, – о его связях с многовековой традицией, с народной культурой. В творчестве Чехова народная культура представлена эксплицитно и имплицитно. В первом случае реалии народной культуры названы и определяют сюжет, характеристики героев и т.д. Во втором случае элементы народной культуры располагаются на разных уровнях текста и требуют специального этнокультурного комментария.

**Ключевые слова:** Чехов, народная культура, национальная самобытность.

*Публикация подготовлена в рамках реализации ГЗ ЮНЦ РАН, № гр. проекта AAAA-A19-119011190182-8*

Now in philological science we can face widely spread opinion that Chekhov touched upon problems common to all mankind and reflected all variety of human nature in his works. But what makes Chekhov a real Russian writer? It seems that apart from depicting social and historical Russian

realities we can talk about universals of Russian culture, which have found realization in Chekhov's works, and also about what is the basis for his national identity – his connections with centuries-old traditions and folk culture.

Folk culture is a stratum of national culture, which exists predominantly in oral form, reflects traditional world view, i.e. ideas about nature, world order and society order, “right” and “wrong” behaviour, relationships between human and supernatural world, etc. These ideas are realized in texts of different symbolic nature: feature texts (fairy tales, songs, Russian epic (bylina), etc.) and non-feature texts (superstitions, omens); verbal and non-verbal (efficient, mental). Tradition is both the content and the way of folk culture performance. In habitual understanding folklore is a verbal feature part of a folk culture, its symbolic system. The connection between the writer and folklore can be proved by his familiarity with folklore texts, although these texts exist only in oral form and variate a lot. His connection with a folk culture doesn't need any specific confirmations, as folk culture is fixed in everyday and “festive” phenomena, calendar, games, things and language.

On the turn of previous and current centuries ethnolinguistics has recently become widely spread. It studies language through human consciousness, way of thinking, common and rite behaviour, mythological ideas and mythopoetic works. Ethnolinguists brought the concept “cultural terminology” into use: a specific group of “words”, which simultaneously belong both to a language and to a culture, and give a notion about “the picture of the world”, traditional world view of the society [Tolstaya 1989; Tolstoy 1995]. “Cultural term” or “cultural word” can also perform on literature, if we perceive a work as a detailed utterance. It means that with the help of cultural terms it is possible to reconstruct personal picture of the world created by a writer as a representative of a specific cultural tradition, as every human which speaks its native language reproduces combination of “reductive” meanings, which contain cultural “words”.

How did Chekhov get acquainted with this cultural language? Firstly, it happened naturally while he was living in a small provincial town with its customs, festivals, Little Russian and Russian songs, superstitious stories, peculiarities of speech, which remained with Chekhov for some time in Moscow; thorough the communication with nanny and grandmother, which believed in Domovoy (house-spirit); through Moscow impressions fixed in Nikolay Chekhov's pictures, etc. It is an urban, mostly the petty bourgeoisie culture, on which Chekhov usually sneers at, but which he knows rather well.

Secondly, through studying this subject on purpose. Out of 121 resources to which Chekhov referred this or that way during the process of preparation to the thesis “Medical Practice in Russia”, there were 38 resources about traditional medicine, superstitions, traditions and folklore,

and some of them were in several volumes. In writer's personal library there were books about folklore and ethnography [Larionova 2016].

The folk culture is presented explicitly and implicitly in Chekhov works. In first case realities of folk culture are named and define the plot, character's features, etc. For example, some stories take place during folk holidays ("At Christmas night", "Petrov's day", "The 29<sup>th</sup> of June"); proverbs, sayings, omens, elements of legends are used ("The Talk of the Drunk with Sober Devil", legends about treasure in "The Steppe"), songs ("Luchinushka" in "Ionych"), etc. Some of his stories are totally based on the material about traditional culture, as, for instance, "Shrovetide" story "Blini", or "wedding" – "Before the Wedding" and "The Cook is Getting Married".

The stories "The Fish" ("The Burbot"), "The Tutor", "The Death of a Government Clerk", etc. have cumulative structure just like in folk cumulative fairy-tale. One the hand, it helps to create a comic effect, on the other – helps to show Chekhov's laconism. According to I.N. Sukhiih, who was the first to notice their similarity with a folk fairy-tale, "the paradox of Chekhov's laconism can be formed as following; conciseness and brevity of Chekhov's narration appears due to repetitions and interrelationships of different text elements" [Sukhiih 1987, p. 67], i.e. cumulation. Cumulative plots in contrast to others do not leave any possibility for unpredictable plot development. They are unambiguous and clearly reflect author's position. More than that, there is practically no satire in a cumulative fairy tale. Chekhov uses this method also as a satiric one.

Chekhov's folk culture is not ornamental, but it is always functional. Its usage allows the author to realize the most recognizable life situations with a help of folklore conventional typification, to destroy expectations of a reader, who grew up in a traditional environment, it creates comic effect, mocks popular and well-known folklore models, introduces folk laugh culture to the story.

In the second case elements of folk culture are situated on different text levels and require a specific ethnocultural comment. For example, we have already shown that Egorushka's image in "The Steppe" has structural connections not with "image of St. George", as some scientists suppose [Zubarev 2017; Senderovich 1994], but with the folklore image of "George of spring", or "Yury zeleniy (green)", the central character of the Yury's Day (patron of initiational rites), which rides a horse across the fields. This image is extremely popular in Southern Russia [Arkhipenko, Larionova 2011].

There is another example, it is well-known that I. Bunin said about the play "The Cherry Orchard", that there were no cherry orchards in Russia. It is not that important that actually there were cherry orchards in Russia (manufacturing ones). What is really important is that there cherry has a specific symbolism, also actual in rites (even now people put a cherry twig into a wedding korovai and tell the fortune by a flourishing cherry twig) and in songs, there is even a motif of selling the orchard (a girl asks her father to sell the cherry orchard and buy her a dress: for the folklore scientist it is

obvious that it is a wedding song and it is not about literal selling the orchard, it is about changing of girl's status, about her marriage – cherry symbolizes girlhood). Such understanding of the main symbol in the play allows to choose the side in an argument among Chekhov scholars about the play's final – is it a complete end or nonetheless the beginning of a new period in life? Semantics of revival, which is contained in the image of cherry in traditional culture, makes us to choose the second point of view.

Chekhov's symbols are not artificially constructed, they arise from the everyday life. They have connections not with the mysticism, but with the reality, and this is a kind of symbol that we can find in traditional culture. Not by a chance E. Faryno said that Chekhov's motifs are more "mythologems of a folk culture, than real common details" [Faryno 1999]. So, how do readers (and viewers) "recognize" symbols in general things and phenomena? Obviously, they see some other sense in these common things in addition to direct real or plot senses, and this sense occurs from the dialog between what the author suggests and the cultural matrix, which exists only in reader or viewers' minds. And the matrix is formed by the whole previous tradition, starting from myth and the earliest forms of folklore. That is why in the play "Three sisters" Natasha prefers flowers to elks, she is totally in the bounds of the traditional culture in its urban, petite bourgeois kind. These flowers become the symbol of the productive expansion, Natasha's "femininity" in the context of this culture. As well as elks, which in folk culture are related to infertility and death, extrapolate this symbolism on the sisters.

However, connection of Chekhov's works with the folk culture is not direct. Sometimes Chekhov changes the canonical tradition beyond recognition. In folklore the process of saving a structure of a phenomenon with changing its sense to the opposite one was called by V.Y. Propp "conversion". It is interesting to notice that in Chekhov's works we come across the same mechanism in terms of folk culture in its different manifestations. In the short story "The Fish" ("The Burbot") characters try to pull the fish out of the river with their hands, just like in a fairy tale "The Gigantic Turnip": Lubim pulls Gerasim, Efim pulls Lubim, shepherd Vasily pulls Efim, landlord Andrey Andreevich pulls Vasily. They are pulling... However, they didn't manage to do it. The whole structure of the fairy tale broke up and turned out to be fruitless. In the short story "On the Way" the structure of Christmas is accurately reproduced in terms of ethnography and folklore. It seems that the holiday has been realized, as well as all rites, even house-to-house carol singing. However, in the story they are shown in a ridiculous way, with an opposite sense. There is no revival either of the world or a man. There can appear love between Ilovayskaya and Likharev, but it doesn't. Also, Likharev's spiritual revival can be started, but it doesn't. An occasional meeting can turn out into a family, relations, finding a home, ending of wandering, but it doesn't. Christmas took place as a calendar event, but not as a transcendent one. It is difficult to agree with A.S. Sobennikov that Chekhov, "while referring to Christmas and Yule symbolism, talks about onto-

logical unity of the world where opposite characteristics... are taken away with the Christmas night miracle" [Sobennikov 1998, p. 141–142]. And in Chekhov's story there is no miracle of this kind. Characters were expelled from the cyclical time and natural course of events. Chekhov "converses" and transforms not only the Yule rite, but also literary tradition of "Christmas short stories" with a happy end.

S.Y. Nekludov wrote about relationships between literature and folk culture: "any bearer of a cultural tradition owns 'folklore' knowledge to a much greater extent than it is generally considered to be (and than the bearer himself thinks)". He gets it from books for children, everyday speech, which are flooded with set phrases and proverbial forms, from oral texts, which echo will inevitably find everyone. Getting into these powerful fields of religious and mythological tradition or literary fantasy, this "semantic dust" in favourable conditions can crystallize in semiotic cultural texts [Nekludov 2009, p.31]. This approach is related to Chekhov's works to the full extent, he considers culture as a tool and a material.

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**Ларионова Марина Ченгаровна** – доктор филологических наук, заведующий лабораторией филологии, Южный научный центр Российской академии наук.

**Larionova Marina** – doctor of philology, head of laboratory of philology of the Southern scientific center of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

*Dane kontaktowe / Contact details:*

*Ларионова Марина Ченгаровна – Южный научный центр Российской академии наук 344006. Россия. Ростов-на-Дону, пр. Чехова, 41.*

*Larionova Marina Chengarovna – Southern scientific center of Russian Academy of Sciences, 344 006. Russia. Rostov-on-Don, Chekhova Ave, 41.*