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### “THE WITCH”, A SHORT STORY BY A.P. CHEKHOV: THE CODES OF TRADITIONAL CULTURE

**Abstract:** Chekhov A.P., was well familiar with the folk culture both because of the books he read when working on the thesis ‘Healthcare in Russia’ and personal impressions gained when living in Taganrog, in the South of Russia. He also addressed the folk demonology. Short story “The Witch” conveys the reflections of the southern Russian notions of witches which contain some specific regional features. They are, unlike the witches of the North, young beautiful women, who master and have control over the natural forces and disasters, practise love magic. The actual narrative description in the short story has a supportive folklore, superstitious background. Raïssa Nilovna, the heroine of the short story is considered a witch by her husband, sexton Gykin. However, he himself is depicted possessing emphasized physiological infernal features — the fact Chekhov was criticised for by his contemporaries. Corporeal abnormalities, dirt and odour, unsociability, malice, glossolalia, slurred speech — these are the signs of inhuman, chthonic sphere. In folk culture, a woman cohabiting with a devil may become a witch. The dramatic fate of the heroine — an unloved, disgusting husband, the life in isolation — endows her both with angst, yearning and itch for love and the specific features of the folklore witch. However, being allies in the folk culture the witch and devil in Chekhov’s short story are the antagonists and the image of snowstorm — war is projected onto the relationship between the husband and the wife. Chekhov, making the night and the snowstorm the artistic time and space of the short story and the travellers who lost their way and the hosts of an isolated hut — its characters, ‘enters’ the territory of the ‘witch’ text of the Slavic culture and creates the original work of literature. This novelty becomes obvious when the short story is considered in and within the ethno-cultural and literature contexts.

**Keywords:** Chekhov A.P., “The Witch”, Ethno-cultural Context, Traditional Culture.

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**РАССКАЗ А. П. ЧЕХОВА «ВЕДЬМА»:  
КОДЫ ТРАДИЦИОННОЙ КУЛЬТУРЫ**

**Аннотация:** А.П. Чехов был хорошо знаком с народной культурой и по книгам, которые он читал в пору подготовки диссертации «Врачебное дело в России», и по личным впечатлениям жизни в Таганроге, на юге России. Обращался он и к народной демонологии. В рассказе «Ведьма» нашли отражения южнорусские представления о ведьмах, которые имеют региональную специфику. Это, в отличие от северных ведьм, молодые красивые женщины, обладающие властью над стихиями, владеющие любовной магией. В рассказе реальный план изображения подкреплен фольклорным, суеверным. Героиню рассказа Раису Ниловну ее муж, дьячок Гыкин, считает ведьмой. Но сам он обладает подчеркнуто физиологичными инфернальными чертами, за что Чехова упрекали современники. Телесные аномалии, грязь и запах, нелюдимость, злобность, глоссолалия, нечленораздельная речь — это приметы «нечеловеческой», хтонической сферы. В народной культуре ведьмой может стать женщина от сожительства с чертом. Драматическая судьба героини: нелюбимый отвратительный муж, жизнь в изоляции — наделяет ее не только тоской и жаждой любви, но и свойствами фольклорной ведьмы. Но если в народной культуре ведьма и черт союзники, то в чеховском рассказе они антагонисты. И образ метели-войны проецируется на отношения мужа и жены. Сделав художественным временем и пространством рассказа ночь и метель, а его персонажами — заблудившихся путников и хозяев одинокой сторожки, Чехов вступает на территорию «ведьминского» текста славянской культуры, но создает оригинальное произведение. Эта новизна проявляется особенно особенно ярко при включении рассказа в этнокультурный и литературный контекст.

**Ключевые слова:** Чехов, «Ведьма», этнокультурный контекст, традиционная культура.

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Anton Pavlovich Chekhov had a strong life-long interest in folklore — the fact might also be proved by the manuscript of the non-defended scientific thesis of the writer,

“Healthcare in Russia”. Among the sources of the thesis are folklore collections and the studies by folklorists: “Russian folk adages and parables published by I. Snegiryov, The Sayings and Bywords (Proverbs) of the Russian people” by V. Dal (Dahl), “Songs collected by P.V. Kireyevskiy”, the book by P. Bessonov about the spiritual poems, woks and collections by I. Zabelin, A. Afanasyev, A. Tereshchenko, and many others [11, v. XVI, p. 277–356].

The oeuvre of A.P. Chekhov contains the reflection of proverbs and sayings, signs and superstitions, folk beliefs and songs, ritual poetry and fairytales. The characters of folk demonology, heroes of *bylichki* (a folklore story about a meeting with harmful creatures or spirits) and *byvalshchiny* (a folklore story about a supernatural incident) or locus related to them may also be noted rather frequently. Already the titles of his works introduce the known to everyone heroes of the non-fairytale prose — play “The Wood Demon”, short stories “The Witch, a Conversation of A Drun With A Sober Imp”, and others. At the same time, the writer transforms the folklore plots in accordance with the realities of his time.

The idea of “The Witch”, a short story, according to Mikhail Pavlovich Chekhov’s memoirs, occurred to Anton Pavlovich not far from Moscow in Babkino, at the estate owned by the Kiselyovs:

...there was an isolated church, in Polevsh(ch)ina, close to the Daraganovskiy Forest, which always attracted the writer’s attention. The service there was merely once a year and only gloomy sounds of the bell, when the sexton struck the time, reached Babkino during the nights. That church, with an adjoining hut for sexton, right near the posting road, it seems, led Chekhov to the thought to write “The Witch and The Malevolent Deed” [10, p. 34–35].

It is quite possible that M.P. Chekhov was right when it comes to the story’s idea birthplace, however, the witch in the short story turned out to be entirely Southern Russian.

Chekhov was born and grew up in a city, which at that time was within the Yekaterinoslav Governorate. Ethno-cultural stereotypes, laid in the childhood, are manifested throughout the entire writer’s oeuvre, from the first short story, “A Letter to a Learned Neighbour”, reflecting Chekhov’s attitude towards the Cossacks and the administrative inclusion of Taganrog into the Don Cossack Host Province, to the last play written, “The Cherry Orchard”, with its specifically southern symbolism of cherry. Understanding the role of the local context and flavour may clarify a lot of points in Chekhov’s works.

There is a significant difference between northern and southern witches. As ethnographer S.V. Maksimov wrote, “...and if there are, not that rarely, young widows among the witches in the Little Russian steppes ... then in severe coniferous forests the mischievous and beautiful Little Russian witches turn into crones” [7, p. 113]. A contemporary researcher, though less poetically, writes about the same:

Northern Russian and Southern Russian witches differ just about the same way as northern and southern mermaids. A Northern Russian witch — is a crone, who is sometimes stout like a barrel, with dishevelled grey hair, bony arms, and a blue nose. A Southern Russian witch can be young and attractive, though sometimes her youth and beauty can be merely a disguise” [9, p. 76].

The links of a witch with natural forces and disasters, as the researchers note, are especially strong in the South of European Russia with the folk beliefs in witches who eat the moon and stars or sweep them away with a broom(stick) [1, p. 420; 3, p. 63; 4, p. 56]. Besides, the southern witches are less inclined to villainy; at least, harmfulness was not their initial form of behaviour [5, p. 440]. And, finally, the ideas and notions of the southern witches, due

to their youth and attractiveness, include the motifs of corporeity, temptation, and seduction, which are not typical of the northern ones. The bright examples might be “Evenings On a Farm Near Dikan’ka” and “The Viy” by Nikolai Gogol. The Gogol’s witches fly to sabbaths, milk cows dry, steal and hex the young moon, cause rough weather, ruin people’s lives, and their enchanting beauty attracts men. Chekhov, of the entire set of specific witch’s features and functions, provides his heroine with only several.

Far and by, Chekhov keeps the intrigue until the very end of the short story: is the heroine a witch or not? If she is a witch then taught or born one? If taught one then why and how did she become a witch?

The witch in folk consciousness is a creature both real and supernatural. Among her supernatural abilities are such as mastering and having control over the natural forces and disasters, the weather. Entitling his short story “The Witch”, Chekhov could not help actualising the motif. On the other hand, making the night and the snowstorm the artistic time and space of the short story and the travellers who lost their way and the hosts of an isolated hut — its characters, he could not but “enter” (willingly or unwillingly) the territory of the ‘witch’ text of the Slavic culture with its “deliberate non-distinguishing between the mythology and reality”, the fact E.E. Levkiyevskaya wrote about relating it to Gogol’s “Evenings” [6]. The witch unlike other mythological characters gravitates towards the world of humans and is interpreted applying the categories of mundane mythological consciousness [2].

So, is Raïssa Nilovna<sup>1</sup>, Chekhov’s heroine, a witch or is she not? There are no doubts that the writer’s contemporaries, who noted the realism of the short story in unison, considered the title to be a metaphor. However, it is not that simple. Let’s not forget that Chekhov grew up in a small provincial city with the traditional culture still surviving at his time in the way of a custom, everyday stereotype. It was not the case for large cities where it underwent significant reduction, especially in the intelligentsia milieu.

The registers of fantasy and reality constantly switch over within the short story. Sexton Savély Gykin listens to the dins of snowstorm and frowns:

The fact was that he knew, or at any rate suspected, what all this racket outside the window was tending to and whose handiwork it was. “I know!” he muttered, shaking his finger menacingly under the bedclothes; “I know all about it!” [11, v. IV, p. 375].

Gykin suspects his wife of causing bad weather and thus luring the travellers who lost their way. This may be considered to be the superstition of a silly and unsightly sexton, his mystical fear of his beautiful wife. Gykin, having heard a sound of the bell, gets even angrier:

“The postman is lost in the storm!” he wheezed out glancing malignantly at his wife. “Do you hear? The postman has lost his way! <...> I... I know! Do you suppose I don’t... don’t understand?” he muttered. “I know all about it, curse you!” [11, v. IV, p. 377].

And here comes the first sign:

“What do you know?” sexton’s wife asked quietly, keeping her eyes fixed on the window [11, v. IV, p. 377].

We, it goes without saying, may explain Raïssa’s quiet voice and gaze and consider them wish and willingness to hear a distant sound. However, common, usual words and

<sup>1</sup> When translating the Chekhov’s text, we relied upon Constance Garnett’s version [12] with exceptions in several cases when we provided a more precise and accurate, in our view, translation version.

actions have often got the second, hidden sense in Chekhov's works. The witch as any other evil spirit "gives herself away by the mystical look in her eyes" [8, p. 297]. There is a folk belief that if a witch watches a bird flying, the bird falls dead to the ground.

Then the narration switches over to the reality register again. "You're mad, you silly"<...> "Cross yourself, you fool!" Raïssa exhorts her husband and provides a very rational explanation for her interest:

"Why, you are stupid, Savély," said sexton's wife sighing and looking at her husband with pity. "When father was alive and living here, all sorts of people used to come to him to be cured of the ague... They came almost every day, and no one called them devils. But if anyone once a year comes in bad weather to warm himself, you wonder at it, you silly, and take all sorts of notions into your head at once" [11, v. IV, p. 378].

"His wife's logic touched Savély". Chekhov writes further [11, v. IV, p. 378]. The reader, however, takes notice of one small detail: Raïssa's father cured people of ague — of fever. The folk name of this illness is *tryasovitsa* or *tryaseya* and there are from seven to forty sisters the fevers in total. These are not just illnesses but mythological creatures and only a knowledgeable person, sorcerer can cope with them.

We may assume that Raïssa's father cured with herbs. In other words, despite being a clergyman, he performed the functions of the herb healer, herb potions maker. Herbs are collected in specific places: on borderland territories (boundaries, outskirts), in forests, in the uplands (mountains, hills). The name of the setting for the action and location of an old abandoned church with an adjoining hut for sexton and his wife is the Gulyayevskiy Hill on General Kalinovskiy's estate. Crossroads, junctions, intersections — these are the esoteric places where knowledge can be shared, given, and acquired, where humans can communicate with some mythical creatures. Taking the snowstorm into account, we may speak about the formation of a marginal, demonic chronotope in the short story. It is no surprise that his wife's arguments and reasons do not convince Gykin.

Gykin believes that it is Raïssa who 'bewitched' bad weather, made the travellers (one of them being young and handsome) lost their way. And though sexton's wife conversation with them is of the entirely common everyday character, Chekhov keeps the intrigue and makes the readers guess: is Raïssa a witch or is she not?

So, she sits near a sleeping young postman and stares at the visitor without taking her eyes off him.

Her cheeks were pale and her eyes were glowing with a strange fire [11, v. IV, p. 382].

And when Gykin puts a handkerchief over a postman's face and does not let his wife put out the light, she hisses at him. The zoomorphism, shape-shifting ability, alluring and glowing look, — these are the specific features of a witch. She is mystifying. Her phrase addressed to her husband: "...You did not see anything...", sounds ambiguously, both as the excuse and the spell.

It is known that a witch can be recognized as such by a tiny tail. The folklorists and researchers, starting with A.N. Afanasyev and V.I. Dal, write about it. Well, what might be simpler than that? Should not Gykin know whether his wife has a tail or not? The answer to this question is directly linked with another one: why has Raïssa become a witch?

The witches in folk beliefs are either natural (born) or taught. The first ones are born from demonic creatures. The ones taught acquire supernatural abilities during their lifetime.

One of the ways to acquire the forces and abilities is marrying or cohabiting with the devil. But though in folk culture and fiction the witch and the devil are usually on one side (just to remember Solokha or the witch, *pannoczka*, in Gogol's works), in Chekhov's short story they are the antagonists. This is because the role of the devil in the short story is played by Gykin and the image of snowstorm — war is projected onto the relationship between the husband and the wife:

It was hard to say who was being wiped off the face of the earth, and for the sake of whose destruction nature was being churned up into such a ferment; but, judging from the unceasing malignant roar, someone was getting it very hot [11, v. IV, p. 375].

Gykin to a greater degree than Raïssa possesses infernal features: hirsute, pock-marked countenance, red and coarse hair, unwashed feet or “stumps” (in Chekhov's drafts: “feet with curved, dirty nails” [11, v. IV, p. 452]), senseless and sound imitating family name. Corporeal abnormalities, dirt and odour, unsociability, malice, glossolalia, slurred speech — these are the signs of inhuman, chthonic sphere. Besides, the description of the hut's interior does not contain a single word about or hint at the icons. We do not know if Gykin believes in God, but he surely does in witches. The wife calls him “heathen”, “pitch”, “long-skirted devil”, “Herod”.

Many Chekhov's contemporaries were embarrassed about the excessive, as they thought, physiological details contained in the short story. V.V. Bilibin reproached the writer:

I do think it is not rather decent to utilise the talent to reproduce exceedingly voluptuous scenes... <...> I am a follower of the realism, however, the description of sexton's unwashed feet warps me. Furthermore, together with such a reality — there is a purely fantasy element in the image of sexton who truly thinks that his wife is a witch. It does not fit in [11, v. IV, p. 520].

D.V. Grigorovich, who used folklore-ethnographic elements in his works extensively, nevertheless stuck to the following opinion:

...You are so much skilful when it comes to the form, style, and taste that there is no particular need to speak about, for example, unwashed feet with curved nails and navel of the sexton. These details as such add absolutely nothing to the artistic beauty of the description; they rather spoil the impression the readers with a taste get [11, v. IV, p. 520].

And that is the point impossible to agree with. Without these feet, these nails, and hair Gykin would not be a demonic figure, rather a pathetic, miserable, and unattractive human being. Are not there plenty of beauties with unsympathetic husbands?

Raïssa Nilovna — is a beauty indeed: “broad shoulders, the handsome, tempting-looking contours of her person”, thick plait, “which reached to the floor”, “white neck”, “handsome face with its turned-up nose and its dimples” [11, v. IV, p. 376]. Gykin considers her beauty and sensuality to be the second, together with mastering and controlling the weather, specific feature of a witch, in full accordance with the folk tradition. Witches practise love magic and they, according to A.N. Afanasyev, “arouse the strongest passions” [1, p. 408]. It is no coincidence that Raïssa was making sacks in the beginning of the short story. The action alludes to the sacks of the Gogol's witch, Solokha, in which she hides her lovers. On the other hand, the action has the magic sense of sewing, connecting destinies, linking life paths. However, Raïssa's love spell is not malicious. She truly longs for love:

“How miserable I am!” sobbed sexton’s wife. “If it weren’t for you, I might have married a merchant or some gentleman! If it weren’t for you, I should love my husband now! And you haven’t been buried in the snow; you haven’t been frozen on the high road, you, Herod!” [11, v. IV, p. 385].

And if not for love then at least for its illusory and temporary equivalent:

“...The postman began undoing the knot in his hood. The sexton’s wife gazed into his eyes, and seemed trying to look right into his soul. “You ought to have a cup of tea...” she said. “I wouldn’t say no... but, you see, they’re getting ready”, he assented. “We are late, anyway”. “Do stay,” she whispered, dropping her eyes and touching him by the sleeve. <...> “You’d better stay... have some tea”. <...> “You’d better stay... Hark how the wind howls!” And the postman, not yet quite awake, not yet quite able to shake off the intoxicating sleep of youth and fatigue, was suddenly overwhelmed by a desire for the sake of which mail-bags, postal trains... and all things in the world, are forgotten” [11, v. IV, p. 385].

The woman seeks what she is deprived of in the marriage, searches for it in a passerby traveller, in a random person.

Raïssa Nilovna is indeed unhappy. She was not a proper bride, actually, as the husband was sent to marry her and take up the vacant position of sexton after her father’s death. She neither unplaited her hair, though a bride is supposed to: her thick plait reached to the floor. And we do remember that a plait is the confirmation of maidenhead and purity, that is, of virginity. Neither has she become the proper wife because her husband is “a clumsy lout, a slug-a-bed, God forgive me!” [11, v. IV, p. 385]. Gykin does not meet the status of husband, neither because he “unplaited her hair” nor provided her with property and assets etc., nor protected his wife and her honour (he was accusing her of lechery and calling her witch instead).

The witch described by Bulgakov, Margarita, would say much later: I became a witch because of all the grief and misfortunes that had struck me. Well, the same old story, it seems. However, Chekhov revives the plot applying a new look to it. This novelty becomes obvious when the short story is considered in and within the ethno-cultural and literature contexts, that is, the space, where folklore witches and the witches of Gogol, Chekhov, and Bulgakov coexist as equals.

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