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The North theme in Modern Russian Folk Horror

Elena A. Safron 

Petrozavodsk State University, Petrozavodsk, Russian Federation

✉ 00inane@gmail.com

Abstract. Examines the specifics of the North theme implementation in the modern Russian folk horror subgenre using the example of novels and stories by D. Bobyleva, O. Kozhin, L. Lvova, A. Podolsky, M. Romanova. The geography of the North in folk horror includes Karelia, Arkhangelsk region, Siberia and Yakutia. The work was carried out using motive, cultural-historical, historical-genetic methods. The author finds out that this subgenre is based on the remote locations chronotope (settlements, villages, farmsteads), which is associated with the chthonic world and danger (the cursed place motif). The article's results establish that the list of mandatory elements of the folk horror poetics includes: the heroes – bearers of a pagan worldview: shamans, priests, sorcerers; the initiation plot: the individual who encounters supernatural beings (whose genesis is determined to a folklore-mythological nature) is introduced to an archaic culture, becoming a full-fledged part of it. The author comes to the conclusion that not only supernatural creatures are dangerous for humans, but also nature itself: the heroes risk drowning in a swamp, freezing during a snowstorm, etc. The results show that, writers in order to fulfill the requirements of the genre frighten the reader and make him feel disgusted, but at the same time convey the special attractiveness of the North, reproducing the customs and rituals of indigenous peoples.

Keywords: folk horror, North, mythology, paganism, chronotope, Karelia, Siberia

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Тема Севера в современном отечественном фолк-хорроре

Е.А. Сафрон^{ID}

Петрозаводский государственный университет, Петрозаводск, Российская Федерация

✉ 00inane@gmail.com

Аннотация. Рассматривается специфика реализации темы Севера в субжанре современного отечественного фолк-хоррора на примере романов и рассказов Д. Бобылевой, О. Кожина, Л. Львовой, А. Подольского, М. Романовой. В фолк-хорроре в географию Севера попадает Карелия, Архангельская область, Сибирь и Якутия. При проведении исследования применялись мотивный, культурно-исторический, историко-генетический методы. В результате выяснено, что данный субжанр выстраивается с опорой на хронотоп удаленных от больших городов локаций (поселков, деревень, заимок), которые ассоциируются с хтоническим миром и угрожают человеку (мотив проклятого места). Устанавливается, что среди обязательных элементов поэтики выделяются: герои — носители языческого мировоззрения (шаманы, жрецы, колдуны); инициационный сюжет, когда сталкивающийся со сверхъестественными существами индивид (чей генезис носит фольклорно-мифологический характер) приобщается к архаической культуре, становится ее полноценной частью. Автор приходит к выводу, что не только сверхъестественные существа опасны для человека, но и сама природа: герои рискуют утонуть в болоте, замерзнуть во время снежной бури и т. п. Выполняя требования жанра, писатели пугают читателя и заставляют его испытывать отвращение, но в то же время транслируют особую привлекательность Севера, воспроизводя обычаи и ритуалы автохтонных народов.

Ключевые слова: жанр, мотив, сюжет, ритуалы, ужас, мифология, язычество, хронотоп, Карелия, Сибирь

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Introduction

Horror literature makes the reader experience the maximum level of fear and disgust (Cuddon, 1984, p. 11; Schweitzer, 1999, p. 64). For a long time this genre has been in the sphere of interests of the English-language

scholars: thus, E. Birkhead's monograph on the history of horror was published back in 1921 (Birkhead, 1921). It should be noted that the main emphasis in foreign scientific practice is placed on film versions, not on literary horror texts: L. Williams (Williams, 1999), N. Carrol (Carrol, 1990), J. Gixti (Gixti, 1989), S.J. Schneider (Schneider, 1997), K.J. Clover (Clover, 2014).

In Russian science this genre began to become the object of deep analysis only at the beginning of the 21st century. For example, V.A. Koshelev analyzes the elements of horror poetics in the works by A.S. Pushkin (Koshelev, 2015, pp. 54–64); S.Yu. Chvertko studies the poetics of horror in the works of Silver Age representatives (Chvertko, 2015); film scholar D. Komm examines the mechanism of producing a scary effect and thinks that horror has a technology of fear aimed at fulfilling a contract with the viewer (Komm, 2012, p. 9), i.e. a set of techniques for presenting a terrible image that works to satisfy the horizon of viewer/reader expectations; A.A. Grishin explores the terrible as an ethical category (Grishin, 2015).

Due to the fact that the understanding of the horror poetics by the Russian scientific community is still in its infancy, some subgenres of horror literature have not been studied yet. This fact determines the scientific novelty of this study, which will be devoted to folk horror. The purpose of the work is to identify the features of the implementation of northern themes in this subgenre. The theme of the sacred North space has always been relevant for the domestic artistic tradition. For example, it played a special role in the works of the authors of the Silver Age (Safron, 2023), so it seems interesting to see how it is interpreted by the mass literature subgenre.

The object of the study consists of: the novels *Swamp* by Maryana Romanova, *Finches* by Daria Bobyleva, the short stories *Meteo* by Alexander Podolsky, *Ogly's Songs* by Larisa Lvova, *Geese-Swans*, *Veriyarvi*, *Parents' Day*, *Frost on the Faces* from the collection *Zoo* by Oleg Kozhin.

The specificity of folk horror poetics

As already mentioned, horror, which belongs to popular literature, has a formulaic nature (Clover, 2014, p. 9). According to K.J. Clover, the poetics of this genre is close to the folklore tradition (Clover, 2014, p. 9): both folklore and horror are characterized by the same set of fantastic characters (living deads, brownies, vampires, sorcerers, witches, etc.), similar themes, plots, motives (the theme of death, the motive of revenge, the motive of cursed house). In addition, both folklore and the horror

genre are united by the focus on orality, where the emphasis is on the narrative, and not on the individual manner of the storyteller/narrator (Dickstein, 1980, p. 34). The closeness to folk tradition gives rise to such a subgenre of horror as folk horror, which poetics is built with the involvement of folklore and mythological motifs, the village chronotope and all the toposes associated with the village: forest, swamp, forest lake, etc.

The northern chronotope and the system of folk horror characters

It should be noted that the folk horror chronotope is determined by the northern Russian territories: the Arkhangelsk region (M. Romanova's *Swamp*), Karelia and Siberia (A. Podolsky's *Meteo*, O. Kozhin's *Geese-Swans*, *Veriyarvi*, *Parents' Day*), Yakutia (L. Lvova's *Ogly's Songs*). These locations are determined by the motif of isolation. For example, the characters in the short story *Veriyarvi* turn off the M-18 highway (now called R-21 *Kola*), connecting St. Petersburg and Murmansk, and immediately find themselves outside the space of well-appointed civilization: "Sofia felt sick as soon as the car turned off <...> onto a dirt road. There was no road to Veriyarvi. "There was a direction, but there was no road" (Kozhin, 2020, p. 91).

The North space is also closely connected with the winter motif and forms the "alien world" – "the world of death, illness, the world where harmony is broken and chaos reigns, the chthonic world" (Kondratieva, 2012). The frosty North, bringing death, is the motif that determines the plot structure of A. Podolsky's short story *Meteo*: "Among a bunch of local horror stories, there was one like this. <...>... Some wandering atmospheric anomaly lives in Kazakhstan. It causes a sharp weather deterioration, the sky fills with clouds of black snow that float against the wind, and sometimes even descend to the ground. People disappear in them. Years later, the bloodless bodies are found in different parts of the country, but most vanish forever. Old people insist on that this was the work of an evil spirit. <...> Stories about a certain phenomenon accompanying winter, or a natural demon, spread throughout the area" (Podolsky, 2023, pp. 139–140).

Folk horror heroes either move from the city, as in the case of the characters in M. Romanova's novel *Swamp*, D. Bobyleva's novel *The Finches*, L. Lvova's short story *Ogly's Songs*, or are originally villagers, like the heroes of O. Kozhin's short stories *Geese-Swans* and *Veriyarvi*. The source of the monstrous in folk horror are anthropomorphized forces of nature and some representatives of lower mythology: a wood goblin, a witch, a mermaid, a werewolf. For example, in O. Kozhin's short story

Geese-Swans (the reception of the same Russian folk fairy tale), we are introduced to an old witch living in the forest: she lures little Vanya to her house in order to boil and eat him, thus taking away his life force. The child's older sister Marichka rushes to his aid. She is assisted by a magic stove and *navki*-mermaids. The fight with the witch becomes a fatal initiation for young Marichka: after defeating the demonic old woman, she is forced to take her place and continue the eternal cycle of life and death: "She drank everything, took everything away, young, healthy, determined. <...> The old witch was dying. Many miles from here, in another hut, in another world, a new witch was born in a silent scream" (Kozhin, 2020, p. 409).

Folk horror subgenre particularity is determined by the cursed place motif: those who find themselves in such a location become victims of this curse: here the laws of familiar reality cease to operate, but apply the rules of the archaic world, which is controlled by magic, the supernatural force. As in the Gothic, the curse motif is associated with events that took place in the past. For example, M. Romanova in the novel *Swamp* describes the supernatural marsh, located in the Arkhangelsk forests, which, allegedly, was mentioned in the ancient Russian chronicles. Infant sacrifices took place in this location. The demonic entity living at the bottom of the swamp, guided by unknown reasons, brings some children back to life. After leaving the forest the surviving babies demonstrate behavior that is unnatural for a human being ("The son, although he clearly heard her, for some reason did not quicken his pace. There was *something mechanical in Mishenka's movements* (italics mine. – E.S.). <...> And Mishenka's face somehow sagged (italics mine. – E.S.), as if it were dripping from his bones" (Romanova, 2022, pp. 315–316). But then after a certain amount of time "the returnee can't be distinguished from an ordinary person – only he is stronger, more cunning, thinks much faster and knows how to lead a crowd", "and every day he learns something new, and can live ten years in a year" (Romanova, 2022, p. 318).

The swamp with demonic mosquitoes, sucking the blood of their victims in order to murder them, describes O. Kozhin's short story *Veriyarvi*. We see several generations of women from one village family, who are forced to sacrifice people they don't like to mosquitoes in order to avoid the victims' sad fate themselves.

The cursed place in D. Bobyleva's novel *The Finches* is a dacha village: the dacha residents who come there find themselves in captivity of supernatural creatures – the traditional heroes of Russian demonology – mermaids, *poludnitsas*, *leshys*, *igosha*, werewolves.

The figures of folk horror encounter not only dangerous supernatural creatures, but also nature itself, whose elemental power can also lead

to their death. Thus, in the already mentioned short story by A. Podolsky, the characters lost on the roads of Kazakhstan and risk dying not only because of the living dead attack, but also because of the severe frost and snowstorm: “The face hardened in a matter of minutes, it was impossible to speak. Real icicles grew on my eyelashes” (Podolsky, 2023, p. 144); “– I don’t feel them. Ogly <...> pulled off her mittens and showed her frozen palms. Her fingers had almost turned black” (Podolsky, 2023, p. 145). An important feature of this subgenre is the obligatory presence of heroes who think from the standpoint of a pagan having a mythological worldview. For example, in *Ogly’s Songs* we see a girl left alone with the last member of her tribe – a dying shaman. Ogly understands that there can’t be any circumstances for tradition of the tribe’s guardian dying, and the shaman’s drum must not fall silent, so she decides to conduct a ritual of initiation for herself as a shaman and get a new drum beater, which the old shaman had accidentally lost: “Where is the beater that can do everything: turn back time and give life to someone who is already dead <...>? It’s a disaster – apparently, the sick shaman dropped the bone into the hearth fire <...> Ogly had heard that the best beater is made from the shinbone of an already dead shaman. And this one is still alive. But there is no time to waste – the creatures of the Lower World are ready to crawl into the tent and grab everyone <...> And Ogly bit into the shaman’s trouser leg. <...> The sinewy flesh gave way too. <...> Ogly’s mouth was clogged with blood clots. But she can’t spit - there are already someone’s thirsty faces reaching out, bodies with sharp spines from hunger crawling closer. And Ogly accepted the shaman’s blood” (Lvova, 2023, p. 282).

We see often, that the religious worldviews of folk horror heroes base on a synthesis of Christianity and the pagan cults of the ethnic groups that originally lived in a given territory. The short story by O. Kozhin *Frost on the Faces* is indicative in this regard: the yakut Kharyskan buries a man he killed and “Finely crosses the dead man, quickly reads a strange prayer in which Christ is mentioned in the same row with the names of the ancient gods aiyy” (Kozhin, 2020, p. 59). The cult of aiyy is officially registered in the Sakha Republic. It is a set of beliefs associated with good deities living in the subtle worlds, which are opposed to abas – evil spirits (Novikov, 1991).

In his another short story *Veriyarvi* Christianity is replaced by a matriarchal cult: “Sophia stopped at the red corner, looking with interest at a small icon, it seems look like the Mother of God. <...> Molded cheekbones, gracefully curved eyebrows – the spitting image of Grandmother Koivu. Except that her thick braid does not fall on her shoulder, but is laid like a knot on the top of her head. Surrounded by

burnt-out candles, the missing photographs of her mother stood, enclosed in a gilded frame” (Kozhin, 2020, p. 111).

The matriarchal cult, a synthesis of Scandinavian and Karelian-Finnish mythology, accompanied, by the technology of fear (in accordance with the requirements of the genre) is also found in O. Kozhin’s short story *Parents’ Day*: on the ninth day after the celebration of Easter there is Radonitsa celebrated, dedicated to the remembrance of the dead. Every year on this day Lehtinen family must bring a living sacrifice to the cemetery in order to be eaten by the demonic deceased grandmother Noita Toivovna (We consider the importance of “talking” nature of her name: noida is the name of a shaman in the religious Sami practice (Demkin, 2009). If they ignore this “honorable duty” the grandmother threatens to rise from the grave and eat one of her own family members.

Conclusion

Generally speaking, the suggestive effect of reading such texts is heterogeneous: on the one hand, by reading scenes with murders and various kinds of mutilations, the person experiences horror and disgust, on the other hand, experiences pleasure from immersion in native or foreign ancient national culture, joins archaic pagan rituals, thereby activating the dormant archetypes in the subconscious. As can be seen, the writers who work with folk horror, follow traditional cultural stereotypes, depicting the North as both a dangerous and attractive location.

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Bio note:

Elena A. Safron, Grand PhD in Philology, Professor Department of German Philology and Scandinavian studies, Petrozavodsk State University, 33 Lenin Ave., Petrozavodsk, 185910, Russian Federation. ORCID: 0000-0002-7752-3403. E-mail: 00inane@gmail.com