

## ФОЛЬКЛОРИСТИКА

### POETICS OF DRAMATIC EXISTENCE IN THE FOLK PROSE ABOUT WORLD WAR I: LOCAL FOLKLORE OR/AND MECHANISM OF COLLECTIVE STRUCTURING OF EXPERIENCE

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#### ABSTRACT

**Kuzmenko, Oksana. *Poetics of Dramatic Existence in the Folk Prose about World War I: Local Folklore or/and Mechanism of Collective Structuring of Experience***

The paper deals with the problem of creative process of coding historic information, negative sensual life experience in particular, in the folklore texts followed by their transmission with further decoding-warning (moral lesson). Theoretical conclusions are based on oral historic narratives, eschatological stories and memorates recorded by the author. The article gives a detailed analysis of persisting plots, productive emotive motives (rescue from perdition, fear for life, physical pain and suffering), folklore concepts ("lost home", "fear", "sorrow", "prayer") which serve to structure the texts about the times of unrest. The author observed that semantics of the characters remains within the general folklore dichotomy "human vs inhuman" where a "human" is a character-victim or a character-sufferer. The latter acts under the circumstances of various existential tests (front, wounds, captivity, tragic death) and confrontations. The main idea of the article is that folklore texts are capable of reflecting both the local historic truth of a certain community and the creative experience of a folklore tradition bearer. Contemporary oral narratives are not only a form of expressing universal knowledge of people about war but also an important piece of information worth transmitting. It serves as a directive for assembling the teller's own life and is a cognitive model enabling to reveal, via language, the experience of existential self-preservation and innate value of a human being.

**Key words:** folklore, story, motif, folklore concept, experience, dramatic existence.

**Кузьменко Оксана. *Поетика драматичної екзистенції у фольклорній прозі про Першу світову війну: локальний фольклор чи (і) механізм колективного структування переживань***

У статті зосереджено увагу на проблемі творчого процесу кодування історичної інформації у фольклорних текстах, зокрема негативно-чуттєвого життєвого досвіду, що передбачає передачу з наступним декодуванням-пересторогою (мораллю). Теоретичні узагальнення зроблено на матеріалі історичних переказів, есхатологічних оповідань та меморатів, записаних автором. У статті проведено детальний аналіз стійких сюжетів, емотивних мотивів (порятунку від загибелі, страху за життя, фізичного болю і страждань), фольклорних концептів («втрачений дім», «страх», «печаль», «молитва»), за допомогою яких структуровано твори про лихоліття. Автор дослідила, що семантика персонажів є у межах загальнофольклорної дихотомії «людина vs нелюд», де «людина» – це герой-жертва або герой-страдник, який діє в обставинах різних екзистенційних випробувань (фронт, поранення, полон, трагічна смерть) та протистоянь. Головною думкою статті є те, що фольклорні твори здатні відображати і локальну історичну правду спільноти, і творчий досвід носія традиції. Сучасні усні наративи є не тільки формою вираження універсального знання на-

роду про війну, але важливою інформацією, яка варта передання. Вона служить настановою до упорядкування власного життя оповідача та є когнітивною моделлю, що дозволяє через мову виявити досвід екзистенційного самозбереження та самоцінності людини.

**Ключові слова:** фольклор, сюжет, мотив, фольклорний концепт, досвід, драматична екзистенція.

## OUTLINING THE PROBLEM

Ukrainian folklore, marked with global openness to contemporary social space, is a significant field for studying the questions of human existence. Experiencing historic dramas is one of the most significant ontological aspects vividly presented in the epic poetry of the Ukrainian people, as well as in the lyric poetry and folklore narratives of modernity. In the light of the above stated we believe it is very relevant to study the problem of creative process of coding historic information in contemporary folklore texts typifying the dramatic life experience of the past, namely the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Special attention is paid to the reflection of negative-sensual experience with its subsequent decoding-warning (a moral).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Various aspects of interaction between the historic past and folklore, historic and cultural memory of the people as significant factors of national self-awareness, ways of modeling national heroic history in epic texts, folklore as a specific historic and cultural phenomenon and a resource for constructing cultural identity of a nation have been widely discussed and researched in the folklore studies of the last decades, by both Ukrainian (O. Britsyna, V. Buriak, H. Demyan, F. Keida, R. Kyrchiv, A. Korniev, S. Myshanych, I. Pavlenko, V. Sokil, V. Chabanenko, N. Yarmolenko) and foreign (K. Chystov, N. Krynychnaya, D. Kadłubiec, L. Honko, O. Sirovatka, T. Baycroft, J. Lugowska, A. Przybyła-Dumin, K. Kazmierska, A. Eriksen, D. Simonides and others).

The **objective** of this study is to reveal and analyze the main structural elements and the most typical elements in artistic system of contemporary oral prose works about World War I which contain significant cultural and historic information transmitted in artistic form.

**Theoretical and methodological basis** for this study is laid by works of scholars in the sphere of philosophic and anthropologic view on human existence, its psychological manifestations in a critical ("borderline") social and cultural space (Hans-Georg Gadamer, Søren Kierkegaard, Erich Fromm, Karl Theodor Jaspers, Serhiy Krymsky, O. Kulchytsky, Dmytro Chyzhevsky, Volodymyr Yaniv), works on theory of memory (Philippe Ariès, Paul Connerton, Pierre Nora, Maurice Halbwachs, Patrick H. Hutton) and folklore (Mykhailo Drahomanov, Olexander Potebnia, Ivan Franko, Sofiya Hrytsa, Yaroslav Harasym, Mykola Dmytrenko, Olena Ivanovska, Lesia Mushketyk, Oksana Labashchuk, Stanislav Rosovetsky, Konstantin Bogdanov, Sergey Nekludov, Roch Sulima), semiotics and linguistics (Roland Barthes, Yuriy Lotman, Wallace L. Chafe, Nina Artunova, Svitlana Yermolenko, Vitaliy Kononenko) – all directed onto a broad interdisciplinary study of ethno-poetics and communicative properties of verbal texts including the texts of oral folk tradition. To achieve the solution of research tasks we shall apply structural and semantic, historic and typological methods, as well as some elements of functional and conceptological approaches.

This article on the research of the Ukrainian folklore prose with historic content. The text records have been taken from war time newspaper and magazine publications. More texts are available from private and state archive collections of Ukraine (in particular, from the Scientific archive fund of manuscripts and soundtracks at the Maksym Rylski Institute of Art Studies, folkloristic and ethnology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine in Kyiv), in the National Library of Poland. Perhaps such records are available also from Austria, Russia.

The contemporary prose works were recorded by me during 2002-2014 in the course of interviewing performers of different age, sex, social identity and education. These materials were recorded in more than 100 villages and some towns of the western and central parts of Ukraine as a result of my individual trips, as well as within the framework of participating in scholarly expeditions with a group of colleagues (ethnologists and folklorists) from the Ethnology Institute of The National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine [1, 2].

Oral prose works, by their content, relate to the tragic events of the Ukrainian early 20<sup>th</sup> century history. They are a figurative representation of information about WWI (1914–1918) centenary of which we are currently commemorating in Europe. Ukraine stood in the centre of the eastern front of this war theatre acted by the two main empire potencies – Austro-Hungary and Russia. According to a prominent Ukrainian historian Yaroslav Hrytsak, Ukraine “*with its rich human and natural resources was one of the main winning prizes for each of them*” [4]. Ukraine’s geopolitical vulnerability remains a burning issue up to date.

The bulk of the Ukrainian folklore materials about WWI representing our cultural memory have been lost forever since we failed to record them on time. Here we are probably dealing with the “experience memory” crisis (according to Aleida Assman) which consists in a gradual extinction of the generations of live witnesses to the 20<sup>th</sup> century catastrophes [3, p. 23]. Therefore, the question of elucidating the collective view of WWI which was a tough test for many European nations in early 20<sup>th</sup> century (as well as similar phenomena of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Famine of 1932–1933, WWII) remains a very relevant and topical issue. We must keep in our minds that poetic creations, including folklore, are not just a social fact. Mykhailo Hrushevsky, Professor of history and literature, the first president of the Ukrainian People’s Republic, said in the 1920’s that folklore is a reflection “of the social function of citizenship” [5, p. 54]. Similar thoughts are shared by Graham Seal, an Australian professor, author of “The Soldiers’ Press: Trench Journals in First World War” (Basingstoke 2013) and “Outlaw Heroes in Myth and History” (London, New York 2011). He says in “The Hidden Culture: Folklore in Australian Society” (Melbourne : Oxford University Press, 1989; 1992, chpt. 1) that «...*folklore provides an insight into the most powerful motivators of social groups. Its close relationship to sense of identity and belonging imparts shared meaning to the lives of individuals and projects an otherwise intangible sense of the uniqueness of the experiences, practices and expressions of the social groups to which individuals belong*» [16].

## MAIN CONTENT

According to genre characteristics, the oral texts about WWI are *historic narratives, toponymic narratives, legends, eschatological stories, memorates*. The texts have been analyzed on the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic levels of meaning. Given the high communicative purpose of the narratives I have all the reasons to state that the majority of them have clear qualities of folklority. These characteristics are: 1) *oral* way of preservation and presentation; 2) *collective* perception; 3) *traditional* circulation; 4) *contextual variety* which depends on the performer’s reactions, recorder’s tasks, as well as 5) *plot and composition integrity*; 6) clear *emotional coloration* and *figurativeness* which represent the text’s artistic value.

The wartime folklore prose belongs not only to the male audience of the military men (here anecdotes, memorates, chronicates, gossips are the most popular) but also to civilians, chiefly ladies. Stories of the women living under occupation are characterized by a specific composition and artistic peculiarities. These texts demonstrate female thought, psyche, memory and life experience. The dramatic episodes of violence in the compositions, dated by the period when Ukrainian peasants were living under the circumstances of war frontline, are presented with strong emotions: sexual abuse, destruction of church icons, etc. A nostalgic “loss” theme is constantly present in these memorates. This theme is developed through the motives of “losing one’s own home” and “losing integrity of the family”, “evacuated (burnt) village”. Female texts reflect the typical hardships of survival and struggle in the changed space, especially in those stories where the main dramatis personae are refugees and orphans.

The contemporary prose works with the topic of war usually come from the repertoire of elderly women. They complement the more remote-in-the-past lyric and epic works, in particular *verse epistles from the front-line and back, chronicle songs, historic songs, historic ballads with stories* about WWI. All these texts represent a creative process of coding information about the negative sensual life experience and are a form of presenting a historic memory. Under the term historic memory we mean “*capability of human mind to preserve individual and collective experience of interpersonal relations and to form, on its basis, one’s understanding of history and one’s place in it*” [6, p. 855]. We believe that historic experience can be verbally revealed through persistent plots, productive emotive motifs (rescue from captivity, fear for life,

experience of physical pain and suffering). From the linguistic and cultural perspectives it is significant to launch the prevailing folklore concepts ("lost home", "fear" [9], "sadness", "prayer" [10], "enemy" [8]).

The tragic human existence in the course of war that was ruining a normal world of the traditional rural worldview, undermining humanistic basics of life, daily work on land, love and death. Existentiality in folklore is represented with the following themes: 1) "farewell", 2) "expectation", 3) "injury", 4) "captivity", 5) "disease-mutilation", 6) "premature death in solitude". They are developed via a set of typical plot-forming motifs repeated from the texts of the Ukrainian song folklore about army and war originating from the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries: *cossak songs, recruit songs, soldier [zhovnir] songs*.

In the poetic language of narratives, probably, the most vivid image is the general image of WAR ("voina", "voynychky", "voynychka"). Anticipation of the new war was reflected in historic songs compiled long before the events of August, 1914 ("*Hvaryla mamichka, zhe bude voynychka*" [My mom told the war would come]). In the texts which appeared during the war and later, the negative connotation of the image is strengthened through expression patterns, metaphoric epithets ("*voina neshchasna*" [ill-fated war], "*strashna voina*" [dreadful war]), through locutions of didactic and ironic content: "*Cherez voynu zozhanete bidni i kaliky*" [17, c. 186]. (Because of the war you shall stay miserable and mutilated); "*Ta na viyni varto zhyty, ne treba tuzhyty*" [17, c. 182]. (Still at the time of war one has to live, no use to grieve).

The motif of "dreadful war" in contemporary stories of a family "chronicle" type is depicted with the help of hyperbolization ("*tears running like rivers*"), uncountable signs ("*corpses were lying uncountable like dust*"), epithets ("*bloody tears*") and comparisons ("*heads chopped like cabbages*") typical for the poetics of the Ukrainian heroic epic compositions.

It is a well-known fact that war has a strong psychological and emotional impact on a person, on everyone who experiences it and lives in expectation. This is why the motif of "divine (cosmic) prediction or prophecy of war and its consequences" became one of the dominating ones in the structure of folklore compositions about WWI, especially of the narratives with eschatological motives. Among them there are stories with one episode about "iron birds". The emergence of unusual ornitomorphic images which serve as a metaphor of planes, helped to depict a wider artistic picture of modernity – apocalyptic "iron world". It is complemented with a folklore image of an "iron" field. Due to these tropes people's consciousness captured the naïve form of reflecting the engineering breakthrough before WWI which is also known as "the war of new technologies".

Folklore motifs of "signifying the end of the world", "prophesizing duration of "the Great war" and its consequences for various nations is a reflection of the first year of war in the historic conscience of the people and in the folklore tradition of the political atmosphere in Europe of that time. Optimism prevailed only at the very beginning. Thoughts about rapid shut-down of war gradually changed into an ever-growing state of total anxiety. This is well illustrated by the plot of a Ukrainian legend of three kings and a cross recorded in 1916:

*"They say that the old Romanian died and our ceasar became a caretaker for his son who turned eighteen. The king of moskals passed a message that he would marry his daughter to him but our king found himself at a loss and said that he does not know how things may turn. Then the king of moskals said: If so then I am going to fight for another decade. A Cross from Rome fell down, all kings arrived to raise it but the German king raised it just a little bit while our king [i.e. Franz-Joseph I (1830–1916) – O.K.] did raise it quite a bit, because he is supposed to win, and those all are supposed to lose for they could not raise that cross, and moskal did not raise it even a bit"* [13, arc. 9].

The significant compositional nucleus in this text is the motif of "cross falling down" and the symbolism of a Christian sign-object. Sacred, apotropaic and preventive functions of a cult object are reflected in the semantics of this image. Up till nowadays the symbolism of landscape (by a road) crosses accumulates people's knowledge about their ramified influence, in particular during war times [15, p. 114].

Oral verbal compositions with various plots related to beliefs, in particular belief in the prophetic signs of upcoming war, are present also in the contemporary folklore tradition. Eschatological motifs, however, are present only in the narratives recorded from elderly people (60-80 years old).

In folklore compositions the motive of war prediction is often correlating with persistent symbolic images “Sadness”, “Lament”, “Blood”. It is worth mentioning that in the Ukrainian lyric and epic songs the World War is verbalized via semantic equivalent concepts SADNESS/LAMENT. They appear in a set of metaphors (“lament came down”), in amplificatory constructions of constant epithets, for instance, in a typical motif “children are crying for their daddy”:

|  |                                |
|--|--------------------------------|
| <i>Sumne nashe podvirjachko,</i>       | [Sad is our courtyard,]        |
| <i>Sumna nasha khata,</i>              | [Sad is our house and mother,] |
| <i>Sumni nashi dity,</i>               | [The children are walking sad] |
| <i>Bo ne majut' tata. [12, c. 111]</i> | [For they have no father]      |

These repeated text elements contribute to the structuring of collective knowledge about the “dramatic and horrible 20<sup>th</sup> century”, about the troublous WWI times. By its logic that war bears a strong resemblance to the war of 2014 in Ukraine. Oral memorates reflect both the local historic truth of the community (“collective historic experience”) within a certain *communicative group*: one family, one village or, on a broader scale – an ethnographic region) and the individual experience of its performer. In this case we may argue with the expression of a prominent Ukrainian historian who says that “the problem with our historic memory is that it is too short” because the experience of folklore testifies to the opposite.

We believe it is also significant that our narrators are the people actively involved into the folklore tradition of their region. They are usually very well acquainted with the ritual wedding songs, lyric and ballad songs. For them, the historic information in the form of narrations is also a part of that oral tradition and is of primary value. The essence of pragmatic strategy of contemporary historic narratives consists in the fact that the performer sees in those stories certain laws of shared characteristics, i.e. how to lead a good life and how to live in the future.

The topic of frontline collisions and personal dramatic experiences prevails in the folklore compositions about the World War. This determines a certain paradigm of acting images. Semantic and structural analysis of texts makes it possible to gather character groups: 1) characters-*victims*; 2) characters-*martyrs*; 3) characters-*helpers*; 4) *ambivalent* characters; 5) *enemies*. Interconnections between characters and plot activity (function) are built on the ancient mythological opposition “good”/“evil”. I can state that the semantics of images remains within the general folklore dichotomy “human versus inhuman”. The “human” image is a transformation of mythological and folklore character in its two realizations: character-*victim* or character-*martyr*.

In the Ukrainian song epics about WWI the main character bears typological resemblance to a more ancient folklore image of soldier (recruit) presented with the accompanying constant epithet “poor”. This semantic charge has stayed with the image in folklore since late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The theme of “being poor” is developed in this image through the motifs: soldier is starving, soldier became a cripple, and soldier is awaiting his death in a foreign land or in captivity (“*Ya molodyj ta neshchasnyj v toj polon zistavsia / Shchyro Bohu pomolyvsia shcho zhyvyj zostavsia*” [17, p.187]):

[Here I am, *young and unlucky*, in captivity I stayed /  
Out of gratitude for survival I sincerely to God prayed].

Overall these substantial elements produce a distinct semantics of a “sufferer” – “the one who is suffering or has suffered from many physical and moral distresses”. This trait is present also in the actions of other dramatis personae displayed on the background of the main worldview dominant, i.e. deep religiousness of the Ukrainians. What do we mean here? The traditional knowledge “about God’s omnipresence” has been formed in the consciousness of Ukrainians since the archaic times. Some of its elements got rooted in standard appellation formulas and sayings.

Such prosody-marked expressions like “If trouble comes, God is addressed at once”, “God, rescue me!”, “Holy Mother of God!”, and “My merciful God and the Holy Mother”, are typical for the speech of many characters from folklore memorates and wartime historic songs. These exclamations, just to remind, played an apotropaic and therapeutic function under the critical circumstances of combat actions. At the same time we should take into account that such appeals reveal a destruction of Christian moral imperatives which took place in the course of

WWI. For many of those retelling their autobiographical wartime stories (which later became oral narratives) originated from the traditional rural environment with the prevalent commandment “thou shall not kill”. Therefore the humanistic motifs of that remote and “alien” war – “the soldiers refuse to fight”, “the soldiers avoid shooting the enemy”, “the soldiers injure themselves to avoid going to the front” – continue to live in the present.

The main character of folklore narratives is in various existential states. At the same time, he should be considered as such who is undergoing the chain of typical “epic” tests (battle, staying in the alien space – captivity or imprisonment, heroic death) and confrontations with the antagonist. There are a couple of variants of enemy images. The most often applied one is a syncretic image of “moskal” (*moskal* is simultaneously an exonym for Russians and ethnonym for Ukrainians, for the latter inhabited once the territory of Central and Western Ukraine which was under the rule of the Russian empire.) Visual portrait of the enemy has a lowering material characteristic (“with lice”, “with beards”) and forms a sustainable image of the “unclean alien” which is typical for a general folklore picture of the world. Short comments on his negative behavior serve as the marking elements for stereotypization of the enemy in the narratives available from the contemporary bearers of tradition (“cossaks were ridiculing others, running after women”, “Russians were never merciful with people”). Attitude to religion has a separate evaluation. Enemy’s godlessness becomes the chief sign of anti-norm and “otherness” (“...*she said that not everyone would pray, not everyone believed in God*”). Psycho-functional characteristics of the enemy image with the corresponding occasional epithets are typical for these narratives (“wild”, “vile”, “horrible”, “uneducated”). They have formed a relevant sharply negative ethnic stereotype of a Russian which is being reanimated again under the circumstances of the new military conflict.

In the contemporary folklore tradition the WWI theme has a distinct regional character (in the west it is called “Austrian war”, while in the rest of territory – “German war”). It is tightly connected with the sacralization of local space which is reflected in the narratives with a dominating toponymic motif. The connection between war stories and significant loci takes place according to the defined “memory places” (P. Nora), most often such as a mountain, a rifleman grave or burial mound. The morphology of such texts is determined by space divided according to the oppositions “mine” – “alien”, “here” – “there”.

## CONCLUSION

I would like to underline the following statements:

1. The contemporary narratives are not only a form of expressing universal knowledge of people about war but also an important piece of information worth transmitting. It serves as a directive for assembling the teller’s own life and is a cognitive model enabling to reveal, via language, the experience of existential self-preservation and innate value of a human being.

2. Semantics of the main dramatis personae (a suffering soldier, ‘merciful’ ceasar, enemy-moskal) relates to different aspects of folklore processing of reality: condemnation of war, naïve monarchism, binary world perception. Typology of characters is within the paradigm of mythological oppositions “mine” / “alien”, “good” / “evil”, “sin” / “punishment”. Through the actions of characters in the oral folk stories we can see the mental traits of Ukrainians: 1) deep religiousness; 2) focus on general human moral values; 3) prevailing esthetics of “good and beautiful”.

Ukrainian folklore compositions about WWI are significant elements of the people’s historic memory which is a fundamental basis of collective information about the nature of war and its main conflicts. It is worth bearing in mind that these compositions reflect not only a specifically folklore approach to history, its axiological dimension, but also esthetic and life experience of the oral tradition bearers. Existential absolute concepts *death/life* have a generally accepted humanistic value. Alongside with them we have very active emotional fictional images (*fear, lament, sorrow*) which became symbols of the world war and terror as the “leading metaphors of memory” about the genocide past of the Ukrainian people.

“Every nation, out of necessity, refracts the universal in its national experience. This is also true for the formation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century spirituality”, said Serhiy Krymsky, a Ukrainian philosopher [7, p. 351]. One of the main expressions of the spirituality is folklore and folklore

text. It “always belongs to the present (but it more often speaks of the past)” [14, p. 30] for it is a sublimation of a number of human experience types: practical, life, naïve historic.

Folklore experience, as one of the ways to describe the past, becomes the basis for forming stereotypic visions and persistent images about what our future should look like (in sharing life with the neighbor, in mutual respect). But above all, oral stories about war are telling us of what this future should not be like: with war, with starvation and violence, with evacuations, with manslaughter conflict. War, according to the apt concept of Tarmo Kunnas, a Finnish philosopher of ethics, “*deprives people of their intrinsic peace-loving nature, destroys their spiritual core, shocks them with violence and brings animality to the surface. It ultimately grants power to people’s hidden evil and unlimited freedom to those with the corrupt soul and those who are really sick*” [11, p. 98].

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