

## Mortal Subtext in O.E. Mandelstam's Poem "Oh, How We Love to Be a Hypocrite":

### Folklore Reality

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### Abstract

The article dwells upon the problem scarcely investigated in literary studies: a folklore tradition in O. Mandelstam's poetry. The researchers studied manifestation of mythological tradition in the poet's artistic world and revealed different archetypal models but they paid no attention to folklore elements. Only folklorists and ethnographers, while describing children's games associated with the theme of death, refer to one text of the poet illustrating their scientific research. This remark made it possible to develop the idea of folklore tradition existing in the acmeist's works having a latent character. The folklore commentary of one of the poems makes it possible to understand an image structure of the text in other way and brings a reader to the ontological level of the content.

**Keywords:** *Mandelstam, Russian literature traditions, folklore, myth, ideal topos.*

### Introduction

The question of folklore essence in O. Mandelstam's poems was not put directly though his poetry is usually studied in the context of the world literature traditions, ancient heritage and myths mostly of eschatological nature (the latter is much more closer to the problem of our interest). Quite a lot was written about mythological concept of his works: it was developed in details in the studies of Kikhney (2005) and Kosterina (2001) as well as in Petrova's (2012) thesis "Cultural and Religious Paradigm in the Works of Osip Mandelstam" where the researcher mentions folklore as an important mode (a medium) for the acmeist's creative work. Actually, one should not reproach these researchers because the other goals and tasks have been put by them. However, interest in a folkloric component in Mandelstam's poetics arose not in the literary scholars' works but in the folklorists' studies devoted, oddly to say, to children's folklore, namely children's death-related games.

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### Methodology

So, the article by Nesanelis & Sharapov (1994) “The Theme of Death in Children's Games: Ethnosemiological Analysis (based on the materials of traditional Komi culture)” dwells upon the complicated semantics of children's games “Kar Tui” and “Yoma Tui” the main essence of which is travel to “the other kingdom” and overcoming the threshold of daily reality. Besides, there are some games with a direct meaning, for instance, *a dead man game*. The purpose of this article is not only to describe children's games related to death but also to think on a liminal (transitional) nature of a child as a member of society (Turner, 1983). Quoting the poem of our interest, the scholars draw literary parallels and address to Marquez, Eco and Mandelstam. This is most probably the only folklore commentary on the present text which certainly deserves more attention (Nesanelis & Sharapov, 1994).

### Results and their discussion

*The mortal subtext* appears immediately in the first stanza but its meaning is revealed through opposition of two social categories – a mature “adult” human being and a “child”:

Oh, how we love to be a hypocrite  
 And all we easily forget  
*That in the childhood we are closer to the death*  
*Than in mature years* (Mandelstam, 1991).

If you do not address to a folklore and archetypal component, then a natural question of the child's position arises. Why is one closer to death in childhood? Is a child defenseless and vulnerable? But does the poet care about these second-rate things? It appears that this is quite the other thing. Based on popular notion of status of children and old men, we determine their borderline position between *this* and *the other* world. This has been reflected in various genres of folklore, pre-genre works and ritual culture (in fairy tales and games) (Bernstam, 2011).

In childhood one is closer to death because a child is much more sensitive to *the other world* and even strives to lift the veil as the games described above indicate (see also the Image 1). An adult no longer believes in *a miracle* and loses *a sacred sense of the world*.

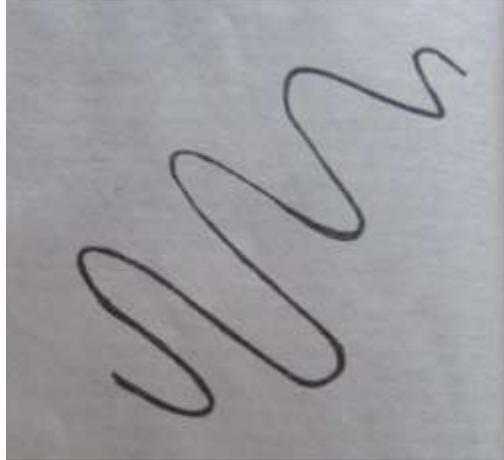


Image 1. “Road to Ema”. Gleb Nesanelis (6 years) painting.

The child's drawing depicting its vision of a road (curved and wandering) to “Land of the Dead”. This drawing is taken from the above-mentioned article written by ethnographers who asked children to draw a line, a road leading to Ema, i.e. the other kingdom. The road is twisty and curved; it is fully associated with “curved” invisible paths to a cemetery, abandoned places – the topoi of *the other world*.

The phrase “to be a hypocrite” with vivid expressive semantics clearly indicates that an adult intentionally forgets about existence of the secret world and that the end of life is one and the same for all of us.

Besides, the *ontological plan* of Mandelstam's poetics includes the “child-adult” paradigm. The researchers have long noted that in the poet's later works the image of a child is related to the theme of the universe, and philosophy of life and death: “The image of a child in Mandelstam's poetry is often associated with infinity” (Porol, 2011) and “in his later poems the connection of infant / child state with death becomes an independent object of a lyric hero’s self-reflection” (Buraya, 2014). So, our *folkloristic guess* is confirmed: the point is not of social but existential status of a child. Now let’s turn to the second stanza.

In the second stanza, the image of a child also appears but here this image is included to the phraseological unit at the lexical level: “the sleepy child still pulls its grievance out of the saucer”:

The sleepy child *still pulls*

*Its grievance* out of the saucer,  
But I have no one to be angry with  
And I'm alone in all my paths.

O.V.Kumanyuk (2008), studying idioms in acmeists' works, notes: "In O. Mandelstam's poetry, "Time" concept objectified by phraseological units is often associated with historical and cultural context of the depicted object:

Cries of dark green needles of the pine,  
Wreaths with depth of well  
**Pull the life** and **time** which's dear  
Leaning on the mortal tools -  
Hoops of red and banner needles,  
The wreaths which're common and so huge!

(O. Mandelstam. "Not by a mealy white butterfly...") (Kumanyuk, 2008).

In our case, the phraseological unit is changed: the sleepy child "pulls out of the saucer". On the one hand, this can be understood as slowing-down of time and reluctance to get out of the state of "grievance" but on the other hand, - a *sleepy* child being between sleep and reality. Again, this indicates the state of "threshold", the borderline between *this* and *the other* world. However, the lyrical hero here still opposes himself to this "child" but at the same time he does not give up the sacred world and does not focus on everyday life like other adults and the third stanza indicates to this:

I do not wish to fall asleep like fish  
In deep and fainting waters.  
The only thing which is to me so dear  
It's free choice of my misery and worries.

This part of the poem is also interesting and semantically tensed. Here, there is responsibility for one's own path: "The only thing which is to me so dear, it's free choice of my

misery and worries”. But why is a fish image suddenly embedded into the poem tissue? Here, to our mind, the biographical and ethnographic commentary is quite possible and appropriate.

In the 1930s, the poet lives in Armenia. And he does not just live there with his wife but penetrates into spirit of the East and creates a lot of poetical works. As the researchers state, this fascination with Armenia began long ago before this trip (Kubatyan, 2012). At first, this fascination was a bookish one but then the poet's dream came true and he created a cycle of poems. The poem being studied here is written after the trip and though it does not contain a direct reference to the eastern theme but it can be associated with the culture of Armenia (Yigit, 2017).

For a long time (until the 20th century) in Armenia there was the cult of the Mother Fish. It was brightly represented in statues of the deity placed along the banks of waters: “... a cult of giant stone fishes preserved in the territory of South Georgia and Armenia belonging to the epoch of Megalithic culture <...> These stone steles in the form of fishes, sometimes reaching several meters in height, stand vertically at the sources of rivers and lakes and are called as *veshapas* in Georgia and *vishapas* in Armenia (Virsaladze, 1973). While talking about the mythological tradition, we should mention that “in Armenia, mainly in the high mountain areas, the sculptures of vishaps-fishes are preserved” and besides, “there is an ancient legend of the World Fish Leviathan ever floating in the Cosmic Ocean <...>” (Mirzoyan, 2013). So, the fish is a mythical animal connecting the worlds. How does this relate to previous parts of the text? If we draw parallels with the image of the child who appears twice in the poem, then we can somehow associate the image of a fish with the image of the child.

The child in Mandelstam’s poem is a human being who feels *the bordere* between daily and existential things but it is still a blank child from the rational point of view. A fish is also a borderline creature like a child. In addition, a fish in folklore is often associated with the other kingdom; the plot about transformation of a cultural hero into a fish is known in the Russian fairy tale (Propp, 1986). Mandelstam’s lyrical hero turns out to be “alone on all the paths” and feels responsible for the course of his life. Thus, all the images stay in architectonics and ritual logic of the verse. The child and the fish set the *archetypal* and *folklore* plan in the text. Vishap is a stone idol of a large fish personifying the ancient cult (see Image 2).



Image 2. Vishap. Caucasus.

### Conclusions

So the poem of Mandelstam is a whole poetic cosmos where every detail is important and creates its own plan. The folklore commentary, revealing archetypal structures associated with the image of a child and a fish (they are quite interchangeable) allows us to notice *the ontological space* in the text. Besides, it is necessary to make biographical and ethnographic commentary since, according to O. Lekmanov's (2003) subtle observation, many things in the poet's "worldview and poetry has been radically changed" after his trip to Armenia. Such holistic commentary on the text also makes it possible to raise a question of folklore nature of Mandelstam's works, a question which has not been raised before and now needs to be carefully studied both theoretically and practically. So, using the example of one poem we can see how literary and folkloric traditions interact within one text. It is also worth to pay attention to *latent nature* of folklore imagery manifestation which seems to make future researchers' task more complicated and sometimes even makes them to stop their research.

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