

White Willow in Russian Literature: Folklore “Roots” of Image

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Abstract

The article deals with a complicated archetypal tree complex in Russian literature. The object chosen here is “white willow” (vetla) as one of the species of willow in its different variations - daphne willow (verba) and goat willow (rakita), and willow itself. In the 19th century Russian literature we can find the image of white willow is in V. Zhukovsky’s translated poem “The Forest Tsar”; in prose it appears in poetics of F. Dostoevsky where it is embedded in ritual mythological context. In the 20th century literature, both in poetry and in prose, white willow has also held its place. For instance, I. Bunin and M. Gorky used this image giving the tree a metaphysical meaning. S. Yesenin writes about the meaning of this tree in poetry in his treatise “The Keys of Mary” (1918) where he draws parallels with Russian folklore. The image of white willow is also live in modern poetry: it traced back to Russian literary and folklore tradition. In children's folklore (cradle songs with “scary plot”) we can see “other-worldly” nature, semantics of a tree which functions as the World Tree.

Keywords: Russian literature, folklore, symbolism of trees, metaphysics, modern poetry.

Introduction

As a rule, the writers’ reference to the image of a tree has reason behind it. Judging on from the world mythological and folklore tradition, the archetype of a tree is associated with the World Axis. A tree is used in many rituals; it is a part of ritual complex in Slavic folklore where it often replaces a person. Symbolism of trees in the artistic world of different Russian writers has been mentioned by many researchers.

Materials and Methods

Linguists consider a tree as a special concept embodied into the great context of national axiology. Literary scholars also see an archetypal structure in the image of a tree. However, it is worth to specify the type of a tree to which Russian literature implies. We mostly find the symbolization of birch, oak and daphne willow. These are the trees which both folklorists and linguists who deal with issues of vocabulary and phraseology in the context of national culture

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indicate (Krass, 2000). If there are no special questions concerning birch and oak in terms of nomination, then it is worth to pay attention to daphne willow because we can find this tree in different variations: willow, goat willow and white willow. These names of trees do not mean one tree but the artistic reality always refracts the reality as it is and dissolves boundaries of perception. But to our opinion, white willow still holds a special place in lexicon and aesthetics of Russian literature.

Literature Review

Let's refer to genesis of the image of a white willow. In the 19th century Russian literature it came to us from free interpretation of Goethe's mythological "The Alder King" made by V. Zhukovsky who titled it as "The Forest Tsar" and the latter overgrew the original. It was M. Tsvetaeva (1994) who nicely and precisely wrote about this in her essay "Two "Forest Tsars" drawing attention to great difference between the king and the tsar. The latter is entirely Russian and is placed in the national context where white willow is one of the symbols. Let's look at the following lines:

Dear, the Forest Tsar summoned his daughters:

I see somebody nods behind dark branches.

"Oh no, in night shade all is tranquil:

These are white willows stand aside" (Zhukovsky, 2008)

On the one hand, there is secular consciousness in the father's answer: he does not see and even does not wish to see miracle and he rejects all relating to metaphysics. On the other hand, here the white willows are replaced by the figures of "daughters" and this is not by chance since according to the laws of ritual logic a woman is quite compatible to represent a tree. Besides, taking into account variability of tree nomination (white willow - willow - daphne willow), it is worth to consider the meaning of daphne willow in the Slavic rites. Daphne willow is relatable to female principle and a bride (Tolstoy, 1982). It is likely that this semantics is a little bit "fuzzy" in Zhukovsky's poem but Tsvetaeva has caught on to this quite precisely: "We came up to the very top of temptation and ballad, to the place where the Forest Tsar, restrained passion, finds intonations which are much more deeper than those of father and mother, and leads us through the whole scale of female impact and gamma of female intonation: from female insinuating tones to maternal tenderness; we came to the stanza which is, in addition to the sense

thereof, a real cradle song due to its sounding” (Tsvetaeva, 1994). So, the eidology of the feminine is anyway strong in the poem and backed up with the image of white willow which has still other additional connotations in folklore.

Perhaps the word “lullaby” (cradle song) in Tsvetaeva's essay appeared by chance but it refers us to children's folklore and cradle songs “scary plot”. In the well-known text about “the grey wolf” beginning with the words “Bayu-Bayushki-Bayu” (lullaby), a lulling motive is combined with stable images: the edge (crack willow bush / small forest) and the wolf (Gorbunova, 2013). These words and images indicate a special space: here is a model of the edge of light, i.e. boundaries between the worlds are given. It is on this “frontier” where initiation takes place with the hero. The forest and the crack willow bush are the loci potentially associated with the other world. We may further reconstruct the elements of maternity to which cradle songs are related but in this case we only point out ambivalence of the image of goat willow (daphne willow and white willow) to which the folklorists often pay attention (Kopytov, 2017).

Returning to literary context, let's once again note the semantic richness of “white willow” in Zhukovsky's poem. The image of a tree is associated with a female archetype and indicates “borderline” state of the hero. Though, of course, a thin silvery willow looks like a ghost in the dark but the poem is not about that. In this context the white willow carries mythological and folklore load. Such a combination of images (the forest and the female principle) is also found in the 20th century poetry. There are many poets who repeatedly used the image of white willow: Esenin mentioned and theoretically grounded this in his treatise “The Keys of Mary” where he wrote about symbolism of a tree: “Everything comes from a tree: this is the religion of our nation but very few people can understand and see the festivity» (Yesenin, 1997).

The image of white willow also has a metaphysical sense in Ivan Bunin's prose (the novel “The Life of Arseniev”): “Its old ruts were overgrown with grass, and old white willows still standing on the left and right along its deserted space looked lonely and sad” (Bunin, 2005). The white willows seem to accompany Arseniev's path and meditation (we'll return to this fragment later on). Referring to this context and to prose, we can show significance of a white willow for Russian axiology. A white willow also has similar metaphysical meaning in M. Gorky's story “Once Autumn Night”. Without delving into metaphysics of the plot, let's pay attention to the paradigm of “a broken white willow - an inverted boat”. The narration begins just with these

details: “The sky is heavy and gloomy; hardly visible drops of rain were unceasingly pouring down from it; two broken and ugly white willows and the boat turned upside-down lying by their roots emphasized the sad elegy in nature surrounding me” (Gorky, 1949). Analyzing this story in folklore and mythological context, the specialists point to expansion of semantic content of the text by means of images and symbols - white willows and a boat: “...in Gorky’s story, a common (“secular”) detail has a certain sacral content (Khanov, 2005).

We can find similar ambivalent meaning of the image of white willow in F. Dostoevsky's poetics. The literary critics who deal with problems of symbolism and folklore, in F. Dostoevsky's “The Brothers Karamazov” drew attention to infernality of the image of Rakitin and that of a goat willow tree (rakita) which are associated with each other not only by nominal sense but at the internal level. Thus, V.E. Vetlovskaya (1971) points out the pivotal (for Alyosha) nature of the meeting nearby a lonely goat willow: “Among softly details connecting Alyosha's entrance “the world” and return from “the world” on the first day, we note connection between Rakitin and that “lonely goat willow” nearby which he is waiting for his brother Mitya. This goat willow appears here twice more associated with the motive of hanging”. Thus, semantics of the surname here is ritually significant. If we consider a goat willow tree/shrub (let’s here remember cradle songs) in archetypal key and take into account the other-worldly meaning, we can see ritual markers in Dostoevsky's text.

Results

Has this semantic tension and significance of this image preserved in modern literature? Has the word “white willow” itself been lost? Strangely enough but in modern poetry we find the book by V. Dudarev (already reprinted and revised) named as “White Willow”. His white willow opens the collection of verse and impresses the reader from the very first line:

We may abandon everything,

We can go crazy and go on the bottle ...

But this white willow

Never will catch fire! (Dudarev, 2016)

You may do what you wish and “waste” your life («We can go crazy and go on the bottle») but the white willow will remain on its place. Here there is something archetypal and

metaphysical: it is no by chance that the poem begins with a thunderstorm during which even faces are visible:

When night is bright thanks to the lightning -
We see the faces shuddering with fear in the windows
But our old white willow
Will hardly catch the fire from the lightning.

Thunderstorm is a borderline time, the other hour for a human being. So it is in Dudarev's poem and that's why the faces "shudder". It is worth noting that the white willow is old, however, this does not detract it but extols. This tree has seen a lot and so did Bunin's white willow. Analyzing the book "White Willow", the literary critics has already referred and neatly approached to Bunin's name when drawing parallels with his poetry. However, association with the work of this classic seems to us more subtle and has a latent character. So, in another poem ("The Province") a white willow appears once again but not as the World Tree: it is only slightly shown here:

Let the mirages win!
Each spring will vanish into them
But you when saying 'bye' please, tell me:
Oh, how many versts and white willows in the world! (Dudarev, 2016)

The action of the poem begins in "outer space" as it is indicated by the image of the Universe ladles.

While the Universe ladles
Are pouring happiness on us -
Please, hurry up to love entire world
On each haphazard path! (Dudarev, 2016)

Such cosmogonic paradigmatics goes on in the symbolic pair "versts and white willows". And this is not only the author's rhythmic finding; the semantic side is also extremely important here. Traveling with his father, young Arseniev looks at bumpy roads and sees old white willows as if they see him off and stir up his imagination with a dimly remembered world: "...especially I remember one white willow and its hollow trunk shattered by thunder storm. A large black raven sat on the tree like a black firebrand and my father said that crows may live for several hundred

years and this one maybe lived in the time of the Tatars...and this caught my imagination so much..." (Bunin, 2005).

Here it is temptation to associate this passage with the first poem (besides, Dudarev greatly appreciates Bunin's works and he is familiar with the novel "The Life of Arseniev") but his white willow is not stricken by thunder. Here semantic intensity is quite different. The white willow is given at archetypal level as something metaphysical and alive which has seen a lot: "from the Tatar times" to our days. And it is this very impression which the lyrical hero must communicate to descendants.

The versts and white willows have become one: this reminds mythological and ritual path of the cultural hero who must reach the World Mountain or the World Tree. In folklore this is clearly expressed in poetics of arcane rites since the world voodoo model includes primarily the hero's way, his familiarity with / acquisition of sacral knowledge and the World Axis expressed by a tree / mountain / stone / sun (Shindin, 1993). Dudarev's text by its intonation resembles incantation and spell of a man and his fate:

While chapels in Russia
Still stay by the sides of the roads
Please, swear an oath in the night
More adamantly and in short! (Dudarev, 2016)

But in this author's works there are the other white willows associated not only with fate but with love:

One sip of Khvanchkara
Is firm and dear and so bright
And wind makes sunny sonnets silver
Between white willows.
The clavier is full of sounds,
The trout is vibrant, lamb is bleating -
And this is life.
So loves the world.
But only poet who can love.
When summing up his fate
He realizes

that the time has come!

That love and death

Are one and the same!

And madrigal appears (Dudarev, 2016).

Most certainly, we are talking about the high modus of Love. The imagery structure in this poem is deceptively simple: wind, trout and fish. But this view of life makes you think and leads to philosophical formula: “love and death are one and the same!” Wind and white willows, like versts and white willows, is not only a good intonation and rhyme but a special paradigm: combination of air, wind, being already silver, with a white willow and the World Tree. And finally, all three lexical items are united in the poem “The Goddess” forming a harmoniously sounded and metaphysical fateful line.

What a space

Was keeping silent!

What the dreams were becoming true!

The sun was first hot and then scarlet

Like being ashamed of its nude.

The versts

And white willows,

The winds,

/ Even when thinking of It! / -

And the dark branches

Became at once much darker.

And ash in mantel tubes sang

Like in the kingdom

of shadows.

The funerary bale-fire ashes

became much darker in woods.

No niche was for its rays!

The ovary's cracked at the node!

Being weaker

And darker and quieter

We're waiting for It on the earth (Dudarev, 2017).

Here the concepts and “fate” and “love” are expressed. However, now the white willow is no longer silver but dark, thoughtful and waiting. So one can see transformation of the image of white willow in Dudarev's poetry (although the last poem is not included into the book: it was written a year later). The eternal, monumental and steady white willow - a prophetess, just Bunin's white willow – a silvery, tender and airy white willow - a dark, fateful white willow.

The carefully made cover of the book also shows significance of the image of white willow (and a tree in general) for the author: a white willow bark on one side and H. Bosch's picture “The Hearing Forest and the Seeing Field” on the other. The forest and trees can hear and see. Natural philosophy, even paganism, presented in various forms, is observed in the poet's book. But pagan barbarian theme is a separate one in Dudarev's poetics.

Conclusions

So, the image of white willow/willow/goat willow is already found in the texts of Russian folklore and in cradle songs with “scary plot” where it has an archetypal character since this very tree “is close to the image of the World Tree”. In Russian literature of the 19th - early 20th century, a white willow took its place both in poetry and in prose. In the works of Zhukovsky, Dostoevsky, Gorky and Bunin this image contains “boundary” semantics; a white willow is like a marker of the hero's state of threshold. In modern poetry, the lexical unit “white willow” is also preserved and fully realized in the poetic language of V. Dudarev who made the image of this tree as a title one.

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