Transformation of Death in Postmodern Russian Fairy Tale Retellings

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the changes in the traditional character of death – Koschei the Deathless – retrieved by Catherynne Valente from the Russian fairy tales and incorporated in her novel *Deathless* (2011). As a postmodern fairy tale reinterpretation, the novel supplies a modified plot along with the substantial changes in fairytale characters. In particular, this paper observes how the character of death changes from a black-and-white villain to a complex, morally ambiguous protagonist. Literary analysis and comparison focuses on several points such as romanticising and humanizing death, change of its function and purpose, as well as adding political criticism.

Keywords: death, transformation, fairy tale retelling, Koschei, postmodernism

Introduction

Death has always been a natural part of life. Everything living eventually dies; a fact, which humanity has been trying to digest, oppose or accept since it has realized there is no escaping death. There is so much and so little known about it; medicine helped to postpone it, psychology to understand the mind of the sick and dying, and yet, the mystery surrounding death has remained intriguing up to modern times.

It has traditionally been fairy tales, folk tales and later fantasy and horror novels which have worked with the curious darkness surrounding death. In the past, when humans did not have access to modern findings about the human body, death was frequently mystified and personified and has been proven a grateful literary trope to work with. Portrayals of death as a skeleton, a woman, a god or a goddess, an angel and many more can be found in almost all ancient myths and religions, whether we look at the Greek *Thanatos*, Norwegian *Hel* or Chinese *Yama*:

> In this manner, death, too, rather than remaining shapeless and chaotically threatening, is made concrete and visible by our creative imagination. Such image-making, such interpretation through personification, occurs on all levels of consciousness, in all cultures, in all times that have left record (Guthke, 1999, p. 10).

Centuries later, many authors such as Terry Pratchett, Jose Saramago, Neil Gaiman or Tanith Lee became inspired by the portrayal of death and have reworked the myth anew in order to appease the modern reader.

This article focuses on death as perceived by Russian folklore and its further reinterpretation found in the novel *Deathless* (2011) by Catherynne M. Valente. Traditionally, Russian folklore portrayed death as an individual named *Koschei* - an immortal villain of ugly

appearance, abducting Russian fairy tale heroines. Koschei commonly had only negative personality traits and generally Slavic folklore depicted him as a skeleton, referring to the name having origin close to the word "bone."

Catherynne Valente borrows the personified character of Russian death and significantly reworks it in her novel. The article addresses this reinterpretation with purpose to determine how the postmodern portrayal of death differs from the traditional portrayal in this limited cultural example. The literary analysis is based on the comparison of the novel *Deathless* with myths that the novel draws from. The aim of the article is to focus on the conversion of the image of death from a mythical representation to fiction highlighting changes such as romanticising death, elimination of death's negative traits, addition of human attributes to death, life and death opposition or political aspects of personified death.

Death and Postmodern Reinterpretations

Death has been a popular character in various cultures. A figure of death has not been limited to mythology and literature only - death appeared in popular films as well, such as *Collateral Beauty* (2016) or *Meet Joe Black* (1998). The portrayals of death in popular culture differ according to the given author, nevertheless, our focus is on the personifications of death, or the instances, when death takes human (like) form.

Personification of death has been present since ancient religions, where gods and goddesses of death were worshipped in many different cultures. Although some cultures worshipped gods of death that are similar in nature or appearance (such as *Hades* in Greek mythology and *Pluto* in Roman mythology (Coulter & Turner, 2012, p. 201)), generally there have been observed great differences in the appearance, character, nature, gender and even number of these gods. For example, some religions relate the god of death being equivalent to "god of war, intelligence, and poetry" (Coulter & Turner, 2012, p. 357) as in case of *Odin,* or *Shiva,* who "is a creator god, moon god of the mountains, god of agriculture, fertility god, lord of the cosmic dance, god of the arts and learning, god of truth, god of luck, god of the rivers, god of the forests, god of death…" (Coulter & Turner, 2012, p. 427). In a more narrow perception relating to death only, there is *Thanatos* depicted with wings, sword and wearing a black robe (Coulter & Turner, 2012), Mexican *Tokakami* "described as black and blood-smeared who come from the underworld to devour the Indians" (Coulter & Turner, 2012, p. 471) or the Celtic goddess of death *Badb Catha* "usually depicted as a crow, sometimes as a bear, wolf, cow, a foul hag, a gigantic woman, or a beautiful young woman" (Coulter & Turner, 2012, p. 89).

It appears so many cultures have given death a face along with certain personality traits, behavior trends, and even motives that is it impossible to list them all. Postmodern literature has often used the opportunity to gain inspiration from the old myths, creating reinterpreted stories along with renewed characters. The popular fantasy series for children *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* by Rick Riordan uses Greek gods as characters, and gods from various religions appear in many other novels by authors such as Steven Erikson (*Malazan Book of the Fallen*), Neil Gaiman (*American Gods*) or Terry Pratchett (*Discworld*).

The common trait of these works is that they take an old myth and strip it bare, leaving only its essence. The author then builds the character anew, giving it personality, motives, aims and desires. For example, *Death* (male) in Pratchett's world is "a seven-foot skeleton in a

hooded black cloak who carries a scythe, rides a white horse (named Binky), and always speaks in capital letters; Death has an abiding fascination with humans" (Hinds, 2014, p. 2). On the other hand, the Spanish author José Saramago's *Death* is female, with an ability to change shape, sending letters to humans who are supposed to die a week after receiving one. There is no limit as how to imagine death and the discussion ranges from "Why is Grim reaper a man?" (Guthke, 1999, p. 7) to death being a lover: "Death the lover is an even more common motif the world over" (Guthke, 1999, p. 12).

Reinterpretation as such is a widespread trend in postmodern literature. Just as an example, there are numerous reinterpreted *Beauty and the Beast(s)* (by Robin Mckinley, 1978, Cameron Dokey, 2008, or Victoria Leybourne, 2017), and classic literature has not escaped this tendency either, manifesting in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Seth Grahame-Smith, 2009), *Alice in Zombieland* (Nickolas Cook, 2011) or *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* and *Android Karenina* (Ben H. Winters, 2009 and 2010).

Taking an old idea and reworking in into something new is one of the main traits of postmodern literature. Reinterpretation, or "the action of interpreting something in a new or different light" (Oxford Dictionary, 2018) is a reaction to postmodernism's refusal of originality and authenticity. Kušnír says that

> postmodern literary work does not pretend to be new and original, but uses the old literary forms, genres, and kinds of literature and art, kitsch, quotation, allusion and other means to recontextualize their meaning in a different linguistic and cultural context to show a difference between the past and present as well as between the past and present forms of representation. (Kušnír, 2011, p. 28)

In other words, postmodernism gives traditional ideas a fresh breath or a new point of view.

Transformations: for better or worse

Appearance

The contemporary depiction of death in Russia is that of a female in a black cloak with a scythe - the word "death" in Russia is female as well (Tolstaya, 2012, p. 58-71). However, it does not mean that the female is the only personification of death in this culture. In mythology, death was associated with other prominent characters too, such as Koschei. In the course of time, the older image of a great villain was worn out during the multiple adaptations, but the original meaning of Koschei was frightful: he would stand high in the hierarchy of the underworld, respected for his wisdom and the domains he owned.

Vasmer's Etymology Dictionary, one of the most respected dictionaries on Slavic etymology, explains the word "Koschei" as a "thin, lean person, a walking skeleton" or a "miser" (Vasmer, 1986, p. 362), both characteristics being relevant, because traditional fairytale Koschei was skeleton-like and owned significant riches: "There's King Kashchey, o'er his gold withered" (Pushkin, 1820). Vasmer gives another meaning of "koschei" as borrowed from the Turkic "Košči," i.e. a slave (Vasmer, 1986, p. 362). However, Kalashnikov (2017) rejects the latter meaning wondering how Koschei could be anyone's slave and how a typical Slavic myth could adopt a Turkic name for its character implying that "bone" is probably a more likely etymology.

In other sources, we encounter similar descriptions of a unlikable, unappealing and frightening figure: "in legend Koschei is most often described as ugly, and he enjoyed riding naked upon his enchanted horse through the mountains of Russia" (Winters, 2015, p. 1). It would seem that his ugliness is a prominent feature along with his villanity.

All these elements are removed in Valente's depiction of Koschei. The character's appearance is completely reimagined; there is no longer a skeleton-resembling man, but rather a "handsome young man in a handsome black coat, his dark hair curly and thick, flecked with silver, his mouth half-smiling" (Valente, 2011, p. 55). Although still evoking fear, references to his physical beauty are found repeatedly: "Koschei Bessmertny, is so handsome that he could lend a cup of his beauty to every man in Yaichka and still charm the bark from his dogs" (Valente, 2011, p. 55).

The removal of the traditional ugly appearance can be found in different mythological creatures; in postmodern literature, vampires, zombies or werewolves are often portrayed as attractive. In a similar fashion, Koschei becomes more attractive and appealing to the reader, resembling a romantic character more than a fairy tale villain.

Romanticisation

Romanticizing negative characters is by no means a new trend in literature. It has affected several mythological or fictional creatures, such previously mentioned as vampires, werewolves or zombies. Death has been no exception in popular culture, having often been reworked into a character that is misunderstood, lonely, positive or emphatic (see Terry Pratchett's *Mort*). In fact, romanticising death as an act, including suicide or murder, has been also popular. Saul in his study of German romanticism acknowledges that "love and death was equally firm outside Germany" (2009, p. 165) and as stated by Freud, human beings have a desire to live or love and to die (Eros and Thanatos). The combination results in the peculiar merging of the morbid and the attractive.

In a similar fashion, Valente romanticizes the previously morbid. In addition, the originally unappealing and evil nature of Koschei is reimagined, although the level of romanticizing is less obvious. In the traditional portrayal of the character, Koschei abducts Russian princesses and fights with the hero: "And he came up with the fair Princess Marya Morevna as she was going her way, laid hold of her and carried her off home with him" (Lang, 2008, p. 43). In Valente's portrayal, Koschei loses the negative aspect of his personality, becoming less evil, but more complex. This complexity corresponds with what Joosen calls characterisation, or expanding the features of traditionally black and white characters. Consequently, the black-and-white aspect is limited or lost and the focus shifts to psychological development of the characters: "The reader is given access to the inner lives of round and complex characters" (Joosen, 2011, p. 15).

Valente's Koschei has lost the evil aspect completely. His portrayal as an evil villain as found in the Russian fairy tales does not correspond with the reimagined version of himself. The elements that make him evil are missing; there is no abduction nor evil intentions. Koschei gains positive features as well; he is sinister, but caring: "He placed honey on her tongue, and pear jelly, and brown, moist sugar" (Valente, 2011, p. 67).

Humanization and Relationships

Both fairy tale and mythological portrayals depict Koschei as a monster. As previously mentioned, this depiction is not present in Valente's version and the character is greatly humanized. The monstrous aspect is lost; Koschei no longer resembles a demon or a god of death. The loss of the black and white characterization and the complexity of the character's psychology allow the development of relationships with other characters. Originally, Koschei has no relationships at all - whether romantic, friendly or family relations. He serves as a supernatural force that is usually defeated with a clever trick.

The only interactions he originally has are in the form of kidnapping and fighting: "Then he took Marya Morevna from him, and carried her off" (Lang, 2008, p. 45) and "Koshchei [...] chopped him into little pieces, put them into a barrel, smeared it with pitch and bound it with iron hoops, and flung it into the blue sea" (Lang, 2008, p. 46). These interactions with other characters are only negative, depicting Koschei as a plain villain essential for the nature of fairy tale.

The reinterpretation, however, deepens the layer of the relationships aspect significantly. Koschei is attributed the ability to have romantic and family relationships. His family, the notorious Baba Yaga, is portrayed as his sister, having "Koschei, my insatiable brother" (Valente, 2011, p. 108). The relationship of the siblings is tense, one attempting to control the other: "Family is a thorny, vicious business, and Koschei can't marry without my say-so" (Valente, 2011, p. 108).

Perhaps the most interesting and most developed is the aspect of romantic relationships. In mythology, Koschei is said to have abducted princesses, but he was always defeated in the end. There were no elaborations regarding a relationship between him and any princess. In *Deathless,* Koschei actually becomes a husband to Marya Morevna: "Among the other things Yaichka possesses is a short, wide house where Marya Morevna lives with her husband" (Valente, 2011, p. 292). The marriage comes with aspects of romanticism, sexuality and infidelity. The marital relationships of Koschei and Marya are anything but regular for both of them explore on the opportunities outside their relationships while being strongly attached to each other in the struggle to dominate in their house: "Just remember that the only question in a house is who is to rule" (Valente, 2011, p. 58). Unlike the traditional Koschei, Valente's character is highly dependent on Marya allowing her anything in exchange for the promise of being together:

> Let us be greedy together; let us hoard. Let us hit each other with birch branches and lock each other in dungeons; let us drink each other's blood in the night and betray each other in the sun. Let us lie and lust and take hundreds of lovers; let us dance until snow melts beneath us... Only do not leave me, swear that you will never leave me, and no empress will stand higher (Valente, 2011, p. 162).

In this manner, Koschei, too, becomes more human, through being allowed relationships. No longer emotionally distant and plain, he gains new depths that allow the reader to perceive a developed, complex character.

Function and Purpose

One of the most striking differences between the original Koschei and Valente's reinventions is the function of the character. Gavrilov and Nagovitsyn support the idea that in the past, Koschei was similar to Karachun, the demon of winter, who was also associated with death: "Very likely that Koschei could personify the frost which "drags" the life powers from the nature and human and kills them" (Gavrilov & Nagovitsyn, 2002, p. 262). Indeed, he knows sorcery and is capable of killing the living beings: "In some versions of fairy tales, Koschei turns his opponents into stone" (ibid.).

Koschei of the Russian fairy tales was still closely associated with death, but another characteristic of him came to fore - that is his immortality. In tales, he would abduct beautiful princesses and present himself for the hero to prevail over him. Despite a rather trite image of the fairytale Koschei, he still remains the most fearful character, the master of all the villains, the antonym of life who cannot stand the "Russian spirit" (Afanasyev, n.d.).

The only aspect maintained from mythology and fairy tales is the immortality, through which Valente recreates Koschei in a complete opposition to its original version. Though still frightful, he represents life instead of death: "Koschei is the Tsar of Life" (Valente, 2011, p. 191). This opposition manifests in Koschei's constant fight against death. Himself being immortal, he is bound to stay alive while he fulfills his purpose of fighting death:

> To be Deathless is to treat with death in every moment. To stave death is not involuntary, like breathing, but a constant tension, like balancing a glass on the head. And each day the Tsar of Life fought in his own body to keep death down like a chastened dog (Valente, 2011, p. 91).

Even the original association with the winter demon Karachun was taken away from him. In the novel, this function was given to the General Frost: "Ask anyone, and you will be told that Russia's greatest military man is General Frost. He whips our enemies with ice and freezes their guns in their paws and sends out his dogs" (Valente, 2011, p. 274).

Though Valente completely changed the character of Koschei from the embodiment of death into a protector of life, death is not removed from the story but assumed by another character who is also present in the Russian mythology - that is Koschei's brother Viy, "whose eyelids go down to the earth, and they had to be opened - and then nothing could escape his sight" (Afanasyev, 1996, p. 238). There is a lot of proximity between the brothers both in the mythology and in the novel. Some sources suggest that Koschei and Viy were originally two of the three sons of the notorious Chernobog, the ruler of Nav', the Kingdom of the Dead, where both had their own dominions.

Valente moved Koschei from the mythical Kingdom of the Dead to a fairytale location - the isle of Buyan, the "Country of Life" with the fortress Chernosvyat in the heart of it. Unlike typical depictions of Buyan as a place full of miracles, Koschei's residence is nevertheless a dark place: "in the deepest, most hidden room of the Chernosvyat, whose ossified cupolas shone here and there… Koschei the Deathless sat on his throne of onyx and bone" (Valente, 2011, p. 89), and the first encounters with the place give a chill as "the fountains of warm blood" (Valente, 2011, p. 145) gurgle around the palace.

Viy was a less prominent character in the Russian mythology, but he instilled as much fear as his brother did. In Valente's novel, Viy has a land of his own - Silver country, which gets rich when humans wage big wars or spill brotherly blood: "And Life, that old tyrant, he knows my land is fertile now. So many white flowers. So many dead since '17" (Valente, 2011, p. 165).

Valente's Viy retains a lot of his original characteristics, and he does not look like a human being, but rather a real demon:

> The man's black hair fell all the way to the floor. He wore a grey priest's cassock, and his chest glowed with a splatter of silver light, like a star. His eyelids were so long that they covered his body like a priest's stole, their lashes brushing the floor (Valente, 2011, p. 164).

Viy is very well aware of his powers, and he relishes the moments of decay and finds joy in seeing the beauty fade: "Let me kiss your bride on both cheeks, Life. Let me feel her hot blood slowly cool against my eyelids" (Valente, 2011, p. 164).

On the other hand, faithful to her intention to move away from the black-and-white characters, Valente retains proximity even between such opposing characters as Koschei and Viy: "The rapt pupil will be forgiven for assuming the Tsar of Death to be wicked and the Tsar of Life to be virtuous. Let the truth be told: There is no virtue anywhere. Life is sly and unscrupulous, a blackguard, wolfish, severe. In service to itself, it will commit any offense" (Valente, 2011, p. 79).

The unnatural affinity between the two brothers deepens because of how much the Tsar of Life is afraid of death: "But the Tsar of Death and the Tsar of Life greatly feared one another, for Death is surrounded by souls, and is never lonely, and the Tsar of Life had hidden his death away in a place deeper than secrets, and more secret than depth" (Valente, 2011, p. 47-48). Moreover, Koschei is depicted very egoistic. Despite his generosity and manners, he would not remove death from anyone else even though he might love them. As Viy, the Tsar of Death, put it: "Never for anyone else does our brother take out his scalpel. Only he lives forever. Everyone else, one way or another, is for me" (Valente, 2011, p. 165).

Political Criticism

Another important addition to the image of Koschei in Valente's book is his association with the political leaders of the Soviet age. The author draws parallels between him and Lenin, calling both "papa": "Who is Papa Lenin?" (Valente, 2011, p. 83) and "Papa Koschei" (Valente, 2011, p. 40). This comparison, however, prefers Koschei as better, criticising Lenin for greediness, cruelty and misuse of power: "The goblins of the city may hold committees to divide a single potato, but the strong and the cruel still sit on the hill, and drink vodka, and wear black furs, and slurp borscht by the pail, like blood" (Valente, 2011, p.). Koschei, on the other hand, is a preferred father figure among all characters: "Zemlehyed has one Papa: Papa Koschei. He needs no nasty bald Papa Lenin!" (Valente, 2011, p. 83).

The political aspect of Koschei is prominent through the entire book. It is an interesting addition to the character and the reader is able to decipher his political preferences. By means of irony and satire, Koschei frequently drops hint about what he thinks about the political situation in Russia:

> Children may wear through their socks marching in righteous parades, but Papa never misses his wine with supper. Therefore, it is better to be strong and cruel than to be fair. At least, one eats better that way. And morality is more dependent on the state of one's stomach than of one's nation (Valente, 2011, p. 65).

Generally, anti-system opinions can be observed criticising the poverty, inequality and the establishment. The comparison of Koschei with the political leaders of the time humanizes him

by making him look similar to the existing people but also dehumanizes him because he follows the inhuman practices of the political leaders of his time. This way, Valente shows a very human-like fairy tale character with inhuman practices and views. These two parts of Koschei's personality - cruelty, egoism, and ruthlessness on the one hand, and passion and love on the other - make him a rounder and more complex character than he has ever been in a myth or a fairy tale, and move him away from the former associations with a death demon.

Conclusion

This article focuses on how Catherynne Valente addresses the ancient mythical and fairytale image of Koschei the Deathless, a notorious magician, who was often associated with death or the deadly winter demon Karachun, and reworked him in a completely different character in her acclaimed novel *Deathless*. The degree of reimagination as well as the approach to the controversial figure of Koschei motivated this research and defined the structure of this paper, which was built around the various transformations undertaken by the author to rework the traditional understanding of Koschei.

The author starts by changing the appearance of the character. Instead of an ugly villain, Valente depicts a handsome young man who is attractive to women. This change goes along with the romanticisation and humanization of the character. Koschei loses his position as the black character in the classic black-and-white fairy tale dichotomy and takes on both positive and negative traits. In this way, he becomes a complex character with motives, feelings and desires, alienating himself from the purely evil depiction found in mythology and fairy tales. The gray portrayal allows the character development, which creates a realistic character with positive and negative traits.

The function of the character also changes from being the embodiment of death and the evil into that of a Tsar of Life, who protects life and wages war against death. On the other hand, the opposition to death has yet another dimension: Koschei is so afraid of dying himself that he has to wage war against death even in his own body.

While being transformed from the Death into the Tsar of life, Koschei retains startling similarity to his brother Viy, the Tsar of Death. Not only family ties, but also mutual hatred and the methods of fighting each other that unite him. Besides, it is Viy who uncovers the egoistic nature of Koschei, who has removed death from himself, but would not do the same even for those who he loves. In addition, though Koschei is the Tsar of Life, he instills fear, and his palace is black with blood fountains gurgling around it.

Finally, the author completes the image of Koschei with a comparison to the political leaders of the early Soviet period. This collation offers further humanization of the character by making him look like a real person who chooses to use inhuman practices. On the other hand, Koschei is used to criticize the political habits of the time and strip totalitarian regimes of their mysticism and symbolism to show its ugly nakedness.

Despite the relative limitation of this research - it focuses on a single novel only - it is a good example of the contemporary way of rethinking Death in fiction similarly to famous reinterpretations of death by Terry Pratchett in *Mort* or Katherine Arden in *The Bear and the Nightingale*. Valente completely reimagined the mythical representation of death into a complex morally grey figure by changing his appearance, function, character by romanticizing and humanizing Koschei. Meanwhile, this change was not from negative to positive, but rather

from a flat to a round character further complicated with references to the political dimension of early 20th century Russia. The multidimensional structure of Koschei's persona is no longer a simple thing to comprehend.

The comparison of Valente's death to similar reimaginations would produce better understanding of the complex approach of modern writers to this character and inspire further investigation into the topic. Other ways of deepening this analysis lie in collating Koschei's reimagination with similar approaches to other Slavic mythical creatures such as Karachun (winter god) in Katherine Arden's *The Bear and the Nightingale*, Baba Yaga in Patricia A. McKillip's *In the Forests of Serre* or life-thirsty spirit in C.J. Cherryh's *Rusalka*.

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