

# N. V. Gogol and E. T. A. Hoffmann: on some folklore parallels in poetics

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**Abstract.** The article deals with comparative analysis of the works by N. V. Gogol and E. T. A. Hoffman. The study object is two texts: “The Night Before Christmas” by the writer from Russia and “A New Year's Eve Adventure” by the romantic writer from Germany. The topic being analyzed is spatial models and relations thereof in the writers' poetics. Special attention here is drawn to folklore tradition as in folk art a clear differentiation of various types of space can be observed. The parallels with Chinese fairy tales are drawn here where a literary technique of an animated portrait appeared to be relevant to the artistic world of the authors in question. Great importance is attached to archetypal structures associated with the feminine principle (the images of Oksana and Julia). Historico-literary and typological methods of the work analysis are used.

## 1 Introduction

E.T.A. Hoffmann's works were vividly and ambiguously taken in literary Russia of the 19th century and such reaction was mostly explained by the fact that he wrote in the genre of social fiction [1].<sup>1</sup> However this did not prevent the German classic's significant influence on Russian literature in which there were names and works which echoed Hoffman's motifs and poetics in general. For instance, many researchers drew parallels between the works by N. V. Gogol and E. T. A. Hoffmann. Our article deals with this very pair of creative persons in terms of comparative typological analysis of some works.

## 2 Materials and methods

In his monograph R.-D. Keil does not avoid direct comparisons between the works of these German and Russian classics [2]. German literary scholars also point to common ground of Gogol and German classics of romanticism: “Gogol for the Germans is a romanticist first of all.” [3] The concepts of “realist” and “mystic” related to these writers are quite conditional since the works by both of them were beyond the literary movements of that time. Gogol is close to realism but he not a pure realist; Hoffmann is close to romanticism but his romanticism has a special character – it is “mystified and codified realism” [4] tintured with romanticism. The target of the study is two works: Gogol's “The Night Before

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Christmas” and Hoffmann's “A New Year's Eve Adventure”. Let's take *the topic*, the spatial models.

M.Y. Lotman was fair to note the following: “Gogol revealed the whole literary power of spatial models for Russian literature” [5]. And indeed, in Gogol's artistic system the significance of chronotopos, intraspecific connections of the worlds in which his heroes are placed, largely determines these heroes' character. As for the German romantic's creative method, here the situation is more complicated: there is no clear boundary between the given spaces which is associated with Hoffmann's “mysticism.” Lotman's explanation seems to be very significant to understand the types of spatial models, since Gogol's “functional fields” and places that are symbolic for his heroes are clearly defined and divided into “common” and “magic”: “The heroes of a stationary and “closed” locus are opposed by the heroes of “open” space” [5]. In Hoffmann's works, it is difficult to separate the real from the unreal, i.e. “the mystical” and “the ordinary” are interlaced and placed in one and the same topos: “While passing through the low door, he forgot to tilt his head and it struck violently against the door lintel but the black hat on his head, looking like a beret, saved his forehead from injury. He walked somehow strangely, pressing close against the wall, and then sat opposite me; and the owner put the lanterns on our table” [6]. At first glance, here the usual everyday scene is depicted but it is immediately followed by something extraordinary: “However there was something so peculiar and attractive in the newcomer's face that I immediately had a soft spot for him despite his gloomy appearance. His thick black hair was parted and hang down along both sides of the head by curl locks *like on Rubens's portraits*” (270). The portrait *tunes* a reader to a different tone of communication: the “picture” changes. The picture itself, because it is neither a person nor one hero who appears in front of us but an image, a series of images: “And yet this is not a portrait but a pure and simple image”.

In Gogol's works we'll also find portraits, as a kind of drawings of images. For example, in “Taras Bulba” one of the heroes directly declares that people “look like they came out from a picture” (a description of Andriy's campaign). Many researchers point out to this feature of Gogol's poetics. So, A. Kh. Goldenberg writes about Gogol's ecphrasis. According to this scholar, the writer comes beyond the limits of literary space, [7] i.e. the master of the pen himself strives to create a picture. The space of his work is similar to a picturesque space; in particular, this refers to a portrait: “and ruggedness was visible in him, and there was some mockery of the embarrassed blacksmith through this ruggedness, and a subtle hint of annoyance slightly spread over his face; all this was so mixed up and it was unimaginably good that the best thing for him to do that time was to kiss her a million times” [8] - Oksana's live image has been created in such a way. However, we'll be interested not only in the literary technique of a portrait as it is but also in its nature and interaction of this “portrait” space with other models in this work.

We have already noted that the literary system of “The Evenings...” is characterized by division of the text into *everyday* and *sacred* space which are separated into several systems but these models are interconnected by the same heroes. In “The Night Before Christmas” it is Vakula and Oksana who are such heroes first of all. The first hero is in a magic world one day or in a profane world another day; he is an independent hero: “At first Vakula was scared having risen to such a height from the earth that he could not see anything being underneath, and he flew like a fly under the crescent moon so close that if he did not bend down a little bit, he would have touched it with his hat” (127). Vakula is a unifying seme inside functional fields. As V.E. Vetlovsky fairly noted, “each hero is an organic link of a live chain; he is needed as a part of this chain and also as a means to connect links of the chain.” [9] After the flight Vakula again appears in *the terrestrial plane*: “During the rest of the night the devil with the blacksmith flew back even faster. And in less than no time Vakula found himself near his hut” (136). But the action of the hero is focused on Oksana

and for her sake, i.e. she implicitly participates here and is involved into the sacred space (and probably she initially sets it). If the girl is removed from the composition, the system of “magic” and “secular” will be no more because it becomes meaningless. For this reason, we face here not to a simple hero but to a *female archetype*. In this case it is appropriate to take folklore traditions to understand the place of such heroine with high feminine semiotics in Gogol’s literary system.

Oksana reveals herself to a reader through the mirror in which we see a reflection not only of her face but that of her soul: “Are my black plaits good? Ouch! They could frighten somebody in the evening: they interwoven and wrapped my head around like long serpents (103). The girl is not just flirting in front of the mirror; she holds a dialogue with her inner self. The mirror here is a symbol of the second, hidden world. The soul of the owner of the object rests in the mirror; Oksana sees her hair like “snakes.” Turning to folk traditions, to ethnographic materials, Northern Russian embroidery and Slavic culture in general, we meet predominance of snake symbolism associated with the female cults, semantics of Bald Maiden Mountains and the gold Celestial Kingdom [10]. And it is not accidental that Vakula’s gesture - he gives cherevichki (gold high heel boots) to Oksana, is perceived in such a cultic context: “Bring him the most expensive boots with gold right now!” (132). So that, the female archetype is manifested implicitly but sets a particular *vector* of motion: from everyday space to the sacred one and back to everyday space.

Vakula becomes a *renewed* hero, an initiate one: “Chub opened his eyes wide when the blacksmith came to him and did not know what to be surprised at: either that the blacksmith had come to life or that how could the blacksmith come to him or that how he dressed up like a dandy and a Zaporozhian Cossack” (137). The hero changes in the “space”: now the sacral and magic space is *open* and available to him and he is not afraid to cross the threshold, [11] i.e. to pass over to another world to Oksana: “Have mercy, father! Do not be angry! Here's the whip: beat me as much as your heart desires, I surrender myself” (137). However in Gogol’s work spatial models have quite clear boundaries unlike those in Hoffmann's work. This may be due to the use of folklore and folklore textual constructions by Gogol and absence of such models in Hoffmann's work. Certainly, in “A New Year's Eve Adventure” we can find the same archetypes that Gogol used: a moon, a mirror, a woman (a trickster and a demiurge all in one). This is largely a steady picture, a number of interrelated elements. But in the literary system of the German romantic they act in a different manner since the open folklore was not characteristic for him (the issue of different types of folklore (external registering and internal) has been posed in the theory of literature long ago. In Hoffmann’s work the mirror symbol has *transitional boundary semantics* and acts as a binding element: a mandatory one to lead the central character along the story line. However, this is also associated with the female archetype. Through the mirror the heroes start living in two worlds: “here” in the everyday space and “there” in the hidden mirror space.

At first glance this is paradoxical as the mirror somehow *grabs* their mind and soul (shadow and reflection). The inner personality of Hoffmann’s characters is lost, it is transferred to a woman who carefully keeps it in the mirror (one has a shadow, the other has a reflection). So that she is not only a trickster but also a demiurge. Julia “clears” their mind and they start living in a new way being in *the inner* search. This is Hofmann’s dualism which was also a characteristic feature in Gogol’s works [12]. If we abstract from “A New Year's Eve Adventure” for a while and take Hoffman's fairy tale “The Golden Pot”, we will find here some oriental trends: a mention about the wise men from Bhagavat Gita (a part of Mahabharata, the Indian epic poem), the high semantic tension of the image of Woman-Snake, the golden pot, the symbol of wisdom and Supreme Kingdom [13]. Such things give us the right to refer to the Eastern cultural tradition. The fact is we can find similar construction of the text in folklore of this culture (Indian, Chinese and Japanese) in

terms of spatial models. So that, turning to poetics of Chinese fairy tales, namely the fairy tale “The Magic Picture”, we see that the space of the action is revealed through a picture - the female portrait which “triggers” a male hero to act: “on one picture there is a girl of such beauty that it is impossible to describe her; the young man gazed at her with admiration and could not withdraw his eyes. He looked at her for a long time and fell in love.” [14] This girl on the portrait creates and sets the situation and goes on from the magical world to everyday space: “The young man lifted up his head and saw that the picture on the wall seems to be swaying: first to one side and then to the other one. What a miracle! The beauty left the picture and sat next to Zhu-tzu (115). Then “everyday” space became *sacred one*: “Zhu-tzu opened his eyes and closed them tight: the whole room just glittered with silk and satin - the beauty had been weaving them for all the night” (115). Here we can see the example of interaction of different types of space giving a sense of *the topic*. The literary work is created across two worlds: “Poetry is an organic unity of outer and inner spaces in which there is a live life and a live meaning of the phenomenon being rooted in infinity of the Universe” [15].

### 3 Results and discussion

Hoffmann’s heroine is a conductor between “outer” and “inner” spaces: “Julia did not laugh together with others; I looked at her embarrassed, caught her glance and I felt as if I was blinded by a ray of *an amazing past life full of love and poetry*” (266). Julia, the owner of the mirror, takes souls of her sweethearts by means of this other world; she had taken away a reflection of one of them: “I gave my mirror image *to her ... To her...*”. To her, to the girl from the mirror, the girl from the picture who is although alive but is likened to a painted: “Her white dress of special style with deep pleats and puffed sleeves till elbows, with along neckline barely covering her breast, shoulders, neck and her hair parted in front and quaintly done up in a high hairstyle in behind: all this gave her some old-fashioned appearance like *a maiden on Miris's canvas*” (266).

So that, Hoffmann goes beyond the limits of literary textual space: here we may speak of Hoffmann’s ephrasis. His works as well as Gogol’s works are characterized by synthesis of arts: “one of the most important features the development of which Hoffmann largely contributed to Romantic Movement was synthesis of arts.” [17] In this respect the literary systems of German and Russian classics are typologically close. M.I. Tsvetaeva united many poets “in pairs”: Goethe and Schiller, Byron and Shelley, Pushkin and Lermontov. According to her, there was a special brotherhood of “two forces” in these “twin names” [18]. In our opinion, N.V. Gogol and E.T.A. Hoffmann represent such a literary pair.

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