

**MSC 2020**  
**International Scientific and Practical Conference «MAN. SOCIETY.  
COMMUNICATION»**

**INTERPRETATION OF WORLD BALLAD TRADITION BY  
NIKOLAY GUMILEV**

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**Abstract**

The article analyses the process of interpretation of the world ballad tradition in the works by Nikolay Gumilev. Gumilev as a poet was very interested in different forms of poems, he studied the experience of the world tradition and tried to use it in his own creations. The ballad tradition has specific interpretation in his poems: the analysis of three ballads showed that Gumilev always used the ideas of light and darkness and his ballads are devoted to the way from dark to light. This way corresponds to the world ballad invariant as a poem about mystical and unexplainable plots. Many ballads in English or German tradition describe the interaction with the world of dead men, the arrival of a ghost in the world of men. But Gumilev uses the concept of ballad as an illustration of inner transformation of lyrical subject: this way from the dark world to the light world refracts the changing in the nature of the subject. Thus, his ballads are always a story of inner transformation – in the example of his poem “The Star Terror” (“Zvezdnyi Uzhas”) this transformation is relevant for the whole tribe and corresponds to the historical change in the life of people of the earlier XX century.

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*Keywords:* Ballad, Gumilev, tradition



## **1. Introduction**

Ballad is one of the most common genres of world literature, a poem with a plot, as a rule, of a fantastic sense (Anisimova, 2018, 2019; Kulikova, 2019). The ballad genre in Russian literature, as a rule, acquires new relevance and is filled with new features in critical periods (Lipovetsky, 2018; Timofeeva, 2019).

One of the authors of ballads with specific plot and conflict features is N. S. Gumilev. Especially interesting is the study of the body of his ballads against the background of the world tradition of ballads and its plot features.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The study is devoted to the unique features of ballads by N. S. Gumilev, viewed through the prism of the world tradition of the ballad and its archetypal plot.

## **3. Research Questions**

The main objectives of this study are:

- 3.1.** Looking at the plot invariant and the conflict in Gumilev's ballads;
- 3.2.** Revealing their specifics against the background of the world tradition of the ballad genre;
- 3.3.** Considering the refraction of the ballad genre and its invariant plot in the poet's work.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to review the texts of a number of ballads by N. S. Gumilev and the allocation of the invariant plot and conflict of the poet's ballads. To achieve this goal it is necessary to fulfill the following tasks:

- identify the invariant traits in Gumilev's ballads;
- compare the revealed features of the plot and the conflict with the world ballad tradition.

## **5. Research Methods**

As research methods we use the system-typological, the cultural-historical, and comparative-historical methods. To analyze ballad texts, both mythological interpretation and, if necessary, biographical commentary are used.

## **6. Findings**

The characteristic features of the ballad genre as a work combining the lyrical and epic principles include the following: extra-historicism, embellishment of historical events, the absence of a direct author's assessment, the author's identification with the lyrical hero, the absence of concrete everyday details, the

absence of an ironic tone in the narrative (Aleksandrovskaya, 2001). Based on these milestones of the genre, a ballad should be considered a poetic work with a fantastic or mystical plot, immersed in a conditional space – timeless, non-geographic, while the ballad is alien to the installation of an ironic assessment of events. At the same time, authors who paid attention to the ballad genre often have a certain archetypal plot characteristic of most ballads in their work (Osmukhina & Gudkova, 2019). For example, in his translations and original ballads V. A. Zhukovsky often uses the plot of “meeting with the dead”: in various versions, a native of the other world interacts with the living, pursuing a killer (“Warwick”, “Alina and Alsim”, etc.) or coming for the living to take him into the world of the dead (“Lyudmila”, “Lenora”, etc.).

Interest in the ballad was also manifested in the work of N. S. Gumilev, who turned to ballads in both the early and more mature periods of his work. Apart from translated works, the author himself defines as “ballads” two of his works: a poem about the five horses of Lucifer, and the poem “Lovers, Whose Sadness is like Clouds ...” written in 1910. The former exists in two editions: the first version of this ballad was included in the poem “The Tale of the Kings” (collection “The Way of the Conquistadors”, 1905), the second edition appeared as an independent work in “Romantic Flowers” (1908).

The plot of the ballad in both cases is as follows: the hero received a ring from Lucifer as a gift that endowed him with supernatural abilities, but he gave it to the “Virgin of the Moon”, “for the wrong shade of scattered braids”, and after that Lucifer derisively gave the lyrical hero the sixth horse, “and Despair was a name to him.” The first edition of the ballad mentions mythical creatures from European mythology – the fairy and the dwarf:

They brought me wine – jet fire  
Fairy of the mountains and the dominant purple gnome,  
I saw the sun light up for me  
Beaming like a ruby on a gold ring

However, we don’t find these characters in the second edition: changing the text, Gumilev makes it more “timeless.” The main conflict of the text of the ballad is the conflict between light and darkness: Lucifer (literally, “carrying light”) gives the hero a gift that allows him to stay in the illuminated space. In the final version of the ballad, the lyrical hero, having found the gift, “saw the young face of heaven”. He realizes that “the sun has lit up for me”, then his wanderings continue “many starry nights, many fire days” – he constantly abides in the space of light, and cited above, the phrase “the sun was lit for me” is also retained in the final version. The lyrical hero receives from Lucifer a kind of key to the world of light, a ring that allows him to remain in the illuminated space and control the world of light. However, in the future he gives this ring to the “Virgin of the Moon” – the Moon does not have its own light source, its light is only a reflection of the light of the Sun. After that, the following happens to the hero:

And laughing at me, despising me  
Lucifer threw open the gate to the darkness  
Lucifer gave me the sixth horse –  
And Despair was a name to him.

From the light of the hero goes into darkness, as he voluntarily refused a precious gift. In the first edition of the ballad, instead of “I opened the gates to darkness,” it says “Lucifer put my eyes in the dark” – that is, deprived the hero of the opportunity to see the light, and in the final version the hero himself

plunges into darkness, falling from the illuminated space into the dark. At this moment, there is an allusion to the myth of Phaeton – having lost the ability to control the chariot of the Sun, he also found himself immersed in darkness. However, the hero of Gumilev is not the Phaeton, he does not lose his horses, but falls into the dark with them, while he has an additional, sixth, horse – despair.

The context of the first edition of the ballad is as follows: the ballad is a song that the “dark horseman” sings for the kings gathered in the castle, warning them of the desire to look for an unknown virgin. However, his ballad has the exact opposite effect: the kings, not hearing a warning, exclaim:

But they cried out together  
Relieving sore chest:  
“The Way to the Unknown Bride  
Our one true path.

Our bowls are full of moisture,  
So drain them to the bottom  
The Virgin of the World will be ours  
It should be ours!

At the same time, it is not specified from the context whether the same creature is meant: the horseman said that he had given a precious gift to the Virgin of the Moon, and the kings gathered on a campaign for the Virgin of the World. The story of the horseman either represents a warning that you should not chase love, losing power. Further on the plot of the poem, the kings find the Virgin of the Earth and die, and all the power in the state remains the hunchback-majordomo.

The poem “The Tale of Kings” was written by the young Gumilev in 1905, and it can be assumed that the search by the kings of a certain Virgin (the text refers to the Virgin of the Moon, the Virgin of the Earth and the Virgin of the World, and only the word “Virgin” is common to all these names) is an allegory describing the search for eternal femininity in Russian philosophy and poetry of the Silver Age (Mazina, 2009, p. 154). In addition, in the image of the Virgin of the Moon, to which the horseman gives a ring with a ruby, one can guess the poet’s complex relationship with his lover, Anna Akhmatova, with whom he was already familiar at the time of writing “The Tale of Kings”.

The second edition of the ballad retains all the key images of the poem, but focuses on the timeless, universal context of the work: the hero no longer tells his story as a warning to the kings, does not interact with the characters of European mythology. The plot of the ruby ring presented to the girl subsequently receives a peculiar continuation in the text of the poem “The Ring” from the collection “Pillar of Fire”: the girl drops the ring with ruby presented to her by the groom.

The second text, designated by the author as a ballad, “Lovers, Whose Sadness is like Clouds ...”, was presented to Akhmatova on their wedding day, April 25, 1910 (Chaban, 2014). There is no clear plot in this ballad – it is rather close to the initial understanding of the ballad genre as a song that accompanies the dance (Filatov, 2018). In the 1910 ballad, Gumilev uses the refrain: each stanza ends with the words “the radiance of a pink paradise will flash”, and the text is a kind of response to the first ballad: if the text about Lucifer mentioned the overthrow from light to darkness, then in the ballad “Lovers, Whose Sadness is like Clouds ...” everything is placed in the space of light. The first stanza completely poses a question to

lovers who seek light — the place where “the heart burns without burning”, “the radiance of the pink paradise flashes”. The light in this text is opposed not to darkness but to fire: in the second stanza, the lyrical hero reports that he found what the sad lovers and brooding ladies are looking for – and in the old world “a false temple burns in the distance, / where I prayed for shadows and words. ” The symbol of the paradise country in which he got, having found what he was looking for, becomes noon and light: “And at noon, drunk with the smell of gum, / red bears tumble”. Fire remains in “that”, the old world, life until the fateful find, and light becomes the symbol of the new world. The moment of discovery is presented through an image from ancient mythology:

So I found, and my song is easy,  
As a memory of a long-gone delirium,  
Where I was taken by the mighty hand,  
Already flew to the trembling Andromeda  
Perseus in chain mail of burning copper.

Perseus had already flown to Andromeda – that is, salvation had already taken place, his chain mail – from “burning” copper – most likely, it was not copper that was burning in the literal sense, but the reflected radiance of metal. This image is also a reference to the wedding day – Perseus married Andromeda. The “message” accompanying the ballad – the last shortened stanza, ending with a standard refrain, nevertheless – “the radiance of the pink paradise will shine”, clearly indicates that the lyrical hero found his love, that maiden who plunged him into paradise:

You, girlfriend, I’ll give this song,  
I always believed in your footsteps  
When you led, gentle and punishing,  
You knew everything, you knew that for us  
The radiance of a pink paradise flashes.

Subsequently, this text was included by the author in the collection “Alien Sky”, about which Akhmatova says: “The most terrible thing I become in “Alien Sky” (1912), when I am essentially close (Margarita, who is in love with Mephistopheles, a vamp woman in the corner, Fanny with hellish beast at the feet, just a poisoner, a Kiev witch from Lysaya Gora ...). There is a fight with me! A life and death struggle!” (Chaban, 2014). In the light of the above, the plot of the two ballads echoes – the lyrical hero found a lover, but communication with her plunged him into despair. The hero Perseus rescues the heroine Andromeda from the “serpent's den”, but the marriage between them, which promised the “radiance of a pink paradise”, came out to be unhappy.

Analyzing the ballad genre in the late lyrics of N. S. Gumilev, I. V. Petrov notes that “Gumilev’s innovation in comprehending the constructive principles of the ballad is that this genre form in his lyrics turned out to be a peculiar and very convenient model that allows you to artistically translate a person’s relationship with dark, beyond powers. The attitude of the hero of Gumilev to chaos is, in contrast to tradition, not fear and horror, but a courageous spell. This attitude is not even determined by the harmonization of the poetic form (“the expulsion of chaos”, in the words of V. M. Zhirmunsky), but by the creation of such a dialogical structure, relying on which the hero regains his stable, stable constants within the space of dark chaotic forces comprehended by the ballad” (Petrov, 1998). Among the poems of the late

period of the poet's creative work is, in particular, "Star Horror", whose heroes make the opposite movement to the vector of the lyrical hero of the first ballad – from darkness they come to light.

"Star Horror" is a poem that completes Gumilev's latest collection, "The Pillar of Fire," and it describes the allegorical movement of an entire tribe from ignorance to knowledge, from fear to acceptance (Kulikova, 2015, 2017). Similar to the ballad "Lovers, Whose Sadness is like Clouds ...", here the light replaces the flame:

They put the girl on the stone,  
A flat, black stone on which  
The holy fire was still burning,  
It went out during the turmoil.  
...  
"No," she said, "these are not flowers,"  
It's just golden fingers  
...  
And show what happened  
What happens and what will happen.

The heroine of the poem is looking at the light of the stars for the first time, and in order to do this she had to lie in the place where the flame was burning. A whole tribe that has never seen heaven in their life, looks at the sky and says goodbye to a past life, and the image of noon and light, but not flame, again becomes a symbol of their renewal:

and here is how the whole tribe  
Died, and sang, and sang, and sang,  
Like a lark on a hot afternoon.

"Star Horror", according to I. V. Petrov, is a transformation of the ballad genre; however, the main features of the genre indicated above are preserved: the poem has a plot connected with the mystical world, the action is immersed in a conditional world that has no specific temporal or spatial reference, and there is no author's assessment of what is happening. The events are described through the eyes of the heroes: an old man watching the transformation of his tribe, and his fellow tribesmen, experiencing the moment of transition from darkness to light.

## 7. Conclusion

The creative work of N. S. Gumilev includes a fairly large number of poems, which are considered to be ballads or borrow the genre features of the European and Russian ballads, both folklore and literary (Kikhney, 2017). In the framework of this study, three poems are examined. The first two are designated by the author himself as ballads ("Five Horses Gave Me My Friend Lucifer ...", "Lovers, Whose Sadness is like Clouds ..."), and the third preserves the main world-modeling categories of ballads and genetic connection with a ballad tradition ("Star Horror"). Common to all three texts are the motives of darkness, light and flame – in the first ballad the hero loses his right to stay in the world of light because of love. The second ballad, written by Gumilev on the day of their wedding with Akhmatova, defeats the hero of the world finding a "pink paradise" in which light is not connected with the flame. In both cases, the ballads

turn to interaction with the supernatural world: in the first ballad, Lucifer gives the hero a ring, in the second – the hero finds what he was looking for, falling into a certain Elysium, an ideal world. His path seems to be finished, he found what he was looking for. Ballads in Gumilev's later work beat the motives of light, darkness and fire in a different way: light becomes a symbol of knowledge, darkness becomes a symbol of ignorance. So, in the phantasmagoric ballad "Star Horror" the ritual flame of the hearth is replaced by the light of stars, indicating the fate of the tribe.

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