

## THE SOUND OF A BREAKING STRING: FOLKLORE SYMBOLISM

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*The publication was prepared within the framework of the SA SSC RAS,  
№ project's AAAA-A19-11901190182-8*

**Abstract.** The sound of a breaking string is a mysterious symbolic image, because the characters of the play "The Cherry Orchard" perceive it differently. For each of them, this sound is a message and is interpreted in their own associative field. In the article, this symbol is considered in the context of myth and folklore. Its structure and semantics shed light on the author's idea and the characteristics of the characters of the play.

**Keywords:** Chekhov, the sound of a breaking string, symbol, myth, folklore, underlying theme.

## ЗВУК ЛОПНУВШЕЙ СТРУНЫ: ФОЛЬКЛОРНАЯ СИМВОЛИКА

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(Перевод Елизаветы Кондратьевой)

**Аннотация.** Звук лопнувшей струны – загадочный символический образ, потому что герои пьесы «Вишневый сад» воспринимают его по-разному. Для каждого из них этот звук – сообщение и интерпретируется в своем ассоциативном поле. В статье этот символ рассматривается в контексте мифа и фольклора. Его структура и семантика проливает свет на авторскую идею и характеристики персонажей пьесы.

*Публикация подготовлена в рамках реализации ГЗ ЮНЦ РАН,  
№ гр. проекта AAAA-A19-11901190182-8*

The sound of a breaking string has become the hallmark of the play "The Cherry Orchard" and of all Chekhov's works. All researchers agree that the "sound of a breaking string" is a symbol and it symbolizes an alarming and woeful premonition of imminent destruction and the end of the usual world order. Even those who optimistically perceive the finale of the play support this point of view. However, it seems that it makes sense to return to this topic, since, in our opinion, there are "dark places" in it.

All Chekhov's symbols have an object and a symbolic plan: a seagull, a lake, a cherry orchard, etc. But the "sound of a breaking string" in "The Cherry Orchard" can't be read as a fact of reality. In this image, the real and

matereal plan is muted as much as possible, it is hidden to such an extent that there is a doubt about its existence. Facts are known when theater directors convey this mysterious sound with a sound of silence.

Let's turn to the text of the play. In the second action, the author's remark unambiguously says: "Suddenly a distant sound is heard as if from the sky, the sound of a breaking string, which dies away sadly". [C XIII, 224]. Before that, in the depths of the stage, Epikhodov is playing the guitar. So the string has breaking on Epikhodov's guitar? But for some reason, such a simple and obvious explanation does not occur to the heroes of the play, they do not associate this sound with Epikhodov and his guitar.

"Lubov Andreevna. What's that?"

Lopakhin. I don't know. It may be a bucket fallen down a well somewhere. But it's some way off.

Gaev. Or perhaps it's some bird . . . like a heron.

Trofimov. Or an owl" [ C XIII, 224].

So what's that sound? There is no answer. Each gives its own interpretation, different from the author's. So everyone is in his associative field. The sound characterizes not only the general meaning of the play, but also each of the heroes. It is important for Chekhov that this sound evokes associations from a reader, but not individual ones – otherwise the play will fall apart into many meanings – but general ones. The general meaning arises from traditional cultural senses and meanings.

The first person to hear the sound and react to it was Ranevskaya. O. Krejča, a Czech director, believes that she "was ready to hear something, knew: something would happen". In his opinion, this sound is a cry of pain [Krejča 2005:257]. That is, the sound takes on a prophetic meaning.

In world folklore, the motive of a sound-prediction or warning is widespread. In Celtic folklore, the functions of the sound, which is an omen of death, are assigned to banshees. Irish banshees are associated with water. In other folklore traditions, as the authors of the book note about these mythological creatures, mermaids can perform the functions of banshee [Lyasaft, Mikhailova 2007]. Russian mermaids rarely show themselves more with actions than with sounds. Their sound appearance includes laughter and a complaint, long moan. "Mermaid" motifs are included in the associative field of Ranevskaya's image for several reasons. The "fading, sad" sound she heard seems like a moan. She perceives it as a tragic signal. The moans of the mermaids forebode death or notify of misfortune.

There is similar sound in I. S. Turgenev's "Bezhin Meadow":

"Everyone fell to silence. Suddenly somewhere in the distance there was long, calling, nearly moaning sound... You listen, and it seems as if there's nothing, but it calls. It seemed somebody was crying for a very long time just under the horizon and somebody else as if answers him in a high-pitched, sharp laughter and then weak, hissing whistle rushed down the river. Boys looked at each other, shivered..." [Turgenev: III, 95].

Turgenev and Chekhov's sounds are very similar. Both are long, lingering, reminding groan. Both are of unclear, mysterious origin. Both take

place near the water: river or pond. In Turgenev's story, boys at night talk about domovoy, mermaids, drowned people. The sound heard serves as a continuation of the topic: someone shouted, the other responded. Whether it is *leshny* (wood-spirit), or some other evil force. Boys perceive it this way. Chekhov's sound is transferred to the author's remark, for the heroes it is a surprise, therefore it is perceived strangely and differently, as if they are trying to give a rational explanation to the sound that has scared them. So that we want to say: "The boys looked at each other, shivered..."

In the same short story, Turgenev cites another sound: "A strange, sharp, painful scream suddenly rang out twice over the river and after a few moments repeated somewhere further..." [III, 95]. It turned out a heron is screaming. Obviously, these are different sounds: "long, ringing, almost moaning" and "strange, sharp, painful". The first sound was almost exactly repeated by Chekhov: "Everyone thought. Silence. I can only hear Firs quietly muttering. Suddenly there is a distant sound, exactly from the sky, the sound of a breaking string, fading, sad" [C XIII, 224]. It is not clear why Gaev suggests that it is a heron screams. The cry of herons, as we saw in Turgenev's work, does not look like this sound at all. But Turgenev's unexpected sound (let's call it "the cry of a heron") makes the boys recall a different sound: a moan that the boys attribute to the forest-guard Akim drowned by thieves.

But the Ranevskys have their own drowned man – Grisha. The play does not indicate the date of Grishina's death, but it can be established with sufficient accuracy, if you believe what the heroes said. According to Anya, "six years ago father died, a month later brother Grisha drowned in the river..." [C XIII, 202]. The play starts in May. Consequently, Grisha drowned in June. There is usually the Pentecost in June, usually, if Easter doesn't take place very early. The first week after the Pentecost is called the "Mermaids' Week". In southern Russia, according to D.K. Zelenin, it was believed that the dead, drowned during the mermaids' week, become mermaids, regardless of gender and age [Zelenin 1995:152].

Thus, Turgenev's sound, which causes a desire to cry, and the "sad" Chekhov's sound can be correlated with popular beliefs about drowned people. It is no coincidence that Lyubov Andreevna is "unpleased", and Anya has "tears in her eyes". Now their reaction is clear. Grisha's death is the same tragic omen of death of the garden as the sound of a string, it laid the foundation for a whole chain of events that Ranevskaya cannot cope with. She went to Paris not from frivolity, but from grief, and her lover is a way to forget.

Why does Gaev connect the heard sound with the scream of a heron? It seems that this character is included in the same associative field as Ranevskaya. Heron – an aquatic bird, heron and stork – pure birds – were credited with the merit of cleansing the world's waters after the creation of the world in Ukraine [Gura 1997:646]. According to popular beliefs, the souls of the dead are embodied in birds. That is, Gaev is also thinking about drowned Grisha, about the end of his previous life. This all explain Gaev's

clumsy external behavioral manifestations and at the same time deep feelings that he can't and is not able to express – an amazing combination of touching nature and comism, long noted by researchers.

Petya interprets the sound as a scream of an eagle-owl. In folk ideas an eagle-owl is an ominous bird. In the southern Slavs' beliefs an eagle-owl foreshadows death or illness. In Ukraine an eagle-owl is associated with a death of young children [Gura 1997:572]. Is it any wonder that Petya's troubled conscience makes itself felt by such a symbolic association? Grisha died in front of him, he feels guilty towards everyone.

The episode is finished with Firs's words: "Before the misfortune there was also: both an owl shouted and a samovar buzzed to no avail" [C XIII, 224]. It is Firs who perceives the sound as a harbinger of misfortune, read – sale and death of the garden. But the deaf Firs, most likely, did not hear anything, he repeats Trofimov's assumption. It is Firs's cue that changes semantic register of the conversation. From sad memories about the past, everyone turns their thoughts to sad future.

Perception of the sound characterizes Lopakhin in the other way. He can hear a bucket torn down in the mine. Why? Everyone hears what they want to hear, what is closer and more understandable to them. Lopakhin is closer to production problems, he is a practical and rational person. There is a folklore-mythological underlying theme in his words. Many researchers see in motifs of death and destruction in Lopakhin's image.

All characters' cues, containing their response to an incomprehensible sound, not only convey their internal state, expose their sore spots, but are closely connected by hidden overtones, which can be discovered only in the context of traditional folk culture.

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