EDUCATIONAL FUNCTION OF AMERICAN FOLK BALLAD

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Larisa Sazanovich. Наставническая функция американской фольклорной баллады

Introduction. Folklore performs a variety of functions in culture, however, the educational function is one of the main ones as it teaches the basic laws of life, norms of behavior. Some genres represent a ready-made model of action for one or another case, others force the listener to seek a solution himself or herself, and teach critical thinking. Folklore in general models various aspects of the personality as it strongly affects an individual’s behaviour, conscious and unconscious, and moral values and virtues orientations certainly belong here. Moreover, folklore texts can influence a person’s self-esteem, as he or she is bound to live with exactly the ideals that he or she acquired in childhood, in particular from the characters of ballads.

Materials and Methods. The phenomenon of American Folk Balladry. The phenomenon of the American folk ballad is undoubtedly one of the kind. This popular in the US genre dates its record back to the Mayflower and the first pilgrims. Because of its impressively long history, American scholars even announced the ballad a dead genre. Nevertheless, this folklore form has preserved in oral tradition, struggled into written tradition and continues its glorious way in forms of modern mass genres (author ballads, ballad operas, literary ballads, opera ballads, rock ballads, jazz ballads) and – not all of its aspects have been properly explored yet.

Russian philosopher Olga Rodionova (2005) terms “tradition as a preserving form of the past in the present”. Later Rodionova states that “the field of tradition encompasses vast space of cultural communications where the actual adaptation and modification of folklore genres resulting from changes in society itself take place”. In this space, maintains Rodionova, “folklore provides socialization and education of individuals as it transmits and creates stereotypes of assessment, behavior in the context of folk culture symbols and ideology. Accordingly, ideology expressed in folklore and its genres is always contemporary as it correlates social changes with the being of the folk restoring its self-identity”1. Thus, we shall argue that causes of the ballad genre tremendous vitality result from the fact that folklore ballad of XVI–XIX centuries translated values of dominating cultural force in North America.

The present article aims to depict the ballad as a medium of communication and to exemplify the power of the American folk ballad of XVI–XIX centuries to educate. Folklore and Communication. To begin with, it is essential to draw a correlation between “folklore” and “communication”. Noteworthy to mention that in the 1960–1970s, studies within the national folklore societies have repeatedly addressed the issue of folklore and communication relations. Among the numerous varieties of the term “folklore” definitions, we share Dan Ben-Amos’s idea that “folklore can be the sum total of knowledge in the society” (Ben-Amos 6). Consequently, “communication” in its simplest understanding, is “the transfer of information from one individual to another” (Clavel 220)3. Thus, the keyword in both definitions is information (knowledge is information as well).

Folklore popularity and virtues. Now back to the educational or social function of folklore. Here we face the question: what information folklore ballad should translate to keep up the popularity with the members of a certain social group over a prolonged period of time? Undoubtedly, it should transmit the ideas shared and adopted by the majority of these people.

maintains: “The life of ethnic group pivots around some stable (unchanging) “core”, which plays the role of a cultural-reproductive program or code (citation), due to which the self-identity of a given ethnic group is preserved. Whereas this “core” does not manifest itself outside in any way, it becomes objectivated in a specific picture of the world that is being developed in a given ethnic community”\(^4\). In the realities of the United States at the early stage of the nation's development, it was the Puritan spirit that stereotyped educational and moral aspects of the American folk ballad of XVI–XIX centuries. Not surprisingly, the ballad as a popular musical genre of the time effectively translated the moral values of Puritanism, thus functioning as an educational tool. 

Leothyiny Clavel (1970) considers communication effective when it is carried out successfully to serve the purpose not only of transmitting ideas, but also satisfying. The author also states that “communication should arise emotions (…) and stir the mind to thinking along predetermined lines” (Clavel 221). Ukrainian philosopher Vira Movchan (1996) echoes Clavel’s idea and defines edification as an “inseparable moral attitude of an individual towards the experience of others founded on deep-lying spiritual ties of the individual with the whole” (Movchan 83).

**Didactic function of American folklore.** The didactic character of most folklore genres has been discussed in a variety of works. For instance, American theoretician Alan Dandes (1965) assigns the didactic function to the four basic functions of folklore (entertaining, modeling, stabilizing) (Dandes 292). Dandes emphasizes the importance of the didactic function of folklore as through it the youth learn about the acquired in the certain community habits, beliefs, and practices like the image of a cannibal in a fairy tale disciplines young children, while lullabies produce a positive effect on a child's mood. The scholar dwells on that in fables and fairy tales, general principles and opinions are proclaimed, they ridicule vices and violations of accepted norms of behavior. In its turn, proverbs warn against wrongdoing. Dandes states that proverbs are called to demonstrate to the dissatisfied or overly ambitious people that they need to value their destiny and accept the world as it is, i.e. to conform to accepted (in society – our note L.S.) models (Dandes 296).

**General notions and research.** The educational function of folklore has been also addressed in a limited number of works of scholars from the former Soviet republics. For instance, Misai Khalydova (1974) researched small didactic genres of Avar folklore\(^5\). Aida Alyeva (2006) studied the reflections of morality, ethics, and law in the Kumyk folklore of the ancient and medieval periods.\(^9\)

The same situation is observed outside the post-soviet territories as well. The most significant works in this field are: Henry Glassie “The Moral Lore of Folklore” (1983)\(^6\), Vigen Guroian “Awakening Moral Imagination: Teaching Virtues Through Fairy Tales” (1996)\(^7\), Kristina Wirtz “Santeria in Cuban National Consciousness: A Religious Case of Double Moral” (2008)\(^8\), Simon Bronner “Explaining Traditions: Folk Behavior in Modern Culture” (2011)\(^9\).

Thus, the educational function of folklore itself has been rarely investigated. But to our mind, didactic potency of it cannot be limited to cliché or be taken “just for grunted”. Didactics of folklore groups differs around the world as well as differs social context in which it exists. Correspondingly we intend to explore the didactics of American folk ballad as it has never been studied before.

**Results and Discussion. Ballad and Puritans.** World known Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp\(^10\) stated that the ballad is a poetic story, mainly about a “tragic modernity” (Propp’s definition). It is short, fragmentary, and its dramatism emotionally overwhelms. The ballad makes you think about the destinies of its characters, imagine yourself in their shoes, and, at the same time, look at the story from outside – from the point of view of moral and ethical norms of a given social group.

Ukrainian scholars dwell on the didactic function of folklore as well. Stanislav K. Rosovetsky (2008) states that ballad is an “Oral poetic” guide to "girls' behavior, founded on negative examples: the girl shall not be courted by foreigners, soldiers, sailors, priests, "lords" and even "fellow" Cossacks, it is dangerous to travel with them join their company in the inn, it is dangerous to walk alone in the woods, you shall not marry a "Cossack" old, rich, poor, etc. " (Rosovetsky 426–427)\(^11\).

The same is attributable to American folk ballads in which the way of depicting life correlates to the principles of life, the values shared, and the general attitude of the community to reality.

Petr G. Bogatyrev pioneered the idea that the existence of a folklore work is presupposed by the existence of a group that assimilates and authorizes this folklore work (Bogatyrev 372)\(^12\). It is this group that has the right to determine the timeliness and relevance of a work.

Under the conditions of the New World creation, the managing function was conducted by the founding fathers of the country – Puritans. The native language of the first settlers – English became the official language of the United States “by default”. Correspondingly, the principles of Puritan morality became a unifying link around which the future American

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4 Lure Svetlana V. Istoriicheskaya etnologiya [Historical Ethnology], Moskva: Aspekt Press, 2003, 448 p. [in Russian]
8 Khalidova M.R. Malye didakticheskie zhanry avarskogo folklora [Small didactic genres of Avar folklore], Makhachkala, 1974, 183 p. [in Russian].
9 A. A. Alyeva (2006) studied the reflections of morality, ethics, and law in the Kumyk folklore of the ancient and medieval periods.
10 The didactic function of folklore groups differs around the world as well as differs social context in which it exists.
nation was to be united.

The English medieval balladry travelled across the seas and quickly gained popularity with the first settlers in North America. Three hundred American versions of English folk ballads entered the collection of Scottish ballads by F. Child, published between 1883–189817.

Since then, the ballad genre has undergone significant changes in North American conditions: the sound of the melody has been colored by new African and European instruments, traditional plots and motifs have been supplemented with new ones, the theme of the ballad has become more practical.

**Didactics put to practice.** According to the nature of depicted human relations and conflicts, their causes and consequences, the themes of the American folk ballad can be divided into five major groups: love and premarital relations; family relationships and conflicts; relationships and conflicts against the background of social and historical circumstances; chronicles of exceptional cases; songs on religious themes. Reality is assessed from the standpoint of established ethical principles of popular morality. Most of the analyzed ballads can be characterized as one-story situations – examples that teach listeners and model their behavior.

The instructive function of the ballad is realized through the proclamation of moral edifications by the characters of the American folk ballad. “Moral edifications” is a key line of the American folk ballad. They are uttered at all stages of the plot, mostly in the main part, ending, and afterword. This is due to the exceptional importance of this function for the American folk ballad, which the author creates not for himself (as with lyrical songs), but rather for others, as an illustration to the statement: “Learn from the mistakes of others”.

Where as at the beginning of the ballad, singers usually announce their intention – to warn listeners, to teach them by example. Like in the ballad “Young Companion”: “Come all you young companions And listen unto me, I’ll tell you a story of some bad company,”20, in the final parts of the ballad, the singer gives advice to the audience.

For instance, in the ballad “The House of the Rising Sun” the girl warns her younger sister against repeating her own destiny: marrying a swindler, lacking a permanent job, and crowning her life path – a brothel: “Go and tell my baby sister / Never do like I have done”19.

Noteworthy, that to the already defined variants of realisation of “moral edifications” a new form is added in the culmination – a will as a warning, for instance in “Just from Dawson”: “Tell my friends and tell my enemies, if you ever reach the East, / That the Dawson City region is no place for man or beast”20.

In another ballad “The Kansas Line”, a young cowboy was betrayed by a rich girl, and now gives advice to others not to seek happiness abroad, but to stick to his family: “Speaking of your farms and your shanty charms, Speaking of your silver and gold, Take a cowman’s advice, go and marry you a true and lovely little wife, Never to roam, always stay at home; That’s a cowman’s, a cowman’s advice, Way up on the Kansas line”21.

It is interesting to note that edifications or warnings can be expressed in the ballad either directly or indirectly like in the ballad “Young Companion”. A young man who has spoken his story of personal troubles, concludes that the listener may forget him, but they will never forget his song: “It’s now I’m on the scaffold, My moments are not long; You may forget the singer But don’t forget the song”22.

The morals and edifications incorporated in the plots of ballads can be revealed or amplified by additional generalizations, mainly in the endings, where the narrator utters a public opinion about the event. For example, in the ballad “Duncan and Brady” the narrator tells the story of two friends in which one man betrayed the other for money. While arguing, the friends shoot each other. Thus, both former friends are now at the cemetery, and it does not matter whether someone is rich or poor – neither will return: “Some rides in buggies, / … / Some rides in hearses, / But they never come back!”23.

In the famous ballad “Fair Charlotte”, the singer tells the story of Beautiful Charlotte, who had a beautiful face and a treacherous heart. The girl led her ex-boyfriend to suicide and disappeared. In the ending of the ballad, the narrator utters the thoughts of people who believed that it was the devil who took the body and soul of the girl: “As I have always heard them say: / The devil has carried her soul and body away”24.

In later American folk ballads, “moral edifications” summarize almost all stages of the plot: the main part, the climax, the ending. Here is an excerpt from the ballad “Texas rangers”: “Come, all you Texas rangers, wherever you may be, / I’ll tell you of some troubles that happened unto me. / My name is nothing extra, so it I will not tell, / And here’s to all you rangers, I am sure I wish you well. / … / Perhaps you have a mother, likewise a sister too, And maybe you have a sweetheart to weep and mourn for you; if that be your situation, although you’d like to roam, I’d advise you by experience, you had better stay at home”25.

Particular attention should be paid to the imposing of the idea of common sense in American folk ballad, which in the Puritan community was praised as one of the most important virtues. It is the cult of common sense, in our opinion, that explains the extremely simple portrayal of the ballad heroes. Female characters are typically portrayed as “fair”. The word refers both to external and internal features: “fair” – beautiful, blond, bright, decent, honest, fair, spotless, polite, calm, noble, frank – and these are not all the meanings of this short word26. For example, in the ballad “The Jam at Gerry's Rock”: “Fair Claire, she was a noble girl, / A riverman’s true friend” – “Fine Claire, a noble girl, / Faithful friend of the carpenter”27.

The verbal portraits of men characters are scarce if there are any like in “Fair Margaret and Sweet William”: “Red the...
The Lost Youth


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Reformatskii vzgliad [Reformatory view], 2005, URL: www.reformed.org.ua/2/54/Packer.

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over time from injuries

Bowers, / Before you get married, / You should prepare a home / For your dear little wife".../

Bowers, / Before you hitch for life, / You should prepare a family with a home of their own: "promised to marry him only when he will provide their future

These ideas are fully implemented in American folk ballads. In States see the personality of the American Puritan as a

Similarly, in the blues ballad "...", the protagonist leaves a quiet, comfortable life, works hard, because his beloved promised to marry him only when he will provide their future family with a home of their own: "She says to me, Joe Bowers, / Before you hitch for life, / You should prepare a home / For your dear little wife".../ "She tells me, "Joe Bowers, / Before you get married, / You should prepare a home / For your dear little woman".

Moral edifications are not always expressed directly, sometimes they become clear only from the whole course of events like in the ballad “Earl Brand”. The lady runs away with her lover, her father and brothers try to bring the girl home. However, the girl ignores her father's requests and instead of finding happiness in a new family, she loses everything: relatives who die in a fight with the lord, and the lord who dies over time from injuries.

Conclusions. System of accepted social values as well as moral virtues is highly influenced by folklore, especially in a traditional society. Ballad offers models of behavior or options for resolving various situations based on examples of fictional or non-fictional stories. Those behavioral models pictured in folklore limit the behavior of each member of the society in which this folklore is functioning. Musical folklore deeply and in many ways mirrors a person's entire life, from birth to death, reveals his or her spiritual beauty and wealth. It is in musical folklore where the eternal aspirations of the people from one group for goodness and truth, for light and happiness are incorporated. The moral ideals inherent in American folk ballads are the legacy of many generations, yet the first ones who brought it to Northern America were the puritans.

Analysis of the vast scopus of ballads made it possible to conclude that in the American folk ballads the following leading moral and ethical principles of Puritanism are glorified: modesty, diligence, prudence, thrift, and discipline. By employing the power of the proverb genre, it appears to be possible to summarize American folk ballad moral edifications in the following ways: “Caution is the mother of safety”, “The squeaky wheel gets the grease”, “the early bird catches the worm”, “God helps those who help themselves”, “The grass is always greener on the other side of the hill”, “All’s fair in love and war”, “Money doesn’t grow on trees”, “Money can’t buy happiness”, “Fortune favours the brave”.

Larysa Sazanovich. Повчальна функція американської фольклорної балади. Мета статті – розглянути повчальний потенціал американської фольклорної балади XVI–XIX. Використано комплексний підхід. Описовий та порівняльний методи аналогії дозволили узагальнити існуючі підходи до вирішення проблеми повчальності у фольклористиці. Історичний метод використано для опису ситуації у Північній Америці, на тлі якої розвинулася американська фольклорна балада. Методами текстового та контекстного аналізу обгрунтовано зв’язок гуртинської філософії з баладами, визначено моральні цінності перших поселенців. Наукова новизна роботи у тому, що, незважаючи на чисельне висловлювання фольклористів на тему важливості повчальної функції фольклору, її не було розглянуто на матеріалі американської фольклорної балади XVI–XIX століття раніше. Висновки. Фольклор має розглядатися як специфічний моральний кодекс поведінки. Письмова форма виступає як ефективний елемент, через який молодь покоління здійснюється до схвалених гуртинською громадою моральних цінностей.

Ключові слова: фольклор, американська фольклорна балада, повчальность, гуртинська мораль.

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32 Paker Dzezims I., Kto takie puritane i pochemu oni nam nuzhnyi [Who the Puritans are and why we need them] [Electronic Resource]: Reформатских вгляд [Reformatory view], 2005, URL: www.reformed.org.ua/2/54/Packer.


