Turning History into a Fairy Tale: The Borders of Reality and Fiction in Catherynne Valente's *Deathless*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the parallels between the classic Russian fairy tale Marya Morevna *and its reimagining in Catherynne Valente's* Deathless. *The authors claim that the novel follows the pattern of the postmodern reinterpretation of fairy tales and provide a thorough analysis of the characters, setting, style and other phenomena supporting this claim. The novel simultaneously addresses the themes of political and social criticism of early Soviet Russia, resulting in the ironic tone and satirical comments provided by the author. The literary analysis strives to answer the question 'how is this fairy tale combined with history?' The novel transcends the genre of a fairy tale retelling and functions as a novel filled with historical references and subjective commentary on the political and the social situation.*

Introduction

Beginning with the publication of Angela Carter's *Bloody Chamber* in 1979, we have been observing the rising phenomenon of postmodern reimagining of fairy tales. Whether in the form of novels or films, these tales were based on well-known stories or less-known myths, stories with a specific cultural background, or stories forgotten and found again. Carter was followed by writers such as Robin McKinley (1993) and Tanith Lee (2000), reimagining tales of *The Sleeping Beauty, Beauty and the Beast* or *Rapunzel*. However, the focus has been on Western-European culture, and Russian fairy tales were not adapted to any real extent in Anglo-American literature. The rare examples of such adaptations include *Firebird* (1996) by Mercedes Lackey or *Vassa in the Night* (2016) by Sarah Porter. The most notable Russian literary adaptations of fairy tales, largely from the era of pre-Romanticism and Romanticism, such as by Pushkin, Gogol, Lermontov, also had little significant follow-up in postmodern Russian literature.

The rise of fairy tale retellings and their involvement in the fantasy genre has prompted the interest of academia, resulting in numerous publications, such as Christina Bacchilega's *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (1997), Jack Zipes' *Don't Bet on the Prince* (1986), Anna Kérchy's *Postmodern Reinterpretations of Fairy Tales* (2011) and Vanessa Joosen's *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales* (2011). However, the topic of fairy tales and their retold counterparts is far from exhausted and we aim to contribute to the growing field of this phenomenon.

Catherynne Valente's *Deathless* (2011) is a reinterpretation of the classic Russian fairy tale *Marya Morevna*, recorded by Aleksandr Afanasyev and published in old Russian in the 19th century.[1] Simultaneously, Valente borrows characters, locations and storylines from other famous fairy tales, making her adaptation rich in references to Slavic culture. For quotation purposes, we use

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1   Aleksandr Afanasyev, *Narodnye russkiye skazki* (Moscow: Nauka, 1984).

the English adaptation *The Death of Koschei the Deathless* by Andrew Lang, which is an adequate representation of Afanasyev's original fairy tale.

Valente's writing is often considered "so rich it almost feels caloric, each word considered and set in its place with the kind of care we usually attribute to poetry."[2] While *Deathless* undeniably contains fairy tale elements, the intended reader is an adult able to understand the complicated themes of love, death and war. Set against the era of the Russian revolution and the consequent years, combining fantasy and Russian folklore, the novel gained mixed reviews. Some praise Valente's book as it "transfigures its indigenous myths while spinning a rousing yarn that, in spite of its clever self-awareness, aims straight for the soul,"[3] others call it a problematic novel with characters "difficult to care about."[4]

This article examines the parallels between the original Russian fairy tale and Catherynne Valente's *Deathless*. We compare the author's novel with the existing theory on modern reimagined fairy tales and show that *Deathless* is more than a reinterpreted folk story. This claim is based on Valente's combination of Russian fairy tales and the historical background of the early 20th century Russia. The links to Russian history serve as an important part of the setting along with the imaginary locations taken from folklore. The real-world references frequently appear in the form of ironic comments, referring to the dire situation, the regime and mindset of the people, which permeate into the "naked world" of the fairy tale in the novel. However, it is beyond our scope to make any substantial historical investigation of the novel, since the objective of this article lies within the literary analysis of the piece.

Vanessa Joosen speaks of reimaginations as disrupting "the horizon of expectation in several aspects,"[5] including the chronotope, attitude to the supernatural, characterization, optimism, action versus character development, style, and narratological features. The reimagined fairy tales have the conflicting features of being "negative and affirmative, desacralizing and resacralizing, rebellious and conservative."[6] Wolfgang Mieder stresses their "rejuvenation possibility"[7] as the ability to constantly change according to the needs of mankind. In the following subsections we address the changes made to the original story, such as additions, removals or renditions, adhering to Joosen's disruptions of horizon of expectation as a tool to structure this paper.

Reimagining the Fairy Tale

The original fairy tale tells about Prince Ivan, whose wife is kidnapped by the evil Koschei. Ivan attempts to save his wife and succeeds at the third attempt, defeating the immortal abductor of

2   Seth Dickinson, "Catherynne M. Valente: a pre-emptive defense," *Seth Dickinson Science Fiction and Fantasy,* September 10, 2013, accessed September 15, 2016. http://www.sethdickinson.com/2013/09/10/catherynne-m-valente-a-pre-emptive-defense/.

3   Jason Heller, "Catherynne M. Valente: Deathless," *The A. V. Club,* April 7, 2011, accessed July 20, 2016. http://www.avclub.com/review/catherynne-m-valente-ideathlessi-54222.

4   Erin Horáková, "*Deathless* by Catherynne M. Valente," *Strange Horizons*, July 25, 2011, accessed July 20, 2016. http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/reviews/deathless-by-catherynne-m-valente/.

5   Vanessa Joosen, *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales: An Intertextual Dialogue between fairy-tale scholarship and postmodern retelling* (Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2011), 13.

6   Joosen, *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales,* 16–17.

7   Wolfgang Mieder, *Tradition and Innovation in Folk Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 44.

princesses in the Russian folklore. We observe the traditionally simple, but lucky Ivan, the evil counterpart Koschei, and Ivan's smart and beautiful wife, Marya Morevna. In *Deathless*, the same characters retain some of the typical fairy tale functions. However, Valente reuses the black and white characters in a universe of her own, creating a morally grey story with ambiguous characters.

Characterization and Character Development

As John Saunders observed in his analysis of *Snow White* variations, with every retelling "the characters constantly adapt and change."[8] In *Deathless* "the black and white distinction between good and evil fades, and flat characters are replaced by round ones."[9] Characterization as a feature of fairy tale retellings disrupts the traditional perceptions of "fairy-tale heroes [that] are flat, one-dimensional characters who know their mission and carry it out obediently."[10] Instead, the reader encounters well-described characters with motives, distinct traits and features. We exemplify characterization and character development with the three main characters: Prince Ivan, Princess Marya Morevna and the villain Koschei, comparing their depiction in the original story and Valente's novel.

The most striking difference between the character portrayal in the original fairy tale and the reinterpretation is that of Koschei in *Deathless*. In Lang's *Red Fairy Book*, Koschei is a villain, kidnapping the wife of Prince Ivan as he "carried her off home with him."[11] He is traditionally depicted abducting beautiful women and "though there are few records about his physical appearance, in legend Koschei is most commonly described as ugly [and] sometimes seen as either a monster or a human."[12] His unpleasant physical appearance originates in his name derived "from the Slavic word for 'bone'"[13] indicating he resembles a skeleton or evokes the image of death portrayed as a skeleton with a scythe and a cloak. In the *Encyclopedia of Mythology and Folklore*, Sherman writes that he is always portrayed "as a sinister figure, either as an old gaunt man or a skeletal figure."[14] The folklore attributes no positive traits to Koschei; he is perceived as a physically unattractive villain who needs to be defeated.

The negative portrayal of Koschei is emphasized because in Valente's reimagining, we observe a character in complete opposition to an ugly villain: "[…] a handsome young man in a handsome black coat"[15] referred to as "Kostya"[16] as a diminutive and affectionate form of his name. The author's depiction of Koschei does not evoke death, although Valente acknowledges that "he

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8   John Haason Saunders, "The Evolution of Snow White: A Close Textual Analysis of Three Versions of the Snow White Fairy Tale," (PhD diss., Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University, 2008), 101.

9   Joosen, *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales,* 14.

10 Viktoria Yefemenko, "Contemporary Fairy Tale Transformations," *Mir yazykov: rakurs i perspecktiva: materials of the 5th international research-to-practice conference* (2014): 2.

11 Andrew Lang, *The Red Fairy Book* (Project Gutenberg, 2008), 43.

12 Ryan Stone, "A Slavic Legend of Immortality: Koschei, the Deathless," *Ancient Origins,* February 26, 2015, accessed July 17, 2016, http://www.ancient-origins.net/myths-legendseurope/slavic-legend-immortality-koschei-deathless-002717.

13 Wilk Vatroslawski, "Koshchei the Deathless – Legend of Immortal Slavic Villain," *Slavorum.* n.d., accessed July 20, 2016, http://www.slavorum.org/koshchei-the-deathless-legend-of-immortal-slavic-villain/.

14 Josepha Sherman, ed., *Storytelling: An Encyclopedia of Mythology and Folklore, vol. 1–3* (London: Routledge), 599.

15 Catherynne M. Valente, *Deathless* (London: Tor, 2011), 55.

16 Valente, *Deathless*, 260, 264, 284.

makes himself pretty, so that girls will like him."[17] Moreover, Koschei's character gains new depth, becoming the Tsar of Life, representing the idea of life and living: "He is the Tsar of Life, and blood is life."[18] This perception collides with the traditional rendering of Koschei as a skeleton or death.

In the original fairy tale, Koschei has few discernable personality traits and few to no motives. He follows the simple illogical pattern of fairy tales, providing in himself a villain for the hero to defeat. In *Deathless*, his characterization is deeper: his motives are driven by the desire to fight death, he is capable of emotions, and he is portrayed as neither good nor evil: "I am selfish and cruel and extremely unreasonable […] For you alone I will be weak."[19] The only thing in common between the two fictional Koscheis is the desire to avoid death. The reinterpreted character follows the trend of postmodernism to romanticize villains, as in the case of vampires, which often occupy "a highly ambivalent moral universe in which 'monstrosity' no longer signifies any kind of cosmic principle of evil"[20]. Valente attributes human traits to the character, such as the ability to have relationships or to be desired. The perception of Koschei as a monster from the fairy tales is lost and replaced with a grey character of which dehumanized nature is no longer a part.

While Koschei underwent the most substantial change, Marya Morevna remained considerably closer to her source. References are made to her fighting skills in the original tale: "All this mighty host has been slain by the fair Princess Marya Morevna [and she] took it into her head to go a warring."[21] Morevna's character is beautiful, but also powerful and wise, managing to imprison the immortal Koschei. She stands in opposition against the "vulnerable female-figures"[22] and is replaced with a version of one of the "determined, powerful women, capable of taking care of themselves."[23]

In Valente's novel, Morevna keeps the status of a warrior princess. She leads the forces of life in the battle against death, wearing a "marshal's uniform."[24] While in the fairy tale, it is thanks to her wisdom that Ivan succeeds in saving her from Koschei, in Valente's novel the motif of being saved fades completely. Morevna does not run away, but simply decides to leave her husband Koschei and it is she who leads the way out of his realm.

While both versions of Morevna portray the character as independent and strong, the following two observations are inevitable. Firstly, there is no tale describing Morevna as the traditional princess waiting for her prince; on the contrary, even prior to the retelling, Morevna is a powerful character, going off to war when she "handed over all the housekeeping affairs to Prince

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17 Valente, *Deathless*, 59.

18 Valente, *Deathless*, 214.

19 Valente, *Deathless*, 72.

20 Claire Chambers and Sue Chaplin, "Bilqis the Vampire Slayer: Sarwat Chadda's British Muslim Vampire Fiction," in *Transnational and Postcolonial Vampires: Dark Blood,* ed. Tabish Khair and Johan Höglund (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 141.

21 Lang, *The Red Fairy Book,* 42.

22 Irina-Ana Drobot, "Adapting the Fairy Tale to Present-Day Times and Concerns," *The Scientific Journal of Humanistic Studies* 7, no. 12 (2015): 43.

23 Drobot, "Adapting the Fairy Tale to Present-Day Times and Concerns," 43.

24 Valente, *Deathless,* 180.

Ivan."[25] It is Morevna who after marrying Prince Ivan "carried him off into her own realm."[26] These facts point to the "rediscovery of matriarchal features in folk and fairy tales."[27]

The second observation is that in *Deathless,* Marya Morevna is equally independent. Subordination to a man is not present, whether to Prince Ivan or to her husband Koschei as in fairy tales where the "victory of the patriarchal culture itself"[28] is a common motif. In both versions, Morevna is an emancipated character, although the reasons are different. While in the original tale, references are made to the matriarchal society, in the reimagination Morevna's independence is a result of the feminist portrayal of female characters who are "no longer vulnerable [and] possess enough rationality (which is a male quality) to judge things objectively."[29]

We also observe a shift from a single love interest, typical for fairy tales, to two, resembling a love triangle where Marya has to choose between two equally strong affections: "If you try to be a bridge laid down between them, they will tear you in half."[30] *Deathless* diverts from the conventional portrayal of couples fitting a role, e.g. prince – princess, king – queen. Traditional marriage present in fairy tales is substituted with a non-traditional, marriage-like relationship: "I guess some people would call those vows."[31] Finally, the marriage does not serve as a happy ending in contrast to being a primary goal in fairy tales[32] since it is followed by splitting, indecision, and several reunions.

Prince Ivan undergoes a significant change too. Nicknamed Ivan the Fool, Ivan is traditionally portrayed as a handsome but simple-minded youth, whose luck helps him more than his wisdom. Sinyavsky agrees that the "fool is the folktale's favorite hero"[33] as seen in the fairy tale, where Ivan unintentionally frees Koschei, who consequently kidnaps his wife. However, he still serves as the hero despite lacking a warrior streak more attributed to Morevna.

Valente removes the one-sided positive portrayal of Ivan and stresses his foolishness: "You will always be a fool,"[34] "And Ivan went down because he was a fool."[35] His character is criticised for thinking he can "measure up to a woman's first love"[36] and substitute for her husband. The disenchantment of his character is observable against the background of the Soviet history: "Marya, you have no papers"[37] and "you have made me a forger."[38] Ivan's job is to "arrest them [people]

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25   Lang, *The Red Fairy Book,* 42.

26   Lang, *The Red Fairy Book*, 42.

27   Jack Zipes, ed., *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England,* (New York: Routledge, 1986), 7.

28   Zipes, *Don't Bet on the Prince*, 220–221.

29   Drobot, "Adapting the Fairy Tale to Present-Day Times and Concerns," 44.

30   Valente, *Deathless,* 220.

31   Valente, *Deathless,* 163.

32   Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 147.

33   Adrei D. Sinyavsky, *Ivan the Fool: Russian Folk Belief: A Cultural History,* trans. Joanne Turnbull, Nikolai Formozov (Michigan: GLAS New Russian Writing, 2007), 36.

34   Valente, *Deathless,* 178.

35   Valente, *Deathless*, 238.

36   Valente, *Deathless*, 321.

37   Valente, *Deathless*, 272.

38   Valente, *Deathless*, 273.

before they have done anything wrong"[39] being an officer with Cheka, which was established to wage "a merciless war against the internal enemies of the revolution."[40] Turning to cruelty, Ivan is the most human character, since he lives in the real world and has political opinions leaving him bitter and disappointed. Katra Byram relates the "core of the optimistic modern fairy tale [to] the reversal of fate the hero experiences when some combination of miraculous intervention, pluck, ingenuity, hard work, and luck saves him."[41] However, the lack of a happy ending and a reversal of luck make Ivan rather an anti-hero than a hero, resembling the survivors of war in postmodern anti-war novels suffering from disillusionment. The shift of a positive character to a negative one is based on the loss of heroic traits and presenting Ivan in association with the Cheka, which make him both negative and despicable.

Style, Narratological Features, Action and Optimism

In this section, we address the features of reimagined fairy tales unrelated to the characterization, such as the style and narration, including the issue of repetitions and numeric symbolism, as well as the narrators and the absence of a happy ending.

Joosen sees the specific style of fairy tales manifested in repetitions, which "frequently disappear from fairy-tale duplicates and retellings,"[42] but "fixed formulas and numeric symbolism are usually retained as markers of the intertextual relationship with the pretext."[43] Ivan's three sisters turn into Marya's three sisters, and the three assignments are retained, but Marya becomes the one to undertake them instead of Ivan. Valente adds numeric symbolism of her own, using the numbers three, four, five, or twelve, also called "formulistic numbers:"[44] "she was fifteen years, fifteen days, and fifteen hours of age, the fourth oldest and the fourth prettiest."[45]

Direct references to the fairy tale marking the intertextual relationship with the original text also appear: "Your name will always be Ivan,"[46] as well as references to other Russian fairy tales: "wherever there is a Yelena or a Vasilisa, there is an Ivan,"[47] where the usage of an indefinite article indicates the frequent occurrence of these names in Russian folk tales. The relationship between the original and the reinterpretation is strengthened by the characters' awareness of their origins and fate: "Because this is how it happens. How he dies. How he always dies."[48] The inevitability of fate reflects the illogic of fairy tale reasoning, pointing to the plot that cannot be changed or influenced.

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39 Valente, *Deathless*, 267.

40 David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York – London: Harper & Row, 1970), 491.

41 Katra A. Byram, "Fairy Tales in the Modern(ist) World: Gerhart Hauptmann's *Bahnwärter Thiel* and Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach's *Das Gemeindekind*," *The German Quarterly* 86, no. 2 (2013): 142–143.

42 Joosen, *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales,* 15.

43 Joosen, *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales,* 15.

44 Anne E. Duggan, Donald Haase, and Helen J. Callow, eds., *Folktales and Fairy Tales: Traditions and Texts from around the World* (Greenwood: ABC-CLIO, 2016), 727.

45 Valente, *Deathless,* 21.

46 Valente, *Deathless*, 178.

47 Valente, *Deathless*, 115.

48 Valente, *Deathless*, 220.

While we must defer from Joosen's claim that "some retellings […] leave out a substantial part of action,"[49] we acknowledge the heightened importance of characterization. However, action remains a strong part of the novel, manifested in several plot twists such as war, marriage, change of setting, or death.

On the other hand, the narration which is in the reinterpretations often told "by a first-person narrator, frequently the protagonist or the antagonist of the traditional versions"[50] opposes the traditional omniscient narrator of fairy tales. The loss of such a narrator who "may perhaps seem to be detached from society"[51] adds to the change of perspective. In *Deathless,* the omniscient narrator is present through the third person narrative, but the focus is shifted to Marya Morevna. The omniscient focalized narrator later changes to a first-person narrator as one of the active characters: "For storytelling, a domovaya is always better than a human."[52]

The most striking difference between the original tale and the reinterpretation is the lack of a happy ending. A happy ending is "not the standard in fairy-tale retellings"[53] and stands in contrary to "happy endings of fairy tales [which] are often open-ended and almost timeless."[54] Contrary to the traditional fairy tale, which "promises a happy ending,"[55] Valente's ending is pessimistic and cynical, explicitly stating that "It's over, Marya […] It's all dead."[56] The author not only kills her characters, she also indicates death in the metaphorical sense, claiming that the whole country has passed to the "Country of Death."[57] The initially adventurous, melancholic and sometimes ironic tone turns into a bitter, cynical narrative, gradually strengthening and finally pessimistically resulting in the victory of death over life.

Fairy Tale and History Intertwined

On the following pages, we shift the focus to the relationship between the fantastic and the historical, since we also aim to prove that the novel can be read on yet another level than a reimagined fairy tale. The frequent use of satirical comments, historical places, persons, or the combination of the fantastic and the political point at the depiction of real events and historical situations, along with the author's underlying criticism of the Soviet Union.

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49 Joosen, *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales,* 15.

50 Joosen, *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales,* 15.

51 Kevin Paul Smith, *The Postmodern Fairytale: Folkloric Intertexts in Contemporary Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 131.

52 Valente, *Deathless,* 271.

53 Joosen, *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales,* 14.

54 Byram, "Fairy Tales in the Modern(ist) World," 148.

55 Hansjörg Hohr, "Normativity in Fairy Tales: Scope, Range and Modes of Communication," *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 57, no. 6 (2013): 609, accessed July 20, 2016, doi: 10.1080/00313831.2013.782892.

56 Valente, *Deathless,* 343.

57 Valente, *Deathless,* 340.

Chronotope

The concept of "chronotope" was applied to literary analysis as "the intrinsic connectedness of spatial and temporal relationships that are artistically expressed in literature."[58] It serves as a tool to explain and estimate literary representations and address "not only the perception of the fictional world but also […] the spatial and temporal embedding of human action."[59]

Joosen understands the chronotope as one of the disrupted horizons of expectation: "The chronotope of the fairy tale shifts when the story is relocated to a more concrete contemporary or historical setting."[60] This relocation from the abstract setting of the original fairy tale, which gives no coordinates of time and space, puts *Deathless* into a "city by the sea which was once called St. Petersburg, then Petrograd, then Leningrad, then, much later, St. Petersburg again."[61] The time is set in the period from the early Soviet era to a precise year: "This is Russia and it is 1952."[62]

The real-world setting of *Deathless* is opposed by the fairytale Isle of Buyan, taken from the *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*, though more enchanted and incorporating new places, such as Koschei's castle *Chernosvyat* (black and blessed). Moreover, *Deathless* also indicates that Buyan lies in the vicinity of Irkutsk City in the real-world Russia. As in Western-European fairy tales, we encounter two "worlds that are divided from one another through occasionally fluid."[63] Buyan initially serves as an enchanted place, but becomes an ordinary part of Russia after magic leaves it. This transformation points to the proximity of the two worlds, where fictional characters can interfere with the non-imaginary world: "Koschei […] abducted all those girls – from Moscow, from Petrograd, from Novgorod, from Minsk."[64] *Deathless* marries fairytale characters and places to physical locations in order to anchor the fictional elements to the real-world coordinates.

Attitude to the Supernatural

Deathless as a world of supernatural characters and events at the foreground of Russian history "renegotiates the boundary between magic and realism."[65] In this section, the focus is shifted to the combination of the fantastic and the real through fictional creatures, who often hold political opinions and are not detached from reality. The author's attitude to historical events can be observed in the examples of the non-human characters.

Valente's fairytale world possesses a magic and peculiarity of its own, while the fictional characters are influenced by their historical background and sometimes constitute a parody, which is "one of the postmodern ways of literally incorporating the textualized past into the text

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58 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84.

59 Nele Bemong and Pieter Borghart et al., eds., *Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope Reflections, Applications, Perspectives* (Gent: Academia Press, 2010), III.

60 Joosen, *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales,* 13.

61 Valente, *Deathless,* 15.

62 Valente, *Deathless*, 344.

63 Alfred Messerli, "Spatial Representation in European Popular Fairy Tales," *Marvels & Tales* 19, no. 2 (2005): 1, accessed July 28, 2016. doi: 10.1353/mat.2005.0034.

64 Valente, *Deathless,* 108.

65 Joosen, *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales,* 13.

of the present."[66] The domovoi, house spirit, presents a vivid example of such parallel. "We will file *paperwork*! We will make *formal complaints*!"[67] salutes one with enthusiasm. Domovois' love of bureaucracy and paperwork satirizes the feature of non-democratic regimes, and so does their love for the meetings of "Domovoi Komitet" (a house committee) with a chairman and speeches resembling Party assemblies: "We must all tighten our belts."[68] The forest spirit leshy or the rusalka mermaid call each other "Comrade," an address typical for the Communist Russia. Valente's portrayal of fictional characters evokes feelings of irony or sarcasm, in particular when the characters imitate the bureaucratic routines of humans: "We […] determined that the Revolution requires more from us than mere mischief and teacup-breaking."[69]

The parallels between historical and fictional worlds also yield criticism towards the political and social conditions described. Valente's Koschei makes bitter and eye-opening comments such as "Children may wear through their socks marching in righteous parades, but Papa never misses his wine with supper,"[70] uncovering the hypocritical approach of those in high ranks. The title "Papa" refers not only to Koschei himself, but also to the historical leaders of the time: "Zemlehed has one Papa: Papa Koschei"[71] and "Who is Papa Lenin?"[72]

The resemblance between fictional and real-world characters culminates when Gorinich, an infamous dragon of Russian fairy tales, is converted into an exterminator of "anti-revolutionary forces": "[…] humans fall into three categories: the criminal, the not-yet-criminal, and the not-yet-caught-criminal."[73] Even Morevna, initially a product of Communist society, admits the corruption of morals in Soviet Russia, referring to the communist leader Joseph Stalin as "[…] a wizard with black hair and a thick mustache [who] put a curse […] so that no one would be able to tell the truth without lying."[74]

The boundary between history and fiction is often vague. Not only does Valente allow her fictional characters to appear in the time and space of contemporary Leningrad, but she also inhabits imaginary locations, such as "Yaichka" ("Egg" in Russian), with historical characters presenting them in a metaphorical way as villagers. In the family of Vladimir and Nadya who "have two sons under their roof, Josef and Leon,"[75] Valente reinvents the four controversial figures of the time: the leader of the Russian revolution Vladimir Lenin and his wife Nadya Krupskaya, his successor Josef Stalin and adversary Leon Trotsky, later assassinated. "Just down the way lives Nikolai Aleksandrovich and his long-haired Aleksandra Fedorovna"[76] with their daughters and

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66   Linda Hutcheon, "Historiographic Metafiction," in *Theory of the novel: a historical approach*, ed. Michael Mckeon (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 842.

67   Valente, *Deathless,* 31.

68   Valente, *Deathless*, 33.

69   Valente, *Deathless*, 38.

70   Valente, *Deathless*, 65.

71   Valente, *Deathless*, 83.

72   Valente, *Deathless*, 83.

73   Valente, *Deathless*, 131.

74   Valente, *Deathless*, 102.

75   Valente, *Deathless*, 294.

76   Valente, *Deathless*, 295.

"sickly young son, Aleksey,"[77] who represent the members of the last Tsar family before they were shot. Valente shows the relationships between these figures as if they were relatives and their fates were not tragic. However, the author does not provide any explanation or context for her historical characters. As a piece of art, *Deathless* creates "its own reality, within which truth and the perfection of beauty is the infinite refinement of itself."[78] Readers can only recognize the characters if they are familiar with Russian history of the early 20th century, otherwise they can perceive the characters as fictional inhabitants of the village.

It can be inferred that in *Deathless*, the historical world serves as an influential background and as one of the main driving forces of the narrative. It influences both human and non-human characters and plays a crucial role in their development. The description of the character's routine and contemporary household is precise without belittling the situation. The novel brings the reader into the period of the early Soviet Union with communal living (and often mindset) being one of the most characteristic features. Not only the roof, but also belongings and children were supposed to be shared: "Marya Morevna had twelve mothers and twelve fathers."[79] The propaganda slogans with the emphasis on equality and superiority of the poor over the rich were also reproduced: "The Workers Have Nothing to Lose but Their Chains!"[80] Valente highlights the role of the People in the newly born communist society, which rejected the very notion of individuality: "She was a person, but she was not one of the People."[81] Numerous details, such as conversations, newspaper headlines, long queues for groceries as well as ration cards, in Valente's narration "give order to the fragmented and apparently dissociated elements of our experience"[82] and complete the picture of Soviet Russia.

Valente also reproduces the traditional components of Russian culture with descriptions of Russian cuisine as well as folk medicine. In the description of "[…] bread and pickled peppers and smoked fish, dumplings and beets […] and blini topped with little black spoonfuls of caviar and cream,"[83] Valente gives a panoramic view of Russian dishes. In a similar fashion, Koschei uses banki and mustard plasters as the main remedy against fever. These details help to broaden the cultural setting of the novel and bridge the real world to the imaginary one, where food can serve itself: "The house had made itself ready for dinner."[84]

The most gruesome reference to Russian history in the novel is the Second World War, which Valente does not name, nor does she provide any specific details about who is fighting. Germany is barely mentioned and neither is it explicitly stated that Leningrad was besieged – the siege being the reason why characters struggle with a sparse supply of bread: "Winter's bitch dogs got hold of the ration cards, and shook them until they broke in half, and then in half again."[85]

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77 Valente, *Deathless*, 296.

78 Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*, 87.

79 Valente, *Deathless,* 22.

80 Valente, *Deathless*, 33.

81 Valente, *Deathless*, 28.

82 Mariano Longo, *Fiction and Social Reality: Literature and Narrative as Sociological Resources* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 5–6.

83 Valente, *Deathless,* 62.

84 Valente, *Deathless*, 62.

85 Valente, *Deathless*, 274.

However, Valente describes making food in times of desperate hunger: "[…] they pulled down the wallpaper […] to make bread."[86] *Deathless* depicts the reality "through the filter of the consciousness of protagonists in the story"[87] and avoids precise historical references, concentrating on the horrors of war and depicting them from the viewpoint of civilians: "Sometimes, a wife would pull her husband to the cemetery, frozen as a pipe, and she'd die pulling him, so neither of them got where they were going, but they both did."[88] War becomes the greatest leveller, which diminishes any differences between the characters; it spares nobody, and fairytale characters die along with humans. By the end of the story, war merges the fictional and non-fictional worlds stripping the characters of their magic and leaving no space for the supernatural:

> The future belongs to the dead, and the makers of dead […] all the human world is the Country of Death, and in thrall, and finally, after all this time, we are just like everyone else. We are all dead. All equal. Broken and aimless and believing we are alive. This is Russia and it is 1952. What else would you call hell.[89]

Conclusion

The article discussed the reinterpretation of the classic Russian fairy tale in the novel *Deathless* by Catherynne M. Valente. While praised for being a "swirling mix of Russian folk tales and *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov,"[90] *Deathless* incorporates reality into fantasy – and vice versa – to a degree that it is hard to say which came first. The aim of the analysis was to prove that *Deathless* fits the concept of a fairy tale retelling, yet contains phenomena that are postmodern in nature and make the novel readable on many levels, one of them being the criticism of social conditions.

The basis of the theoretical framework was taken from Vanessa Joosen's *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales: An Intertextual Dialogue between Fairy-Tale Scholarship and Postmodern Retellings,* in which Joosen defined the horizon of expectations for fairy tale retellings. As the analysis proved, most of these horizons are also found in *Deathless.*

Firstly, characterization was analyzed, proving to be in-depth and detailed since the reader was "given access to the inner lives of round and complex characters."[91] The three main characters differ from their original counterparts not only by having structured personalities, but also by being redrawn from black and white heroes or villains to grey characters – neither explicitly good nor evil. Koschei underwent a significant transformation: no longer physically repulsive, skeleton-like and evil, he becomes the Tsar of Life, wanting to protect life. In Koschei, we perceive a romanticized character who, however, does not become a hero, remaining mostly cynical and pessimistic.

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86 Valente, *Deathless*, 282.

87 Jerome Seymour Bruner, *Actual minds, possible worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 25.

88 Valente, *Deathless,* 280.

89 Valente, *Deathless*, 343–344.

90 Cat Fitzpatrick, "Deathless by Catherynne M Valente," *Fantasy Books Review,* accessed July 20, 2016, http://www.fantasybookreview.co.uk/Catherynne-M-Valente/Deathless.html.

91 Joosen, *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales*, 15.

Marya Morevna is an unconventional character, who was never a helpless princess needing to be saved. Having her own land and a taste for war, Morevna is already strong and emancipated in the original fairy tale. The "matriarchal worldview and motifs of the original folktales underwent successive stages of "patriarchalization,""[92] yet Morevna retains her independence, although its source is now based on the trend of the postmodern feminist portrayal of strong female characters.

The transition of the naive hero Ivan to an anti-hero and his depiction as a communist official make his character not only tragic, but despicable. The references to him arresting criminals before they become criminals point to the unlikable nature of the regime's practices, and the denotation "Ivan the Fool" gains new meaning: Ivan is no more the "lucky fool," but a fool for believing in the practices of the communists.

The stylistic complexity of the novel is manifested in the relevance of the maintained numeric symbolism, although repetitions are cut to minimum. The lack of a happy ending as a typical feature of postmodern fairy tales underlines the bitter tone of the whole piece. In addition, the usage of typical Russian realia along with borrowed words such as "volchitsa" (she-wolf), Ivanushka (diminutive of Ivan), ukha (fish soup), komityet (committee), Likho (bad luck) needs to be highlighted.

The universe of Valente's *Deathless* is a complex relationship between the non-imaginary and imaginary worlds portrayed in the period from the establishment of the Soviet Union to the year 1952. The locations of both worlds, whether it is Leningrad or the Isle of Buyan, are interwoven through the imaginary elements incorporated in the historical world and vice versa. However, as the narration develops, the gap between fictional and non-fictional worlds narrows until both worlds merge by the end of the novel with the non-imaginary world prevailing over the imaginary one.

Valente achieves a high-level detailing of the historical chronotope in *Deathless* with believable descriptions of households and the mindset of people of the time. Nonetheless, the nuances of such depiction often require a more substantial cultural and historical background from the reader, otherwise they might be missed or neglected. To an uninformed reader, the newspaper title *Vicious Spies and Killers Under the Mask of Academic Physicians*[93] might be a pointless detail, while a person familiar with the Russian history might feel a pang of grief associated with the injustice rooted in anti-Semitism.[94] Lack of background knowledge does not diminish the effect of the novel, but understanding of the details paints *Deathless* in more tragic colours of the past.

The approximation of the fictional and real worlds is achieved through the theme of war, with Valente holding a strong anti-war stance, which manifests itself in references to Anna Akhmatova, a Russian Silver Age poet, survivor of the Siege of Leningrad, as well as in remarks such as "War is not for winning, Masha. It is for surviving."[95] War is waged by the fictional forces of Life and Death as well as against Germany in the real world, but Vyi, the Tsar of Death, seems to be the only one to win: "[…] his great strength has always been in numbers, and in patience."[96]

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92 Zipes, *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England*, 7.

93 Valente, *Deathless,* 239.

94 Gennady Kostyrchenko, *Tainaya politika Stalina. Vlast' i antisemitizm* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya, 2003).

95 Valente, *Deathless,* 93.

96 Valente, *Deathless*, 188.

Although having all the features typical for postmodern fairy tale retellings, Valente's *Deathless* is readable on multiple levels. The author's ironic comments on the social situation in the Soviet era provide criticism of the regime, the relationships between the three main characters transform the straightforward matrimony of a fairy tale into a more tragic and sensual one, and condemning war – where there are no winners but death – all constitute the complexity of *Deathless*. It can be stated that the novel contains anti-war references and social criticism. It even provokes the question whether it could be considered an anti-war novel. After all, as Mikhail Bakhtin says, a literary work may have multiple interpretations by present and future generations: "The work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world as part of the process of its creation, as well as part of its subsequent life, in a continual renewing of the work through the creative perception of listeners and readers."[97]

Although *Deathless* could be considered a novel falling into the genre of magical realism, this article strived to focus on the analysis of how fairy tales are reinterpreted as a work of postmodern fiction without further having to specify the genre, which, considering the complexity of the topic, theme and other aspects of the novel, would require a further and more lengthy examination that the authors had no room for in this paper.

Taking into account the richness of Valente's themes and symbolism, as well as the paucity of Slavic fairy tale reimaginings, we consider *Deathless* a one-of-a-kind novel merging both a postmodern fairy tale retelling and a critical depiction of early Soviet Russia. Numerous historical references and social criticism contribute to the depth of the novel, while its distinct eastern Slavic color arouses interest in the underlying culture. We hope this research will provide encouragement for further examination of Slavic fairy tales and their reimaginings.

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97   Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 254.

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