

THE CHARACTER OF THE FAIRY TALE DEVIL IN THE GRAPHICS OF LATVIAN BOOKS: THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

The works of Latvian artists analysed in the article – illustrations for folklore stocks or individual fairy tales – represent the stylistic diversity of the books of the first half of the 20th century, the gradual emergence of the national art features and the development of the iconography of the frequently appearing character of the mythical devil. Most of the illustrations of the folklore material during this period are characterized by the adherence to the traditions of realistic representation, linking the text to be illustrated with the environment and attributes of Latvian peasant life. The researcher has used the key principles of the contextual method and the iconological method.

For the analysis of the study, the illustrations by Latvian artists and popular book illustrators Rihards Zariņš, Janis Rozentāls, Eduards Brencēns, Jānis Saukums, Alberts Kronenbergs, Indriķis Zeberīņš and Ernests Brastiņš were selected in order to look for the iconographic origins in Ādams Alksnis's works.

Keywords: devil, folklore, illustrations, Latvian art.

Introduction

The illustrations of Latvian folklore publications in the first half of the 20th century reveal a common trend – they are based on the studies of ethnographic artefacts and traditional lifestyle, and their elements are interpreted and stylized according to the aesthetic values of the time (Treija, 2015). In addition, the characters in the illustrations of folklore texts are created by trying to find a universal, but at the same individual system of symbols specific to each author, representing a particular topic. When the human and animal figures, attributes, environmental elements

and ethnographic motives are semantically combined in the illustration, they become inclusive symbols.

The less concrete descriptions there are in the pre-text (verbal text), the greater the plurality of interpretations is provided to the illustrator. The most frequently illustrated folklore genre – fairy tales and legends – is characterised by descriptions of events and actions, but relatively little attention is paid to the appearance of characters and to the definition of environment. It allows the artist to freely create the iconography of characters based on the studies of nature and past experience, but in some cases it also determines the inclusion of borrowed clichéd forms in the solutions of plot and characters.

The research methods of visual text and the sources used in the study

In the field of Humanities, contemporary research methods are used to interpret the text at three levels: 1) as a written message, 2) as a result of the language use (oral or written) and 3) as a sociocultural product that can also exist in visual, audible or event form (Bula, 2011, 230, 231). If we look at the illustrations of folk fairy tales created by artists as a visual text, a crucial role in the interpretation of this text is played by the contextual connection with the source of inspiration – the verbal text. The article emphasises the transfer of verbal text to another context – visual art, thus the verbal text is understood as a decontextualized folklore text. In the early 20th century in the territory of Latvia, the folklore text had gradually obtained a certain fixed form in writing established by the collector of folklore in an authoritarian manner (see Abrahams, 1993, 8–13). By studying the samples of visual art (book illustrations) as textual units in the broadest sense, it is possible to discuss the recontextualisation of the folklore text – inclusion into the construction of the new context. Such a perspective is characteristic to the contextual method in folklore studies, which was introduced in the 1960s. The illustrations of the folk fairy tale compilations or individual fairy tales, if looked upon as a visual text, demonstrate an unmistakable connection to the context of folklore – even in the event, if the illustrations are removed from the book context. Thus, the focus of the study is the recontextualisation of the folklore text (with mythological notions included in it) and the semantic links, which were retained by the folklore text from the original context.

The presence of the folklore context is essential in the iconological interpretation of the illustrations, based on the method proposed by art historian Erwin Panofsky. There are three strata of the interpretation of the artwork – the primary or natural subject matter, the secondary or

conventional subject matter (iconography) and the tertiary or intrinsic meaning (iconology) (Panofsky, 1957, 26–40). The third stratum of the Panofsky method helps to define how each artwork fits into (whether the author is aware of it or not) and functions in a particular culture. The artwork is viewed as one of the “symptoms” of the views shared by the nation and the time period, religious and philosophical beliefs, and reveals the symbolic values of its time and society (Panofsky, 1972, 6–8).

The author has selected the illustrations created by Latvian artists in the defined period of time, where it is possible to identify one of the most frequently visualised characters of Latvian mythology – the devil. Although only the first half of the 20th century has been selected for the study, the devil is the only mythological image that appears in the graphic art of books after World War II as well, when the Soviet ideology in the Latvian SSR did not allow the representation of Latvian mythology in art (1945–1990). The contextual and iconological aspects of the character of the devil in the art of books should be explored further, covering the entire 20th century and applying the comparative analysis.

The iconographic features of the character of the devil in the works of Latvian artists

Latvian publicist and cultural event reviewer Ilmārs Erlachs in his overview on the iconography of fairy tale devils in Latvian painting states that the devil characters portrayed by Latvian artists have little diversity in terms of form and little imagination, if compared to the art of other nations. However, he does not regard the refrain from hyperbolised fiction as a shortage. Rather, he sees it as an organic symbiosis with the theme of the fairy tale, because the devils in fairy tales often act in the environment that is common to peasants (Erlachs, 1944).

The “peasant” devil’s characteristic to the late 19th century have been created by Latvian artist Ādams Alksnis. His heritage consisting of many drawings and variants with the motives of folk tales seems to be close and understandable to Latvians. The fairy tale devils drawn by Alksnis are very human: they have horns, fur and two legs of a beast, yet their silly facial features and behaviours are more relatable to the particulars of human lives. It should be noted that an accurate description of the devil is not often provided in Latvian fairy tales, but one can get a certain idea in relation to situations in which the devil competes with a man and always turns out to be the loser. The devil may appear looking like an animal, a man or natural phenomenon; however, the prevalent appearance is the anthropomorphic image with or without special features (for instance, one leg as a beast’s leg), which would indicate towards the status of

the devil (see Straubergs, 1941, 506–513). Folklore researcher Elza Kokare argues that there are no authentic, archaic creatures in Latvian mythology that would embody the essence of evil forces. There are only such situations or personification of circumstances, which characterize the lack of good (the Evil One, the black or the Devil (*Jods*)) (Kokare, 1999, 193). Leons Taivāns also notes that in Latvian mythology, the binary opposition of God and Devil appears to be without any ethically qualitative differences. “The mythological Devil of the Balts [...] is the inversion of the wise God; the stupid face of the God. The fairy tale Devil is a fool. His animal attributes (tail, claws, ears) show his genetic connection with animal symbols, which in the religions of the Stone Age referred to the power of God – life, fertility” (Taivāns, 1992, 26).

Having observed further development of Latvian art, it can be concluded that the iconography of the character of the devil created by Alksnis has also influenced the works of other Latvian authors. The most typical features are the devil’s human body and facial features, fur, horns and action in natural or domestic environment of a peasant illustrated in a more or less detailed way.

In the early 20th century Latvian graphic artist Rihards Zariņš had an idea to illustrate the fairy tale about Kurbads (see Pujāte, Putniņa-Niedra, 1997, 318) – a mythical Latvian superhero, who fights with various fairy tale monsters, including three devils. The idea to provide illustrations to the folk tale about the heroic deeds of Kurbads can be paralleled with Akseli Gallen-Kallela’s intention to create the Finnish “Big Kalevala” – the “Book of Nation”. The intentions of both authors share a number of common traits: the desire to highlight and visually represent the national myth, to build on the studies of nature and ethnography of their land and to leave both morally and artistically valuable legacy to their people (see Wahlroos, 2009, 31). Unfortunately, both of these projects are also united by the fact that they were not completed. Judging from the drafts of the book layout, the book illustrated by Zariņš would have been sophisticated and elaborated in a scrupulous manner; however, the illustrations and ornamental decorations had become the author’s main goal, burdening the readability of the text. Although Zariņš’s works undoubtedly manifest professionalism, there are a few national features in his fairy tale illustrations, except for certain costume elements and ethnographic ornaments.

One can draw conclusions about the potential iconographic solution of the character of the devil in the planned book by examining Zariņš’s graphic artwork *Kurbads un deviņgalvainais velns* (Kurbads and the Nine-Headed Devil) from the cycle of etchings *Ko Latvijas meži šalc* (What the Forests of Latvia Rustle; 1906–1914). The image of the devil (monster), with several heads and the body parts combined of various animals, has

emerged from the mythological notions of Ancient Persia and Egypt. In Medieval Western art it has transformed into more “human” appearance; however, it has maintained many features of animals (horns, tail, claws, fur) (Holl, 1999, 494). Zariņš has more favoured the anthropomorphic character, emphasising the animal nature of the devil by adding a hairy body and predator’s teeth. The nine-headed devil in Latvian fairy tales indicates to the end of the initiation process of the hero by beating his most powerful opponent (the devils beaten before were three and six-headed).

One of the founders of Latvian national art school Janis Rozentāls also chose a plot solution similar to Zariņš’s etchings in his illustration *Lāčplēša cīņa ar deviņgalvaino Jodu* (The Bearslayer’s Fight with the Nine-Headed Devil; 1908). Both examples of the early 20th century can be included in the context of the quest for Latvian ethnic identity and building of national self-awareness. The fairy tale devil has obtained the symbolic role of the nation’s enemy – by beating the enemy, namely, by passing the ritual of initiation, the people has the hope to become a nation and gain independence.

In parallel to the many-headed devil as the embodiment of a nation’s unfavourable forces in the beginning of the century, the iconography of the stupid devil’s character also continued to develop, as initiated by Alksnis. An expressive example of this is the Devil drawn by Eduards Brencēns (see Fig. 1), which appears in the illustrations of the book *Mūsu tautas teikas un pasakas* (The Legends and Fairy Tales of Our Nation; 1909–1911). In the overall iconography of Latvian devils and other comparatively evil creatures, Brencēns’s Devil differs with a long, black beard, a huge body and glowing eyes; yet, due to the silly facial expression he looks like an easy target. Brencēns’s Devil is similar to the devil created by Kārlis Krauze in the illustration book *Tautas pasaka par gudro kalpu un velnu* (Folk Fairy Tale About the Wise Servant and the Devil; 1927). Being twice as tall as a man, with muscles and claws, the devil does not instil fear, but rather makes one smile due to his simple-mindedness (see Fig. 2).

The popularity of the devil’s image in the fairy tale illustrations in the publications of the research period is also attested by a typical example – *Tautas teikas un pasakas. Dievs, Pērkons un Velns* (Folk Legends and Fairy Tales. God, Thunder and Devil; 1925) edited by Jānis Stiprais, where in the 48 page book Jānis Saukums has included the devil in 20 drawings (see Fig. 3). Besides, it seems that the artist has given himself a task to provide each devil with individual features. For comparison, God appears in a couple of illustrations, but Thunder (*Pērkons*) – only in one.

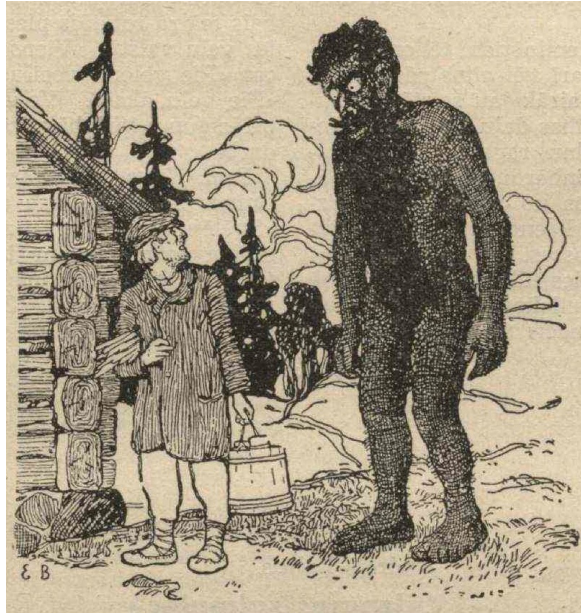


Figure 1. Eduards Brencēns. *Velns* (Devil). The early 20th century¹



Figure 2. Kārlis Krauze. Illustration for *Tautas pasaka par gudro kalpu un velnu* (Folk Fairy Tale About the Wise Servant and the Devil). 1927²

¹ Brencēns, 1938.

² *Tautas pasaka...*, 1927.

The drawings of Latvian children's book illustrator Alberts Kronenbergs are characterised by good-natured humour and simplicity. The stupid and credulous Kronenbergs's devil appeared in 1922 for the first time, in the illustration of the fairy tale *Zelta bārda* (Golden Beard). The artist drew devils both bearded and beardless, dressed in simple, sometimes well-worn and patched peasant clothes, engaging them in various situations of fairy tales. In the book *Mazais ganīnš un viņa brīnišķais ceļojums* (The Little Shepherd and His Wonderful Journey; 1931) with Kronenbergs's text and illustrations, where the elements of folklore and Christianity of various nations were merged, the devil with his whole family appeared. Finnish journalist and scholar Jukka Rislakki notes that Kronenbergs's devil is more civilized than Alksnis's naked and hairy forest creatures (Rislakki, 2017, 145); however, with the exception of human clothes, there is much in common in the characters of devils created by Alksnis and Kronenbergs.

The devils drawn by the painter and cartoonist Indriķis Zeberīnš also belong to the iconography of "peasant" devils. In his book illustrations, he creates multi-figure compositions with elaborated actions, where the characters are often slightly caricaturized (Rožkalne, 2004, 343) and optimism is present. Sometimes he is accused of overly direct and inappropriate realism for the illustrations of fairy tales (Peņģerots, 1925, 53). In the interpretation of the devil's character, Zeberīnš has maintained previously developed and established clichés of form – the devil dressed in human clothes and only the long ears underneath a hat and goat toenails indicate his devil's features.

Whereas artist and art theoretician Ernests Brašiņš in his work *Rīta ausmā* (In Morning Dawn; c. 1936), which has been created as a magazine illustration (see Fig. 4), has departed from the usual iconography and has created the devil as a fine gentleman in a black tailcoat. Such an image of the devil emerged into Latvian mythological notions along with Christianity (Straubergs, 1934–1935, 21750). Perhaps the artist, by deviating from the understanding of Latvian mythology of the devil as a simple-minded assistant to God or the opposite, wanted to emphasise his negative attitude towards German culture (caused by counter-reaction to the long lasting German domination in the Latvian populated area). In the first phase of the independence of the state of Latvia (1918–1940), Brašiņš was a relentless fighter for Latvian art and tried to look for justifications based on the grounds of Latvianness, when choosing the means of expression. In the plot solutions of the illustration, he has used a rather frequently noticeable motif of fairy tales – the devil, who is sent away by a singing rooster in the early hours of the morning. According to folk beliefs, the rooster is able to see and expel all the evil forces (see Straubergs, 1944, 147).



Figure 3. Jānis Saukums. Illustration for *Tautas teikas un pasakas. Dievs, Pērkons un Velns* (Folk Legends and Fairy Tales. God, Thunder and Devil). 1925³



Figure 4. Ernests Brastiņš. *Rīta ausmā* (In Morning Dawn). C. 1936⁴

The works mentioned in the article herein are the most outstanding examples. In the period of research there are other artists, too, who have worked on the iconographic character of the devil but these episodic works are not further analyzed as they more or less fit into common iconography of the image.

³ Stiprais, 1925.

⁴ Brastiņš, 1936.

Conclusion

The art context provides visual reference and additional symbolical value to the content of the recontextualised folklore text. During the period, when the development and establishment of the national culture and building of Latvian self-awareness took place, the artists often found inspiration in the sources of folklore, expressing the processes in society in a symbolic form. The analysed illustrations of fairy tales represent the stylistic diversity of the first half of the 20th century in the art of Latvian books, the efforts of the authors to stick to the traditions of realistic representation by linking the text to be illustrated – the folklore material – to the life environment and attributes of Latvian peasants.

The laconic verbal description of the character of the devil in folk fairy tales opens an extensive field of visual interpretations for the illustrator; therefore, conventional principles not dictated by the sources of folklore, often appear in the tradition of the character construction. The iconography of the character of the devil in Latvian fairy tales is dominated by the physically strong, but silly and simple-minded devil, whose origins can be sought in the most ancient layers of mythological notions.

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