

## MOTIF OF “THE TRAGIC MISTAKE” IN ORAL, POPULAR AND ELITE CULTURE OF CENTRAL EUROPE

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The essay presents an overview of several uses of international narrative motif of “The Tragic Mistake” by oral, popular and elite culture since the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the present time, with special emphasis on territory of Central Europe, especially the Czech lands. It builds on existing research conducted by folklorists, ethnologists and literary historians while trying to present new data as well as to critically interpret popularity of the motif both in historical and contemporary contexts (Krejčí, 1947–1948; Kosko, 1966; Brednich, 1977; Campion-Vincent, 1998).<sup>1</sup> The investigation of the motif is also connected to more general questions of popularity of certain narratives across various media as well as of connection of this popularity to specific historical milieu; the popularity of the motif also touches two fundamental yet troubling defining traits of widely disseminated vernacular texts posed by folklorist Alan Dundes: their multiplied existence and their apparent irrationality (Dundes, 1987, p. 4).

The motif, classified by folklorists as narrative motif N.321 *Son returning home after long absence unwittingly killed by parents* belongs to the motific section dedicated to fate and unfortunate coincidences (N, “Chance and Fate”) and can be found in 24 language traditions of more than 20 countries, most prominently in Europe (Thompson, 1957, p. 94). It can be briefly summarized as follows: *After many years spent abroad, a son returns home to his parents. They do not recognize*

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him and think he is a rich stranger. Because of greed or poverty, they murder and rob him. Truth comes to light, and parents commit suicide.

The motif usually occurs within more complicated narrative, accompanied by other details which develop the plot. The most common ones are: 1) *the son does not reveal his identity to parents in joke; and 2) he reveals his identity only to his sister, who, after his murder, announces the tragedy to their parents.* In this more structured and also more common form, it is referred to by folklorists as the international narrative type ATU 939A *Killing the Returned Soldier* (Uther, 2004, pp. 583–584). Other academic fields, such as literary history, refer to this narrative by other designations, such as *The Murdered Son*, *Liverpool Tragedy*, *Die Mordeltern*, *Le Malentendu*, *Niespodzianka*, etc. (Campion-Vincent, 1998, p. 63).

The oldest evidence of the motif can be found in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and is related to the emergence of then new media discourse: early proto-journalism. The motif first appeared in two news items about incidents which supposedly took place during period of single month of 1618, first in England (in Perin in Cornwall, September 1618), then (in Nismes in Languedoc, October 1618). In both cases, the motif was incorporated into a description of supposed real event: the alleged victim was a son who returned from a long journey to another continent (e. g. West Indies). Soon, the narrative underwent genre transformation – the news account became popular *exemplum* (preaching example), used primarily by Jesuit preachers; influential versions included one by Antoine de Balighem (1621) and Georg Stengel (1651). In 1634, Protestant version followed, published in the *Historische Chronica* by Johann Ludwig Gottfried called Godofredus (Campion-Vincent, 1998, pp. 63–64). The motif, however, still continued to live on in its original form of newspaper or chronicle item. Interesting version, by Czech literary historian Karel Krejčí mistakenly regarded as original source of the narrative, is dated to 1649 and set in Bohemian village of Černolice (today's district of Prague-West). It can be found in the sixth volume of the chronicle *Theatrum Europaeum*:

At that time, a terrible case happened in Černolice in Bohemia. About the 6<sup>th</sup> of May came home a son of a poor man (who was 18 years in the war), but did not get to be recognized by anyone, except his sister, and during the night, he was murdered by his own mother. But the next day, when they heard from their daughter that it was their son, she hanged herself, father jumped into the well and the sister, when she saw the mother hanged, died of grief (Krejčí, 1947–1948, p. 407).

Since the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the narrative spread to a wide range of different genres of oral, popular and elite culture. Some of them will be investigated in more detail.

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## Use of the motif in oral culture

Local collective memory mostly used the motif to explain the meaning of specific toponym or origin of certain unusual location. Therefore, we find it primarily in “realistic” narrative genres such as local legends, namely the etymological and etiological ones (i.e., the legends explaining the origin of a name or very existence of a specific location, usually isolated, abandoned, or even haunted). In the Czech lands (and generally eastern parts of Central Europe), the motif was most often associated with a specific mill; in western Europe, an inn (typically mountain one) seemed to be more popular (Petzoldt, 1989, pp. 194–212; Šalanda, 1990, pp. 159–160). From locations in the Czech lands, famous Dolský mlýn near village of Kamenická stráň in the Bohemian Switzerland (site of filming of several famous movie fairytales including *Pyšná princezna* (“The Proud Princess”) from 1952), or Vrahovský mlýn near the pond Vrah (“Murderer”) close to village of Chlum at Sedlčansko region where the narrative provided false etymology, could be mentioned (Habart, 1925, pp. 222–223).

Since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the narrative became so popular that it turned into a “mere” fictional folktale (e. g. Kubín, 1908, p. 27). In the standard *Soupis českých pohádek* (“Index of Czech Folktales”) by folklorist Václav Tille, it is classified as a folktale type *Murder of his own child from greed* (Tille, 1937, pp. 180–181; 504).

The story exists in the oral tradition even today, albeit in a different genre: the so-called contemporary legend, i.e. actual realistic story from everyday life. Several of its versions from Central and Southeastern Europe, related to the economic and social changes in the region which took place during the 1990s, were documented by local folklorists: e. g. one set to the Liberecko region in Czechia (Janeček, 2008, pp. 24-31) or ones set to Polish Silesia or Sofia in Bulgaria (Czubala, 2019, p. 4).

## Use of the motif in popular culture and newspapers

One of the most important media for transmission of the motif across decades were broadsize ballads or chapbooks, a distinct genre on the border between oral and popular culture (Smetana & Václavek, 1949, pp. 103–105; Krejčí, 1947–1948, pp. 416–420; Grochowski, 2010). From several influential versions of the narrative, the song, published in 1869 in Prague and titled *Pravdivá píseň o veliké vraždě, kterou otec s matkou nad synem spáchali* (“A True Song About the Great Murder That Father and Mother Suffered on Their Son”) with the incipit “Jsouc na řece mlynář jeden” (“There is a miller on the river”) could be mentioned (*Pravdivá píseň*, 1869).

The most common form of the story in popular culture was, however, the *Zeitungssage*, the “newspaper legend”, that is, the fictitious text published as

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a report of the event which have actually taken place (related to journalistic genres of “dead catter” or “black chronicle”; Petzoldt, 1989; Kawan, 1995). In this form, it is known since 1727, in the Czech lands since 1821 (when it was first published in the *Vlastenský zvěstovatel*; Königsmark, 1941, pp. 187–191). During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, its journalistic use was so frequent that it was ironized by famous Czech journalist Jan Neruda (1967) in his feuilleton from 1880:

“The Dead Season” has been tingling us, the journalists, despite the February weather earlier than ever. We’re in a terrible misery. In vain, we look around the world after the event a bit romantic to satisfy the hunger of a summer reader – no one would believe what such a summer reader would consume in the long days of 24 hours!

We see his cramping hunger squeezing his lips, his thin-throated tongue – our heart is bleeding – but nowhere, no bite of news, no more fresh gossip...

It’s true, we’re smart. We have a certain supply that will help us finally year after year, when it is worst. (...)

We have that “lost son” who has been abroad for many years, then returned, met with his parents, and his unknowing mother (the following year we will write that the father), because of the money greed, at night cut his throat. (...)

We have the 208 candidates for the position of an executioner in town of X., among them one “hairdresser and one actor“.

We have some other story – but this year, misery has struck us a little prematurely, we have already slit the throat of our “son” just those days, “hairdresser and actor” we have already sent to X. – and the year is so long – God knows what other crimes we will commit! (pp. 192–194).

Despite Neruda’s irony, after the First World War, the story came back to journalistic practice of Czech newspapers, when it began to be regularly printed as a true account:

Národní demokracie.

14 May 1923.

A few days ago, a young Slovak returned to his native village in the Spiš County from America, inquired about the Jewish innkeeper, if his parents were alive, he agreed with him that he will go to be accommodated there, but he could not be recognized immediately. He promised his parents a good payment in the evening and showed them a lot of dollars. The parents haggled at night if they should murder the rich stranger, but they could not make a decision. Father went to the pub to reinforce himself with liquor, and in the morning, he learned there that the guest is his own son. He ran home, but the woman already cut throat of her son and robbed him; she joyfully told this to the man. When the husband told her that she had killed her son, she fainted and went mad.

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Father told the gendarmerie. The terrible case aroused great excitement throughout the neighborhood (Tille, 1937, p. 181).

Národní politika.

January 6, 1935. From Belgrade, Saturday.

A stranger came to a pub in Oravice near Bela Crkva, and the innkeeper murdered him with the help of his daughter and robbed him of 20,000 dinars. The next day it appeared that he had murdered his own son. The son returned home after twenty years, wanting to give his savings to his mother. Then both the mother and her daughter committed suicide (Tille, 1937, p. 500).

Typically, this newspaper story was usually set to countries located to east and southeast of the countries of its printing. This is, interestingly, the way how contemporary journalistic practice of publishing similar stories sometimes still works on the Czech Internet even now, which typically set stories of this kind to Romania, or, more generally, to the Balkans.

The story has also been used many times by popular literature. An interesting example provides its incorporation into the famous novel cycle of popular writer Josef Svátek *Paměti katovské rodiny Mydlářů v Praze* (“Memoirs of the Executioner’s Family of Mydlář in Prague”) from the late 1880s which uses the above-mentioned 1649 Černolice version, first published in the *Theatrum Europaeum* (Krejčí, 1947–1948, pp. 421–422).

An interesting work which uses this motif and stands on the border between popular and elite culture is animated movie by Jiří Brdečka *Jsou na řece mlynář jeden* (“There is a miller on the river”) from 1971, a skillful artistic reference to the genre of broadsize ballads, in which Eva Švankmajerová worked as an artist and actor Miloš Kopecký sang the song (*Jsou na řece mlynář jeden*, 1971).

Since 2000, a new wave of popularity of this story in Czech popular culture could be registered; the narrative was recently reinterpreted by several popular music genres (e. g. historical pseudomedieval music – Ginevra, 2001; or country music; Štáhlavský, 2005) as well as featuring in several TV shows.

## Use of the motif in elite culture

Elite culture handled this narrative mainly by a genre of theatre play. There are at least 10 dramas using this motif; it is interesting to note that primary source of inspiration for most of them was fake newspaper report of the alleged real event. Because of its popularity, in 1895, the story was even described as one of “36 basic dramatic situations” (Janeček, 2008, p. 29).

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The oldest one is the play by the famous English playwright George Lillo, entitled *Fatal Curiosity* from 1736, typical example of the so-called “domestic tragedy” with a strong moralistic focus (Krejčí, 1947–1948, pp. 408–411). Another important example is the drama *Der vierundzwanzigste Februar* by the German playwright Zacharias Werner of 1808. This belongs to different genre of “fateful drama” and adds motif of a fateful date when a family has been struck by tragedies over several generations; Johann Wolfgang Goethe had direct influence on the creation of this work (Krejčí, 1947–1948, pp. 411–415).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at least two influential theatre plays are worth mentioning, both having ties to Central Europe. The first is fatalistic drama of Polish author Karol Hubert Rostworowski *Niespodzianka* (“Surprise”) written in 1928–1929, which is set to the interwar Polish village (Krejčí, 1947–1948, pp. 422–426). The second is drama *Le Malentendu* (“Misunderstanding”) by French writer and absurdist philosopher Albert Camus written in 1944. This “existential drama” is located to the fictitious “Moravia” with the main acting figures having Moravian – and also biblical – names Jan, Marta and Marie. The original intended name of this drama was meant to be “Budejovice”; the primary source of inspiration here was contemporary Western European journalistic practice of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s which often put fictive news of this type to Czechoslovakia, often around České Budějovice (Čapek, 1971, p. 28–37). Two years before, Camus used the same motif in his famous 1942 novel *L’etranger* (“The Stranger”):

Between my pallet and the bed’s plank, I had found an old newspaper piece, almost stuck to the cloth, yellowish and transparent. It told a fait divers whose beginning was missing, but that must have happened in Czechoslovakia. A man had left his Czech village to make a fortune. After twenty-five years, rich, he had come back with a wife and child. His mother kept an inn with his sister in his native village. To surprise them, he had left his wife and child in another inn, had gone to his mother’s place, and she had not recognized him when he came in. As a joke, he had had the idea of taking a room. He had shown his money. During the night his mother and sister had murdered him with a hammer and thrown his body into the river. In the morning, the wife had come and unknowingly revealed the traveller’s identity. The mother had hanged herself. The sister had thrown herself in a well. I must have read this story thousands of times. On one hand, it was impossible. On the other, it was natural. Anyhow, I thought the traveller had somewhat deserved it and one should never play games (Campion-Vincent, 1998, p. 66).

## Conclusion

The popularity and constant returns of this archaic motif, especially in contemporary contexts, are somewhat puzzling. The narrative, in literally hundreds

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of its versions and variants, permeates many oral, literary and popcultural genres, and represents, in a sense, an “eternal story”. It also shares several parallels with two other important narratives of European civilization, the Oedipus and Odysseus Myth. Although the narrative is significantly younger than these mythical texts and received less support in European literary and cultural canon, the parallels are striking: Oedipus also unknowingly murders a close family member, while Odysseus also returns home incognito after many years spent abroad. Nevertheless, several authors recognised importance of this story and offered several interpretations of its meaning and popularity. There are two possible clusters of these interpretations: *universalistic*, and those which take account its *historical and cultural specifics*.

The first universalistic interpretation could be labelled as *psychoanalytic*; it seeks the cause of the popularity of the story in the projection of the supposedly universal fear of an evil mother (Auclair, 1970, p. 100). Problem connected with this interpretation is following: it relies too much on the French versions of the narrative where character of the father is often absent; in the vast majority of internationally known versions, the mother plays a rather passive role. Second possible universalistic interpretation can be labelled as *structuralist*; it could proceed similarly to the well-known analysis of the Oedipus myth by Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss, 1955). Reason for the popularity of the story would be its hidden structure; the message of the story would be, similarly to Oedipus myth, that “lack of communication between close kin leads to tragedy”. The story could be in this way interpreted as a myth about underestimation or overestimation of family ties. The final universalistic interpretation could be called *semiotic* (Fabre & Lacroix, 1970). This one is, perhaps, more acceptable to contemporary folklorists; it finds the reason of the story’s popularity in its similarity to the three allegedly universally known mythological motifs (“Oedipus” – motif of unwitting murder of immediate kin, “Odysseus” – motif of returning home incognito, “Brothers Grimm” – motif of parents killing their own children). All these universalistic interpretations are interesting for the folklorist, but their main problem is that they are *ahistorical* – they do not explain why the motif appeared as late as the 17<sup>th</sup> century and why it is popular especially in Europe.

Another cluster of interpretations includes those, which, unlike the previous ones, emphasize the *historical and cultural context of the period when the motif became popular*. First one is famous interpretation by Polish folklorist Julian Krzyżanowski who claimed that the story represents *a typical life situation*. The popularity of the text for centuries is, according to him, regularly revived because events of this type occasionally really happen (Krzyżanowski, 1977, pp. 839–842). This is a very controversial view, as there is no solid evidence of any single real event of this kind. Czech literary historian Karel Krejčí saw the origin of the story

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due to the *Zeitgeist of the period of the Thirty Years' War* (Krejčí, 1947–1948, pp. 406–407; 433–437). French folklorist Véronique Campion-Vincent interprets original form of the story as a *typical product of the early modern period* and the subsequent modern social situation; as a text which is *no longer topical in postmodern times* (Campion-Vincent, 1998, pp. 75–76). Both these interpretations are more acceptable, but today we know more about origin of the motif: it is little bit older, and even in its original form it captures the audiences today, at least in Central and Eastern Europe – as *Zeitungssage*, fake news, contemporary legend, or internet hoax. Interesting is interpretation by American literary historian Tom Cheesman. According to him, the text *reflects changes of the cultural concept of the family in the 17<sup>th</sup> century*. Specifically, the transition from “authoritarian” to “sentimental” family model and changes in social understanding of hospitality. It is very convincing interpretation, but its solidity should be verified by historians, especially its musings about supposed “pagan” narrative tradition surviving until the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Cheesman, 1989–1990, p. 64; 1994, pp. 85–90).

Most of these interpretations neglect one of the main causes of the popularity of the story for 400 years. The narrative is closely related to another important story of European culture, famous biblical narrative: the parable of the *Return of the Prodigal Son* (Luke 15: 11–32, ATU 935), which was, interestingly, extremely popular in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, right before sudden appearance of the motif. It thus could represent early-modern “cynical” reaction to the parable. The popularity of this narrative has been periodically revived for centuries by its regular publishing in the press as a report about a true event. This regular publication inspired artists, producers of popular culture, and performers of oral culture to their own creative treatment of the narrative. This was facilitated by its inherent genological syncretism: this relatively simple story could easily be used and disseminated by a wide range of oral, popcultural and literary genres. At the same time, it is also a universally attractive story about interpersonal relationships and family tragedies, popular within oral culture, popular culture and contemporary tabloid news.

Whatever interpretation of the popularity of the story is regarded to be more valid, its continued existence undoubtedly testifies to the fact that the collective *homo narrans* still lives.

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