

Widening Origins: Twa Sisters, Singing Bones, and the Slavic “Usna tradytsiya”

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This study begins with the ambiguous phrase “widening origins,” which is meant to imply that, despite on-going approaches to context-placing within the larger epistemological studies on balladry introduced to us by music scholars, folklorists, and literary historians, the application of such approaches to traditions outside of the west is still an understudied topic. This study attempts to navigate the prevailing western expectations about the context of origins of ballads in light of an understudied foreign body of literature. The question of origins is one such question that can never be *completely* answered, yet it is still valuable to consider the motives and tropes within ballads as these may help to further relate them to specific areas, which, in turn, can give us further clues to their origins.

In the case of “The Twa Sisters” (Child 10), one of the oldest in the Child canon, the exact origin of the ballad exists somewhat ambiguously in scholarship. From the early twentieth century, scholarship sought to determine the geographical distribution of the ballad by demonstrating the existence of English, Scottish, and European traditions and thus identifying various peculiarities belonging to each tradition. Nearly a half-century later, however, the prevailing consensus of belief is that the primogenitor from which nearly 500 variants derived themselves existed “somewhere” and at “sometime” exclusively in northern Europe. Using comparative textual analysis and new translations,¹ the present study argues that “The Twa Sisters” contains strong motivic affinities with Slavic folklore.

The basic story elements of “The Twa Sisters,” as intimated within the canonic Child corpus, are as follows:²

Plot: Two sisters go down to the sea [...]. When they reach the shore, the elder sister pushes the younger in the water. The elder remains impervious to her sister’s pleas for help, and the latter drowns. A miller pulls the dead woman out of the mill damn, and builds a violin from various parts of her body. When he plays it the strings reveal that the woman was murdered by her own sister.³

Motifs: ✂ murder (of sister: *sibling murder (woman murders her sister)*); motive unclear; by drowning) / woman, wicked (committed murder) / death (through murder);
✂ help (*rescue (of person from death: of sister from drowning)*); refused by person asked for help);
✂ crime (exposed; by magic (object, marvelous (*violin*), *musical instrument*, marvelous)) / exposure (of murderess);

¹ All translations appearing in this study are mine. The responsibility for any mistranslations or misinterpretations lies with me.

² These summary and subsequent motivic chart is adapted from Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1997 and from Thompson’s *Motif Index*.

³ For the complete version of Child 10B, see Appendix I

Within western literature, it might seem clear “The Twa Sisters” has been established as part of the canonic northern European collection of ballads primarily related to the United Kingdom; however, of the twenty or so versions that are listed, Child presents texts from other languages such as English, Scottish, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Icelandic, Finnish, German, and Spanish. More interestingly are the following listings: Estonian, Lithuanian, Slovak, Polish, among others. While it would appear from Child’s discussion that “The Twa Sisters” has British roots, a few scholars argue differently. On one hand, for example, Parker in *Twa Sisters—Going Which Way?* notes the importance of various particularities belonging to Scandinavian traditions. On the other hand, In “The Twa Sisters: A Santal Folktale Variant of the Ballad,” Philipose notes the “appearance of a variant among the storytellers of the Santals, a tribal group in West Bengal, India.”⁴ In *The British Traditional Ballad in North America*, Tristram Coffin notes that “Paul Brewster has done a very complete survey of both the song and the tale in FFC,⁵ [...] he feels the song began in Norway before 1600, spread through Scandinavia, and then to Britain and the West,” but, he notes, “[...] the tale is of Slavic origin.”⁶ The present study attempts to further this discussion.

Considerations within this study of the Russian and Ukrainian renderings of “The Twa Sisters” are certainly integral to this discussion, however, the aim of this study would be amiss if it did not consider another integral part of this investigation involving the motivic element directly tied to “The Twa Sisters:” the singing bone. In *The Folktale*, Stith Thompson demonstrates the motivic precedent between the ballad and the folktale known as “The Singing Bone” (Type 780), which can be seen by the comparison of their narrative:

[i]n the prose form we have the murder of one brother by another, whereas in the ballad we are dealing with two sisters. in any case, the murdered person is either buried or left in the water where he has been drowned. Sometimes a harp is made from various parts of the body, or a flute from a bone, or some other instrument from a tree which has grown over the murdered person’s grave. The musical instrument is played in public and sings out the accusation of the murder.⁷

Beyond the previously established motivic precedent, there is historical precedent for the consideration of the “singing bone” motif in this study. In 1894 R. Nisbet Bain (1854-1909), the leading British linguist (icosalingual)⁸ of the 19th century, completed his *Cossack Fairy Tales and Folk Tales: Selected, Edited, and Translated*. In the very tradition that Child helped to establish, the attempt of his work was to try to bring into popularity with the west the old Cossack stories by translating them for the first time into the English language from their Ruthenian manuscripts. The fact that Bain indicates the manuscripts translated were in the Ruthenian language is interestingly noteworthy.⁹ By as early as 1569, with the signing of the treaty known

⁴ Lily Philipose, “The Twa Sisters: A Santal Folktale Variant of the Ballad” *Folklore* 101 (Issue 2, 1990): 169-177.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Tristram P. Coffin, *The British Traditional Ballad in North America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 280.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ An icosalingual is a speaker of twenty languages.

⁹ A few linguists, who also refer to “Ruthenian” as Chancery Slavonic, note that the language existed “somewhere between Polish and Russian.”

as the Union of Lublin,¹⁰ the Ruthenian language had gradually been replaced by the Polish language, especially with regard to literature. Further to this, by the mid-17th century, there were already needs for translators during political negotiations.¹¹ This evidence is largely conjectural, however, what has possibly been discovered is a folkloric version that very likely predates Child's earliest collected rendering from the western tradition.

Within Slavic literature, a few scholars have previously made the connection between the "singing bone" motif and "The Twa Sisters." In *Tło ludowe "Balladyny," studjum folklorystyczne,* or *Folk Backgrounds "Ballads," The Study of Folklore*, which appeared in the seventh edition of the Polish ethnographic journal *Wisła* (1894), Volodymyr Buhel, the Polish literary critic and folklorist, discussed "The Singing Bone" motif in ballads and fairy-tales he collected from various native (Slavic) and non-native (English, etc.) sources.¹² The literary critic, folklorist, and writer Ivan Franko (1856-1916) gave an overview of Buhel's *Tło ludowe "Balladyny," studjum folklorystyczne,* in *Dvi shkoly v folklorystysi*, or *Two Schools of Folkloristics*, however, in his article, he notes that Buhel "misinterpreted" the significance of the "singing bone" motif and that the story has more to do with religio-societal issues.

Oksana Karbashevska, the famed Ukrainian folklorist, literary critic, and scholar, she notes the significance of the "singing bone" motif to Ukrainian culture in the following interview:

[...] The singing bone motif is unfolded in a beautiful Ukrainian ballad "Daughter-in-law – Poplar" and the motif of the punishment for misdeeds and crimes, that are against the law and customs of the community, is inherent in the Ukrainian ballad, e.g. about a girl's elopement with soldiers (kozaks) from her family, sexual relations before the marriage and giving birth to a child, child murder, etc. In general, one of the leading functions of the Ukrainian ballad is didactic, i.e. to teach the listener (reader) the right on negative examples. In addition, the same theme may be reproduced in different genres of both folklore and literature, as well as in the arts of music, painting, theatre. The Ukrainian prose fairy-tale with poetic insertions (the song of a pipe) more fully elaborates the story and closes with the punishment of the elder daughter.¹³

This study now turns to the final part of the discussion.

¹⁰ See the Union of Lublin, 1569; for more information, see *Encyclopedia of Ukraine* at: <http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CL%5CU%5CLublinUnionof.htm>.

¹¹ See <http://www.rp.pl/artykul/488281-Kozaczyzna--Rzeczpospolita--Moskwa.html>.

¹² Volodymyr Buhel "Tło ludowe "Balladyny," studjum folklorystyczne" in *Wisła*, 1894.

¹³ Correspondence with Oksana Karbashevska on 26th of August 2016.

Ой мала матуся, мала дві дочки (A Mother had two daughters)

Ой мала матуся, мала дві дочки
Молодшу любила, а старшої — ні
А старша молодшу та й підмовила,
Взяла за рученьку до річки повела
—Куди мене, сестро, куди ти ведеш?
Куди ж, куди, сестро, зо мною ідеш?
—Підемо, сестричко, до броду по воду,
Подивимось, сестро, на чистую воду,
Котра з нас гарніша на пишную вроду.
А старша молодшу в воду кинула
Та й надійшла хвиля — понесла вода.
—Ой плавай, сестричко, в холодній воді,
Бо ти заважаєш мені, молодій.
—Ой рятуй, сестричко, за золоту косу,
Тобі, в нагороду золото приношу.
—Не хочу я брати жодну нагороду,
Бо ти нам мішаєш у нашому роду.

Once there was mother who had two daughters,
The younger loved, and the other — not.
The older took the hand of the younger,
And by her hand led her to the river.
—“Where are you, sister, taking me?”
“Where, o, where, sister, are we going?”
—“Let’s go, darling sister, to the fjord,”
“Let’s look, sister, into the clear water,”
“To see which one of us is the fairest.”
And the older sister threw the younger into the water
As the wave came — and carried the water.
—“Oh, swim, darling sister, in that cold water,”
“For your youth is a hindrance to me.”
—Oh, save me, darling sister, grab my golden braid,
“For you, as a gift, I’ll give to you the gold,”
—“I do not want any of your gifts,”
“For you are the hindrance in our family.”

Tune (in *Ukraiins’ka Narodna Tvorchist’*)¹⁴

ОЙ МАЛА МАТУСЯ, МАЛА ДВІ ДОЧКИ. Е

Помірно

Ой ма_ ла ма_ ту_ ся, ма_ ла дві доч_ ки, мо_

_ лод_ шу лю_ би_ ла, а стар_ шо_ ї — ні. мо_ ні.

Plot: Two sisters, one loved, the other not, go to a body of water. Upon reaching the body of water, the elder sister pushes the younger sister into the cold water out of jealousy. The younger sister cries out to her sister for help, but the pleas are ignored by her sister. The younger sister offers her possessions, yet the elder sister refuses those as well. The younger sister drowns.

¹⁴ O. Dey, *Ukraiins’ka Narodna Tvorchist’* (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 1987), 103.

Motifs: ✂ murder (of sister: *sibling murder (elder sister murders her younger sister)*); motive clear; by drowning) / woman, wicked (committed murder) / death (through murder);
✂ help (*rescue (of person from death: of sister from drowning)*); possessions offered (golden braid [unique to Ukrainian culture], gold); refused by person asked for help);

While sexual jealousy, sibling relationships, and murder are central elements to this ballad variant, the emblematic motif of “the singing” bone is absent here. This absence illuminates one of the difficulties in understanding the diverse renderings of this ballad: the various renderings of the story only provide fragments of the entire narrative. The absence can be seen in the eight Ukrainian variants, which, as Karbashevska notes “really do not elaborate motifs of the singing bone (as in the British ballad) and punishment of the elder sister for her crime.”¹⁵ The fact that many of the ballads are missing the singing bone element is perhaps testimony to the reason why they have been discounted by western scholars. In the interview with Karbashevksa, she notes that the reasons for such diverse renderings of the same story might “lie in the national uniqueness of the Ukrainian ballad genre, namely its style, composition, and genesis.” She continues:

In the first place, realism and humanism (humaneness) are dominant features of both the Ukrainian folk song and folk ballad. Generally, they don’t have affection for the fantastic and gothic motifs (ghosts and terror), though they’re developed in some cases (e.g., in the famous ballad about the dead lover). My impression and feeling is that the ballad of my people is softer and “sunnier”. In the second place, the composition of the Ukrainian ballad tends to be more compact and concentrated than the narration of the British ballad. Lastly, the Ukrainian ballad was born and has been existing in the community of rural people and doesn’t show the aristocratic vein or origin. I think the last fact explains the attention of the British (in contrast to Ukrainian) collective author to the wealth and high status of the family of the female characters as they’re going to look at the father’s ships; luxury and richness of the younger sister’s clothes; the play of the harp / fiddle at the court of the father - king, etc.¹⁶

While neither the Russian or Ukrainian variants of “The Twa Sisters” include the “singing bone” motif, their fairy-tale counterparts “embody this fantastic motif.”¹⁷ Many Slavic fairy-tales engage the motif that embodies the tale of “The Singing Bone,” and many scholars agree that “*Kalynova sopilka*,” or “*the guelder-rose pipe*” and “*Try Braty*,” or “*The Three Brothers*,” and (Russian translation) the Silver Saucer and the Crystal Apple (Russian), which appear in the chief collections of Rusyn folk-lore, engages this motif more fully. The Ukrainian ballad *Kalynova sopilka* is provided here in full translation:

¹⁵ Correspondence with Oksana Karbashevska.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

Був собі дід да баба. У діда дочка, і в баби дочка. От і пішли вони в гай по ягоди. Так дідова збирає да й збира, да й назбирала повну миску, а бабина візьме ягідку, то і з'їсть. От і каже дідова:

— Ходімо, сестро, додому, поділимось.

От ідуть да йдуть шляхом, а бабина говорить:

— Ляжмо, сестро, відпочиньмо.

Полягали, дідова, втомившись, заснула, а бабина взяла ніж да й устромила їй у серце, да викопала ямку, да й поховала її. А сама пішла додому да й каже:

— Дивіться, скільки я ягід назбирала. А дід і пита:

— Де ж ти мою дочку діла?

— Іде ззаду.

Коли ж ідуть чумаки да й кажуть:

— Станьмо, братця, от тут одпочинем.

Да й стали. Глянуть — над шляхом могила, а на могилі така гарна калина виросла! Вони вирізали з тієї калини сопілку, да й став один чумак грає, а сопілка говорить:

Ой помалу-малу, чумаченьку, грай,

Да не врази мого ти серденька вкрай!

Мене сестриця з світу згубила —

Ніж у серденько да й устромила.

А другі кажуть:

— Щось воно, братця, значить, що калинова сопілка так промовляє.

От прийшли вони в село да й натрапили якраз на того діда:

— Пусти нас, діду, переночувать, ми тобі скажемо пригоду.

Він їх і пустив. Тільки вони увійшли у хату, зараз один сів на лаві, а другий став

There once was a grandfather and a grandmother who both had a daughter of their own. One day the daughters went to the forest to pick and gather berries. The daughter of the grand-father collected berries until her bowl was full, and the daughter of the grand-mother picked the berries and ate them. The daughter of the grand-father said:

—Let's go home, Sister, and share.

As the sisters went on their way, the daughter of the grand-mother said:

—Let's lie sister and rest.

So they lied down and the daughter of the grand-father drifted to sleep, but the daughter of the grand-mother took a knife and stabbed her sister through the heart, dug a hole, and there buried her. She went home and said:

—Look how many berries I collected. But the grand-father remained silent.

—What has happened to my daughter? Said the grand-father.

—She fell behind.

Back in the forest came tradesmen (chumaky) who said:

—Let's stay here, brothers, and rest. And so they stayed. Unbeknownst to them near their way was a grave and from the grave grew a beautiful guelder-rose tree. From a portion of the tree they fashioned a flute and one tradesman began to play upon it when immediately it spoke:

—Play slowly, tradesman, play!

—But my heart please do not break!

—Me my sister from this world withdrew

—By knife in mine heart she did slew.

The other tradesmen spoke:

—What does it mean, Brothers, that the guelder-rose pipe has come to speak?

біля його да й каже:
— А ну, брате, вийми сопілку да заграй!
Той вийняв. Сопілка і говорить: Ой помалу
малу, чумаченьку, грай,
Да не врази мого ти серденька вкрай!
Мене сестриця з світу згубила —
Ніж у серденько да й устромила.
Тоді дід каже:
— Що воно за сопілка, що вона так
гарно грає, що аж мені плакати хочеться! А
ке, я заграю!
Він йому й дав. А та сопілка говорить:
Ой помалу-малу, мій таточку, грай,
Да не врази мого ти серденька вкрай!
Мене сестриця з світу згубила —
Ніж у серденько да й устромила.
А баба, сидя на печі:
— А ке, лиш сюди, старий, і я заграю!
Він їй подав, вона стала грать,—
сопілка й говорить:
Ой помалу-малу, матусенько, грай,
Да не врази мого ти серденька вкрай!
Мене сестриця з світу згубила —
Ніж у серденько да й устромила.
А бабина дочка сиділа на печі у самому
куточку. І злякалась, що дізнаються. А дід і
каже:
— А подай їй, щоб заграла!
От вона взяла, аж сопілка й їй одказує:
Ой помалу-малу, душогубко, грай,
Да не врази мого ти серденька вкрай!
Ти ж мене, сестро, з світу згубила —
Ніж у серденько да й устромила!
Тоді-то вже всі дізналися, що воно є. По
дідовій дочці обід поставили, а бабину
прив'язали до кінського хвоста да й
рознесли по полю.

The tradesmen made way for the village where
they happened to come upon the house of the
grand-father:

—Let us in, Grand-father, where we might
stay the night and, in return, we will tell you
our story.

The grand-father allowed them in and, as soon
as they entered the house, one of the
tradesmen set on the bench as the other stood
next to him and said:

—Brother, take out the flute and play!

He took the flute and as he played it
immediately it began to speak:

—Play slowly, tradesman, play!

—But my heart please do not break!

—Me my sister from this world withdrew

—By knife in mine heart she did slew.

The grandmother who sat by the furnace spoke:

—Give me the flute, old man, and I will
play!

He gave her the flute and as she played it spoke:

—Play slowly, my lovely mother, play!

—But my heart please do not break!

—Me my sister from this world withdrew

—By knife in mine heart she did slew.

The grand-mother's daughter who sat near the
furnace in the corner was scared that her
actions would be discovered. The grand-father
spoke:

—Bring the flute to my wife's daughter to
play.

Once in her hand the flute began to speak:

—Play slowly, my murderer, play!

—But my heart please do not break!

—Me from this world you withdrew

—By knife in mine heart you did slew.

The sister's actions were discovered. A dinner
was prepared in memory of the grand-father's
daughter and the grand-mother's daughter
was dragged by horse.

The ballad “Twa Sisters” is clearly a story with ancient origins. This is attested to by the fact that there are many different versions, collection points, and concordances across cultures, languages, and related folkloric traditions. Following scholarly leads from scholars including Child and Coffin, this study has investigated the possibility of Slavic roots for the “Twa Sisters” ballad—first considering the versions presented in Child’s collection and then exploring new versions that prior to this study had not been translated into English. Given that these latter versions are incomplete and almost entirely avoid or negate the magical elements—primarily the singing bone—that form the motivic backbone of the tale, they have been largely ignored by scholars as corrupt variants. Looking solely within the ballad tradition, this is a valid conclusion, however, when one considers the larger folkloric matrix present within *Rus* culture, comprising both Russian and Ukrainian traditions, the incomplete quality of these ballad texts interleaves with the well-known outlines of the popular fairy tale as part of the oral tradition of this ballad. *Russe* ballad audiences of the 19th century would very likely have known what came next and that supernatural revenge would be voiced because it is clearly stated in the fairy tale as a prominent part of the story. The fact that the motive of the singing bone is heavily represented in *Rus* folklore, not solely in the “Twa Sisters,” complicates the discussion of the possible origins for this ballad, echoing Coffin’s somewhat cavalier statement. But how does the strong possibility of a Slavic origin change the perception of a well-known ballad, now firmly entrenched within Anglo-American traditions? It does not, nor should it, as these traditions have developed independently. Such knowledge does, however, allow for the possibility of new interpretations of this ballad complex that may further deepen the understanding of ballad migration and dissemination in the Early Modern period across the greater Eur-Asian regions.