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Article

"Teremok": Ethnocultural interpretation of a folk tale with a psychological dominant and its application in profiling

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Abstract: The article is dedicated to the study of the psychological and cultural aspects of the perception of folk tales, using the Russian version of the common Slavic plot about the formation of temporary communities—the tale "Teremok"—as an example. The issues surrounding the folk tale and its literary adaptations are examined through the lens of deconstructing ideological influences, especially those related to the tension between collectivism and individuality, as well as the formation and destruction of personal boundaries, self-realization, and the socio-psychological mechanisms that support them. To this end, we developed an integrative theoretical model that draws on concepts from analytical psychology, transgenerational trauma theory, object relations theory, and Bowen's family systems theory. Special attention is given to the metaphorization of fairy-tale images and plot structures with the aim of using them for readers to work through childhood traumas and understand their influence on adult life. In particular, the article proposes an author's interpretation of the role of parental and social dogmas—often framed as "traditional values"—and the social pressure for their mandatory implementation in the life of every citizen, which leads to the formation and entrenchment of limiting, and consequently possibly less effective behavioral models in changing life (including cultural) contexts. The article also discusses examples from the practice of individual and group profiling, illustrating the behavioral strategies of "mice"—daughters growing up in socially conforming "teremoks" and then seeking self-actualization in their professional activities and personal lives. The conclusion emphasizes the importance of working through a non-societal reading of original folk tales to determine one's individual values and behavioral paradigms, as well as working with personal boundaries and self-knowledge as necessary conditions for effective self-actualization and the formation of healthy, productive relationships in society.

Keywords: psychology of fairy tales; folk tale; text analysis and interpretation; cultural studies; ethnopsychology; social psychology; profiling

1. Introduction

The study of folk tales attracts specialists not only from literature, but also from psychology, social sciences, management, and more. Fairy tales are an optimal source of information about the development of the national worldview, the formation of social constructs, archetypes, and their influence on personal development and team management. For example, Afanasyev, in his work "Fairy Tale and Myth," interprets the meanings and functions of fairy tales [1], while Propp in his work "Morphology of the Folk Tale" demonstrates the existence of interrelated functions of characters [2]. Currently, the focus of researchers is shifting, viewing fairy tales as tools for

working with children and adolescents [3–5], as well as with adults—especially within the field of psychology, including fairy tale psychotherapy [6,7].

1.1. Problem statement

In our opinion, fairy tales may also be interesting from the perspective of profiling—creating a characterological profile of a client based on their favorite or most frequently presented tales and characters by their parents, and uncovering their trauma and its history based on family dynamics and parent-child relationships within a particular culture. While this approach is close to fairy tale therapy, it poses somewhat different tasks—helping individuals self-profile based on their pain and its probable causes even before seeking help from a psychologist, which is often stigmatizing in Russian-speaking communities. Considering folklore from this perspective, the choice of a particular version of a folktale becomes especially significant. The mental space it creates "can be described through units of language understood as means of mental representation. Ethnocultural specificity is mentalized, and its identification is connected with mental representations of the world—forming a worldview" [8].

Fairy tales are an essential component of any linguistic and cultural community. On one hand, they serve as a means of categorizing the world, and on the other, as a tool for transmitting fundamental (system-forming and, therefore, protected by a given system, such as a state or already established family system) values and norms from generation to generation. However, this intergenerational transmission can encompass not only constructive elements but also dysfunctional patterns, including the conveyance of traumatic experiences. In such cases, a "domino effect" emerges, wherein unresolved psychological conflicts and traumas of parents are passed down to children through recurring life scenarios embedded in cultural narratives—among them, distorted versions of fairy tales that have lost their original regulatory and therapeutic functions. These altered narratives reinforce traumatic experience, affecting the psychosocial well-being of subsequent generations [9].

1.2. Research gap

Contemporary studies on fairy tale therapy and narrative practices reveal substantial breadth, encompassing their historical evolution, methodological foundations, and diverse conceptual frameworks, as evidenced by recent review articles and systematic analyses [10–13]. Active developments are underway in both the creation of therapeutic tales [14] and the exploration of cultural prototypes [15] and methodological challenges of interpretation [16]. Practice-oriented studies increasingly interrogate the connection between folklore and trauma, particularly in its intergenerational dimensions, as well as the role of fairy tales as narrative tools for working through such experiences, including in literature for young readers [17]. Yet despite this diversity of approaches, there remains a notable lack of a specific and systematic methodological toolkit for analyzing traditional folklore texts through an integrated lens—one that brings together object relations theory, transgenerational frameworks, systems thinking, and narrative approaches to decode how symbolic structures articulate boundary dynamics and inherited trauma patterns. While existing

integrative [11] or analytical [15–18] contributions pursue valuable but distinct aims—such as artistic creation or broad therapeutic applications—they do not, to our knowledge, propose a focused approach to interpreting fairy tales through the psychological phenomena at the heart of this inquiry.

A second key gap concerns the conceptualization and justification of this multi-layered analytical method as a potential tool for characterological profiling. While traditional fairy tale therapy focuses on diagnosis, correction, and development [10,14], and other works employ tales to explore healing narratives [17], we propose to extend this field by positioning profiling as a process that facilitates individuals' self-understanding of their behavioral paradigms and helps them identify likely traumatic scenarios. This application is conceived as a self-help or pre-therapeutic reflection tool, particularly relevant in cultural contexts where formal psychological support may be stigmatized or viewed with suspicion.

1.3. Study aim and focus

Fairy tales represent a unique linguistic and cognitive code that reflects the mentality of an ethnolinguistic cultural group and allows for an assessment of the peculiarities of the consciousness of its members [19]. Each variant, despite the similarity of the plot, has its own "scenarios" that are embedded in the listener's or reader's subconscious as specific behavior models, shaping their worldview [20]. In this context, studying the original (primary or earliest available) version of a fairy tale becomes especially important. As an example, we will analyze one of the most famous folk tales—"Teremok" (both in literary adaptation and in its original form).

The aim of this study is to analyze the diagnostic potential of the folk tale Teremok in identifying individual and intergenerational patterns related to the formation and violation of personal boundaries.

We argue that engaging with the message of the original "Teremok"—its portrayal of the destructive consequences of blurred personal boundaries—is critical for cultivating self-awareness and disrupting cycles of inherited psychological conflicts. This becomes particularly important in cultural contexts where individual autonomy is undervalued and seeking psychological help remains stigmatized.

Based on this fairy tale, we formulated the following research questions:

1) How do the archetypal images and narrative structure of the original Russian folk tale "Teremok" reflect psychological mechanisms related to boundary violations and transgenerational trauma, and how might this understanding be applied in characterological profiling?
2) What specific psychological mechanisms of transgenerational trauma transmission emerge through the symbolic structure and character dynamics of "Teremok"?
3) How have ideological adaptations—particularly during the Soviet era—altered the tale's original psychological message regarding individualism, collectivism, and the integrity of personal boundaries?

1.4. Hypothesis

Our working hypothesis is that identification with specific characters in "Teremok"—especially the mouse—correlates with distinct patterns of boundary diffusion rooted in early relational experiences and potentially reflective of transgenerational trauma scripts. We also propose that ideologically driven adaptations of the tale generate alternate, yet equally problematic, psychological models—masked by the promotion of socially accepted values.

2. Methods

2.1. Research approach

In this study, we apply an integrative theoretical framework to analyze the folk tale "Teremok". Our model brings together concepts from analytical psychology, object relations theory, transgenerational theory, as well as systemic and narrative approaches.

2.2. Material

Our primary focus is the version of "Teremok" included in Afanasyev's ("Narodnye russkie skazki" (Russian Folk Tales)), which we view as the one most closely connected to the archaic layers of the oral tradition [21]. In our understanding, this makes it particularly valuable for exploring the deeper symbolic content embedded in the tale. To better trace the meanings most relevant to the aims of this study—and to assess how cultural context shapes interpretation—we systematically compare the Afanasyev version with several key literary adaptations. Of these, Bulatov's version is especially significant, as it represents a characteristic Soviet reinterpretation, centered around collectivist ideals and optimistic messaging [22].

2.3. Theoretical foundations

2.3.1. Key concepts

Personal boundaries: Psychological and emotional limits that separate one's individual "self" from others. These encompass physical space (situational context), emotions, thoughts, values, and other internal attributes (propositional context). Healthy boundaries are flexible yet stable, enabling closeness without loss of identity. Boundary violations—often rooted in early relational experiences [23,24]—may lead to difficulties in self-definition, autonomy, and interpersonal functioning [25,26].

In Teremok, this is illustrated by the characters' inability to regulate access to their "home", along with a tendency toward fusion based on a shared inner deficiency.

Transgenerational transmission of trauma: An unconscious process through which the psychological impact of traumatic experiences (loss, violence, family secrets) is passed down not through direct experience but via mechanisms of "invisible loyalty" [27], family narratives, attachment models, "anniversary syndromes," and the notions of the "crypt" (a psychic vault of unspoken trauma) and the "phantom" (the influence of another's unconscious) [28,29]. Folk tales can carry such unresolved familial or collective trauma.

The collective demise in Teremok may symbolize the destructive consequences of unacknowledged and inherited vulnerabilities.

Symbolic representation: The use of concrete images, characters, and actions in a narrative (in this case, a fairy tale) to express deeper, often unconscious psychological realities—archetypal patterns, inner conflicts, and developmental stages [30].

Characterological profiling (in this study): A process of identifying enduring personality traits, interaction styles, coping strategies, and possible vulnerabilities (such as personal boundary issues, trauma responses, and attachment patterns), based on an individual's identification with childhood fairy tale characters or plots, or through their interpretation of such narratives.

2.3.2. Analytical psychology (Jung, von Franz)

From the perspective of analytical psychology, fairy tales are spontaneous expressions of the collective unconscious and its universal structures—archetypes [30]. Characters in "Teremok" can be seen as personifications of archetypal energies or psychological complexes:

- The Mouse may symbolize the Anima archetype (the inner feminine, the capacity for connection and holding space), though in this narrative her function appears distorted or diminished, perhaps reflecting early relational deficits highlighted by object relations theory (see 2.3).
- Other animals may represent stages in the filling of the psychic space with affective content emerging from the unconscious.
- The Bear might stand for the Shadow archetype—repressed, unintegrated, and potentially destructive aspects of the psyche, both individual and collective. He may also symbolize an unintegrated Animus—destructive, overwhelming, and excessively invasive, logic without empathy and will indifferent to context—or a raw instinctual rush. This might reflect the multifaceted nature of unacknowledged destructive forces, both internal (Shadow) and potentially relational or inherited (linking to transgenerational themes of unresolved aggression or intrusion, see 2.4). The collapse of the teremok initiated by the Bear thus points not just to individual psychic imbalance but potentially to the breakdown point where individual fragility meets overwhelming external or inherited pressure.
- The self is represented as a striving for wholeness and integration, which collapses in the narrative, pointing to an interrupted process of individuation.
- The teremok itself—especially in archaic versions where it appears as a skull or animal remains—functions as a powerful symbol of transformation, death and rebirth, a psychic space (potentially maternal or feminine), and a container for unconscious or unintegrated content.

2.3.3. Extended object relations theory (Winnicott, Kohut)

Despite methodological differences between British object relations theory (Winnicott) and American self psychology (Kohut), both schools emphasize the formative role of early relationships in the development of the self. This approach highlights the impact of early interactions with primary attachment figures (objects)

on the construction of internal psychic structures and the capacity for healthy relationships. Key concepts include:

- Holding environment: A caregiving atmosphere of safety and acceptance (usually provided by the mother) necessary for the development of basic trust and self-integration [23].
- Selfobject needs: Needs for mirroring (validation of feelings and achievements) and idealization (relying on a powerful figure), which help build a stable sense of self and ambition [24].
- Formation of boundaries: A gradual process of separation from the caregiver, through which the infant comes to differentiate the self from the non-self and develops internal regulation capacities.

When early caregiving is inadequate—through intrusion, neglect, lack of mirroring, or role reversal—the result may be a False Self: a defensive facade of adaptation that conceals inner emptiness, a fragile identity, and an inability to assert one's needs and boundaries.

The characters in "Teremok", especially the Mouse with her excessive compliance and inability to protect the found space, embody the consequences of such early deficits. Their pull toward fusion in a collective existence reflects attempts to compensate for inner emptiness and the lack of reliable internal structure. In this context, the teremok symbolizes an unstable external support or a "False Self" structure—offering the illusion of safety while ultimately inhibiting real development and integration.

2.3.4. Transgenerational theory (Schutzenberger, Abraham and Torok)

This approach explores how unresolved traumas, family secrets, and unconscious behavioral patterns are passed down across generations through mechanisms such as "invisible loyalties", "anniversary syndromes", as well as through the "crypt" and the "phantom" [28,29]. One of the most common transmitted patterns is the violation of personal boundaries.

In Teremok, the storyline may serve as a metaphor for the consequences of inherited vulnerabilities:

- Inability to establish healthy boundaries may result from ancestral trauma (loss, displacement, repression) that was never integrated.
- Dependence on what is found, not built: The animals' occupation of a fragile and random refuge symbolizes reliance on inherited but maladaptive survival strategies, along with difficulties in psychological separation.
- Compulsive repetition: The tale's sequence—each new, larger animal settling in, culminating in collapse—may reflect the unconscious re-enactment of destructive family scripts.
- The destruction of the teremok may symbolize a recurring destructive pattern, possibly transmitted through the maternal line (especially if we view the Mouse as the initiator of the cycle).

2.3.5. Systemic and narrative approaches (Bowen, White and Epston)

Bowen's family systems theory views the individual as part of an interconnected emotional system (such as a family or group), where the behavior of one member affects all others [31]. A key concept is "differentiation of self"—the ability to

maintain one's identity and autonomy while remaining emotionally connected to others. Low differentiation leads to emotional fusion, anxiety, and difficulty maintaining boundaries under pressure.

The Teremok community can be understood as a dysfunctional system characterized by:

- Low levels of self-differentiation among its members.
- High emotional fusion based on shared vulnerability rather than individual resources.
- Absence of effective leadership or regulatory norms.
- Inability to withstand external pressure (the Bear as a destabilizing force).

Narrative therapy [32] investigates how dominant cultural or family narratives shape identity and problems. "Teremok", as a cultural narrative, holds significant interpretive power. Examining its various versions reveals how cultural ideologies—such as Soviet-era collectivism—can reinterpret the plot, normalizing or even glorifying problematic patterns (e.g., unconditional hospitality) while ignoring the risks of boundary violations and collapse. Analysis allows us to deconstruct such limiting narratives.

2.3.6. An integrative model for analyzing "Teremok"

The integrative model we propose combines the aforementioned perspectives for a multidimensional interpretation of the fairy tale. This model suggests that:

- Universal context: Archetypal imagery and symbols in the tale (analytical psychology) serve as a universal language for expressing deep psychological processes.
- Individual context: These processes—especially those related to the formation of self and boundaries—are rooted in early object relations (object relations theory).
- Family context: Deficits and trauma patterns from early childhood or family history are transmitted across generations (transgenerational theory).
- Cultural context: Individual and family functioning is shaped by systemic interactions and cultural/family narratives (systemic and narrative approaches).

Crucially, this model emphasizes the dynamic interplay between these levels. The analysis moves from universal archetypes (e.g., Mouse as Anima, Bear as Shadow) represented in the symbolic space of the fairy tale ("Teremok" as skull/psyche), to their connection with individual development (boundary formation via early relations), to their embedding in family history (transgenerational transmission of trauma/vulnerability), and finally to how these layers are refracted through systemic dynamics and cultural narratives. The outcome of this analysis is the potential use of the fairy tale in characterological profiling, aimed at identifying patterns related to boundaries, trauma, and identity.

Thus, this integrative framework allows us to approach "Teremok" not merely as a children's story, but as a complex psychological text. It reflects the interplay of universal archetypal themes, individual developmental trajectories, family inheritance, and sociocultural contexts. This approach opens the door to using folk tales diagnostically and therapeutically—for addressing boundary issues, trauma consequences, and dysfunctional family patterns.

2.4. Analytical procedures

2.4.1. Hermeneutic analysis

At the heart of our method is a hermeneutic immersion (Gadamer) into the symbolic language of the fairy tale. Symbols are not interpreted in isolation but read in light of the integrative theoretical model outlined earlier (see 2.3), which allows us to trace their meaning across multiple levels—from the archetypal (Jung) to the object-relational (Winnicott, Kohut) and transgenerational (Schutzenberger, Abraham & Torok). In this sense, the tale becomes a field of layered psychological resonance, where each motif invites multilevel interpretation grounded in lived and inherited human experience.

2.4.2. Deconstructing ideological overlays

A critical reading guided by principles of deconstruction [33] is applied primarily to adapted versions of the tale (e.g., Bulatov's). Our goal here is to examine how narrative modifications—such as the insertion of a collective rebuilding ending—are used to promote certain sociocultural values (e.g., collectivist ideals, optimism through labor), while potentially masking or distorting what we consider to be the tale's core psychological messages about the destructiveness of boundary violations and the risks of compensatory fusion. This layer of analysis seeks to highlight the ideological tensions between inherited symbolic structures and historically situated reinterpretations.

2.4.3. Comparative analysis

To crystallize the key psychological differences between versions, we conduct a systematic comparison between the Afanasyev version and Bulatov's adaptation along core dimensions: the origin and symbolic function of the teremok, character motivation, the roles of the Mouse and the Bear, the narrative resolution, and the overarching thematic message [21,22]. This comparison helps to clarify how structural and ideological changes reshape the symbolic landscape—and thus the psychological reading—of the tale.

3. Results

3.1. Interpretation of the plot and structure in the Afanasyev version

The comments on the academic edition state that there are 25 Russian, 10 Ukrainian, and 3 Belarusian variants of the tale. Overall, the plot is localized among these peoples (it is rarely found in neighboring cultures). The Ukrainian and Belarusian versions of "Teremok" have already been literarily adapted, and there is no information about their original variants. The Ukrainian version is called "Rukavichka" (The Little Mitten), while the Belarusian version is "Mukha-Pevukha" (Fly the Songstress). Many authors have adapted the tale "Teremok," but the most well-known adaptation is by the Russian writer and folklorist Sergei Mikhalkov, which became popular among children and is frequently used in children's literature. However, this adaptation is not the original. The tale "The Mouse's Terem," from Afanasyev's collection "Narodnye russkie skazki" (Russian Folk Tales), is considered the closest to the original version [21]. In the unprocessed original version, there is a

tragic but logical ending, allowing listeners to form an effective worldview—it does not hint at the harmonious collective work of the accidentally surviving inhabitants of the terem (and the terem (a tower-shaped house, teremok is a small house of this sort) itself is not just ordinary—it is the remains of an animal, a skeleton[1]). This is because they are unable to build anything, united only by a common trauma as consumers of chance and miracles. Therefore, when children hear rewritten folk tales "so that they become kinder and build a new reality," they experience a disruption of causal relationships and a deformation of their worldview, leading to a decrease in the functionality of perception and action. They begin to engage in random, illogical actions, further destabilizing the reality around them.

So what is this fairy tale about? It tells the story of individual characters who are unable to build their own home and attempt to organize a communal life in a shelter—the "teremok"[2]—that they have accidentally found (originally identified with a mouse). The characters, as the plot progresses, are introduced to the action according to the increase in their physical size—from a mouse to a wolf—metaphorically signaling the growth of some shared characteristic that defines their behavior. The story culminates in the arrival of a bear, who cannot fit into the "teremok" due to being disproportionate (lacking the shared quality or possessing it in a different format), which serves as a logical conclusion to the narrative thread. Notably, the bear, an eternal loner, holds the key to the entire story. The tale illustrates that attempts to resolve the problem of individual loneliness and internal inadequacy through the creation of a "commune"—essentially socializing the problem—are ineffective.

The second key in a profiling reading of the fairy tale is the mouse, who is hospitable to the point of self-destruction. Despite the bear's global, eternal loneliness—which exceeds the capabilities of the "teremok" (being fundamentally different in nature and thus dangerous to the diverse assembly already living there)—the mouse demonstrates "kindness" and is ready to let in another tenant into the dwelling she has found. However, her refusal is merely based on the physical impossibility of accommodating the bear, rather than an awareness of the danger posed by clustering beings who share similar pain in one space. Consequently, the bear resolves his issue (fulfilling his need as a true loner, an egocentric) by simply sitting on the house, attracted by its appearance of comfort (where real comfort is impossible, only mimetic—due to the initial traumas brought into the teremok by new inhabitants, which will be discussed further below)—thereby destroying it and eliminating all the freeloaders. This is a logical conclusion for them: they could not build their own dwelling (due to their existing traumas) and instead took over someone else's space, seizing the opportunity offered by the mouse for their own benefit.

3.2. Characters and their behavior patterns

What kind of character is the mouse?—Answering this question will lead us to an understanding of the essence of the trauma that unites the heroes, its roots, and consequences. The mouse in Russian folk tales often serves as a guide of fate (for example, in the tale "Kurochka Ryaba" (The Little Hen Ryaba)). The fear of these subterranean inhabitants, who appear from nowhere and disappear into the unknown, bringing devastation and hunger with their raids on fields and granaries, has been inherent in agricultural nations since ancient times[3]. It was believed that they spread

terrible diseases and could be the cause of famine, as they destroy crops. In reality, it is rare for a mouse to surface alone. More often, we encounter mouse families and even colonies.

The mouse-noryshka (Mouse the Burrower) in the tale is a mouse from a burrow, meaning a mouse from the underground world. Through all its manifestations, it represents a direct connection with death, otherness, and inevitable, insurmountable fate. Therefore, the fact that the mouse saw its little house (both a fortress and a prison for a woman, its home) in the remains (bones, remains of a once-living entity) is interpreted within our theoretical framework as symbolically significant and within the bounds of psychological norm. It took up residence in a skull, which has a dual meaning: on one hand, it may symbolize magical transformation in fairy tales, and on the other, it serves as a connecting link to the world of the dead, reflecting themes of growing up and the end of life.

The image of the mouse-noryshka (Mouse the Burrower), striving to create and preserve its burrow, is quite natural. It represents a female figure searching for shelter and caring for it, creating comfort. Ideally, a partner should then appear beside her, with whom they can form a family and have children, continuing the lineage—which corresponds to the natural laws of existence.

Let's pay attention to how the characters in the tale are identified and how these identifications affect the perception of each character:

1) "Myshka-noryshka" (Mouse the Burrower).
2) "Lyagushka-kvakushka" (Frog the Croaker).
3) "Na gore uvertysh" (Hare the Dodger-on-the-Hill).
4) "Vezde poskokish" (Fox the Hopper-Everywhere).
5) "Iz kustov hvatysh" (Wolf the Snatcher-from-the-Bushes).
6) "Ya vas davish" (Bear the Crusher-of-All).

Each of the characters defines themselves through their actions, without naming themselves directly, with the exception of the mouse and the frog. The female characters—the frog and the mouse—are presented straightforwardly, while the male ones are described through their strength and size. However, even with the increase in the characters' sizes, due to their specific self-identifications in the tale, there is no expected growth in the threat level, although there is a growth in tasks for the mouse (which she does not consciously recognize as her tasks, as she is the discoverer of the remains as a "terem"—the tasks of managing the household and responsibilities for the well-being of new inhabitants taken into the house), as is the case with the hero in the tale of "Kolobok" (The Little Round Bun).

As a result, five characters end up in the "terem", and the bear becomes the sixth—since he fits into the same paradigm as the other guests ("I'll crush you"). From the perspective of numerical symbolism, the number five represents diversity, change, and adaptation [34]. It typically symbolizes the striving for absolute freedom and the rejection of limitations. The number five is associated with a favorable destiny and is considered a lucky number in Russian fairy tales, embodying a constant search for self-improvement, even while implying the possibility of violating the established order. Conceptually, a five-fingered hand or fist indicates unity and the ability to hold, but the appearance of the sixth character disrupts a perhaps strange (trauma-based) but nonetheless coherent structure [35]. Thus, the bear, as the sixth character, disturbs the

illusory harmony, revealing its inadequacy[4]. What led to his appearance? If the mouse had initially cared for her personal space and had not allowed passersby into it, the bear would not have come. In this context, the bear's manifestation becomes a logical consequence, showing that the mouse was unprepared for new challenges and could not adequately measure her abilities against them. The reason lies in the mouse's (as well as the other characters') lack of awareness of the boundaries of her personal space, indicating a fundamental problem with personal boundaries from the outset. Thus, the theme of personal space arises.

3.3. Symbolic analysis of the "Teremok" image

Interestingly, the terem initially represented a space exclusively for women, providing security for them [36]. A man could not become a guest in the terem without a woman's consent; in this space, his power was limited. In the context of the fairy tale, the terem can be seen as a skeletal structure, which can be interpreted as a skull, for example (since it is found in the field), or that of a horse or cow. The horse symbolizes the connection between the worlds of the living, the dead, and the gods, which is manifested in the image of "Sivka-Burka" (Sivka Burka)[5] a tricolored figure that heralds significant events. The cow, as we learn from the tale of "Kroshka-Khavroshka" (Kroshka-Khavroshka) has a transformative and, in a sense, maternal function.

The second semantic component of the word "terem" also points to the concept of a prison. This is not only due to phonetic similarity but also etymological connections [37]. Thus, the terem serves a dual function: on one hand, it provides a protective space for women, granting them strength; on the other hand, its walls conceal the outside world from them, and them from the outside world.

This enclosed space becomes challenging to overcome: initially acting as a zone of protection, it later becomes a zone of habit, and ultimately a zone that limits development, acting as a transformative yet damaging comfort, leading to stagnation.

4. Discussion

4.1. The core psychological drama of "Teremok"

The mouse's discovery of the teremok represents her (personal) miracle[6] and her feminine space. Why does she allow guests in, including male beings who do not belong to her kin, such as the hare and the wolf, and is even willing to welcome the bear? Perhaps, unconsciously, she does not want to be alone in this fort-like terem-prison, or consciously—it implies she does not wish to live and die in solitude. In both cases, it concerns a seemingly voluntary opening of her personal space to the outside. However, upon reading the fairy tale carefully, we understand that the mouse essentially has not formed a complete "self". That is, she lacks an understanding of boundaries, properties, and possibilities of her personal space. Not being aware of the boundaries of her "self" and her capabilities, the mouse struggles with growing challenges—and is ready to accept even the challenge of the bear, which far exceeds her abilities and her terem. This recurring pattern of over-extension and inability to realistically assess one's limits may reflect not only a personal deficit in boundary-

setting (object relations), but also point toward a deeper transgenerational dynamic—specifically, what some theorists call an invisible loyalty [27]. In this light, the very fragility of the teremok—the fact that it is not built, but found, and not on solid ground, but upon "remains"—may symbolically signify a psychic crypt [28,29]: a concealed inner space that houses unspoken, unmourned ancestral trauma. The animals' compulsion to enter and remain in this unstable space, despite obvious risks, can be read not as innocent hospitality, but as the unconscious response to a collective phantom [28,29]—a transgenerational imprint that compels repetition rather than transformation.

They do not build, they inhabit. They do not test the foundation, they accept it as given. And in doing so, they follow not a rational plan, but a psychic script—one shaped by what came before, rather than what they truly need.

4.2. Interpretation through the transgenerational lens

Transgenerational trauma is passed down to children by parents. For people with disrupted personal space, causal relationships (these are replaced by invalid ones in the new conditions of life and incomplete parental pseudo-cases of fears[7]) do not work effectively, and consequently, feelings of self-worth and self-preservation are compromised. Here, the theme of self-sacrifice arises in an unhealthy psychological context of family and a traumatized society[8].

Can we say that the problem with personal space exists only for the mouse? Other animals also do not realize their true situation, not understanding that the discovered and used as a "teremok" remains—not their chance, not their miracle, and not their home. Therefore, the hypothesis arises that their personal space is also violated. Where self-awareness should manifest as a member of a specific society and as an individual distinct from others of its kind—with its own needs and individual ways of fulfilling them—its absence leads to behavior where they act as consumers, using the space discovered (and recognized, transformed into a "teremok" by the mouse). Ultimately, this overloads the "teremok", leading to its destruction and their demise. Thus, we can conclude that the more you open your space, allowing other people in and letting them manage its components (personal time, personal finances, personal belongings, etc.) for their purposes, the more you lose your individuality, condemning yourself as a person to mental and then physical demise.

The mouse-noryshka (Mouse the Burrower) settles in the natural for her life and existence "teremok"—a portal to the world of the dead—which seems quite logical. However, the story then unfolds as an anti-example, showing that one should not be "too nice" and share with others a chance that is yours alone. And that by "helping" (actually hindering such "pseudo-help" in developing autonomy, awareness, and responsibility in those around you), the "helper" gives away part of their life force and ultimately perishes with them, becoming the cause of both their tragic end and their own.

4.3. Deconstructing ideological adaptations

Children are presented with this story as a model of "proper" behavior and hospitality. However, this particular tale never included the message "in a tight space,

but without offense" (meaning no one is left out of the community). This approach arose later, in the context of the collectivist characteristics of Soviet society. Those responsible for upbringing during that period rewrote the folktale with the aim of instilling in the consciousness of the younger generation ideals corresponding to the political ideology and the party's program for the socialization not only of private property but also for the erasure of personal boundaries[9].

The reasons for the emergence of such forms of solitude, which are unable to effectively integrate into a collective while preserving their identity and autonomy, are linked to negative external influences, including rigid parental roles and strategies (relationships where parents perceive children as an extension of their own self, a means of self-realization in new conditions) and ineffective, depersonalizing upbringing practices (shifting parental responsibilities onto the child). For example, when a mother turns her eldest daughter into a nanny for younger siblings (as in "Cinderella"), or when a mother who fails to realize her own womanhood prepares her daughter to be her eternal companion, depriving her of the chance to leave the maternal home and start her own family (as seen in "Thumbelina" and "Little Red Riding Hood"; similarly for the father and sisters in "The Scarlet Flower").

4.4. Socio-cultural implications and contemporary resonances

People whose personal boundaries were violated in childhood or adolescence are unable to form healthy interpersonal relationships as adults. A lack of understanding of emotional and other communication boundaries, along with the development of aggressive (essentially defensive) strategies or expectations for tactical and, even more so, strategic plans from outside (absolute submission to the surrounding community, incapacity for autonomy) leads such individuals to become trapped in their own world of limitations and prohibitions. This vulnerability compels them, out of fear, to seek out like-minded individuals and create the illusion of communities.

The characters in this story indeed reflect various strategies for overcoming fear. Each of them chooses their own path to deal with their inner turmoil. The mouse escapes to an underground world, while the frog hides underwater, and the hare takes refuge in the bushes. The fox and the wolf, in contrast to the others, employ cunning or aggression, respectively, implementing adaptive behavioral strategies developed in childhood based on observing adult behavior.

Such a collective "we", formed from a community of deficits, is not sustainable. This dynamic illustrates a convergence of theoretical perspectives: the systemic principle of low differentiation leading to fusion [31], fueled by individual object-relations deficits (inner emptiness, potential False Self dynamics [23,24]), and potentially perpetuated by transgenerational scripts of communal coping with shared vulnerability [28,29], all playing out within the archetypal symbolism of the fragile container collapsing under pressure [30,38]. It lacks any form of leadership (both emotional and substantive, as well as managerial leadership are impossible due to the shared trauma—an individual with the most pronounced trauma cannot become an effective leader, and an untraumatized leader from outside will be excluded from this community) and constructive interaction (the unconstructive reaction to fear manifests as fleeing from fear into the collective unconscious). Since fear, which becomes the

primary driving force of such a group, stops being a cautionary signal and instead becomes a unifying reason (shared trauma) and a cause of stagnation.

The mouse is not a leader, nor does it unite everyone (the characters are bonded by trauma and fear); rather, due to the specifics of its trauma (the destruction of personal space in childhood or adolescence), it is a receptive entity for those who share a similar type of trauma. This connection does not stem from an awareness of their trauma and a collective desire to overcome it, but rather from the need to avoid triggers when encountering "living" people in the external world who do not share this trauma, who have a strong subjective position and critical thinking. However, the prevalent notion, especially in the Russian-speaking space, that the unification of the weak represents strength is fundamentally erroneous. By coming together, the characters actually intensify their trauma, exchanging experiences of avoidance that, due to their specificity, are not suitable for either of them (the frog cannot act aggressively like the wolf, and for the mouse, fleeing underwater is unrealistic). They simply sit in their little house, diving into their fears unhindered, as they are incapable of effectively overcoming them through reflection and action[10].

Why does the bear draw the line under the pseudo-existence of the characters? There are several possible answers. What paradigm does the bear represent? Its solitude, unlike that of the other characters, who have the opportunity to form family groups or packs in the real world, is determined by its nature (bears do not form permanent communities). When it observes the behavior of the mouse and its companions, this becomes a trigger for it. Option 1: As a bearer of the same trauma[11], the bear intuitively feels that it cannot fit into this inadequate, yet collective structure (due to the scale of its trauma). "If you can't change it, lead it; if you can't lead it, destroy it" becomes the bear's only possible strategy for overcoming its solitude. Its behavioral mechanics and strategies do not allow it to be part of group dynamics, prompting it to instinctively destroy what its psyche cannot cope with. Option 2: In the context of real life, the bear—unafraid of solitude as it knows it from personal experience as a norm—senses the mass fear (the agony of existence) and the lack of unity and leadership (the foundation for conscious decisions) among the inhabitants of the little house. The bear, as an external (NOT in the little house) thinking entity, takes the only possible action to stop the agonies of the traumatized characters—it translates them from a semi-life to death[12]. As the saying goes in Germany: "Better a terrible end than endless terror". Option 3: A combination of the two previous options. The bear, to some extent, embodies the final stage of the destruction of this vulnerable, stagnation-prone community to which the mouse and other characters belong. He may be the one who, despite his own trauma, functionally responded to the situation, seeing it as an opportunity to end the existence of the illusory "society" of traumatized individuals. Why was he able to provide such a functional response? Perhaps because he recognized his own loneliness as a form of autonomy, understood its effectiveness, and did not flee from it into a false collectivism. Consequently, through his own experience, he is capable of realizing both the strangeness and the instability of this type of group existence of traumatized, unconscious entities.

4.5. The non-obvious in a fairy tale

In the folk tale, the logic of the natural laws of life is presented. A far more problematic version, processed by Bulatov, depicts consumer characters building their own new little house in place of the lost free one [22]. From a realistic standpoint, this is absolute nonsense and a breach of logic: to plan and organize the construction of such an intercultural (inter-tribal, accommodating the needs of vastly different entities like a frog and a bear, a wolf and a hare) home, a strong leader with preventive and design thinking is necessary. However, none of the inhabitants of the little house exhibit such qualities. The self-centered bear cannot become that leader, as he has no resemblance to Machiavelli's "Prince" nor Nietzsche's "Übermensch." Hence, children, whose perceptions have not yet been completely distorted by their parents' dreams of an ideal world, ask "uncomfortable" questions: "Why are they building a new house? They should be fleeing in fear, as they have learned that living together is also frightening and dangerous!" Children notice the inconsistencies between cause and effect because their logic has not yet been disrupted, while their parents' logic has already been seriously altered by the convenient-for-the-state concept of collective creative labor and joint survival that has been transmitted to them.

In contrast, the original version of "Teremok" reflects the complete hopelessness of a social worldview based on socialism and communism. Communal existence as a unified living space implies a shared fate and a common premature death. Individual fate involves having one's own worldview, the ability to manage personal time and finances, and the freedom to develop one's own ideas and thoughts. In a commune, this becomes impossible: everyone watches everyone else, reminiscent of the utopian concepts described by Thomas More [39] and Tommaso Campanella [40], where life in a community amounted to a complete lack of personal space. The question of who could live under such conditions implies that it could only be those who, from the very beginning, had been deprived of the right to effective self-expression within the context of parent-child relationships.

The question that should be asked after reading the fairy tale must shift the focus from the conventional interpretation (about the hospitable clever little mouse, a role model) proposed by the older generation to unexpected and unfamiliar aspects. For example, in the story of the Kolobok, a round bread that comes to life and escapes from home, we always recommend asking: "What would have happened if he had stayed home?" He would either have gone stale (in the literal sense for a baked product or, in the figurative sense, for a person—being burdened by parental dogmas and stagnating), or, more likely, he would have been eaten by his own parents (after all, they baked him for themselves, to satisfy their needs for attention and care). Yet, few people consider this. The same logical analysis technique can be applied to the tale of the teremok. What if the bear hadn't come and destroyed the house? What would have happened to its inhabitants? Would they have lived happily ever after? Certainly not, as their trauma wouldn't just disappear on its own. They would continue to exist in an atmosphere of constant anxiety. Their further development would become impossible because the fear of stepping outside their familiar world means consciously isolating oneself from opportunities for personal growth.

We also recommend discussing with children the practice of planning and building a house: what stages it includes, what skills, abilities, and competencies are necessary for this… In the version processed by Bulatov, the part where the characters construct the new little house without understanding the boundaries of their own and others' personal space (a new prison) is perceived as artificially introduced [22]. It disrupts the narrative and compositional unity. If we take the little house as a model of a socialist state, then, as in the fairy tale, the idea of such a house-prison is unviable. Historical confirmation of this is provided by the collapsed socialism of the 1990s and, as a consequence, the lost generation[13] that relied on the ideology of universal equality promoted by the Soviet Union, believing they would be taken care of by the state, forever. The complete shift in the socio-economic formation, for which they were unprepared, led to the disorientation of adults. Parents, having lost their life orientation, have been unable to raise effective children in the new reality. What is happening with the next, now third, generation? The grandchildren of the parents from the 1990s (the so-called NEET[14] generation) strive to create a zone of their own maximum emotional comfort—at any cost, even at the expense of the rights and needs of others. They are in a constant, endless search for happiness without realizing that it can only be created through their own labor. They are eager to believe in stories of sudden success and refuse to hear about the painstaking processes of work. Isn't it true—this is typical of the eternal seekers of easily obtainable little houses, who do not understand that someone else's little house is their prison and demise?

4.6. The practical significance of the work

Analyzing the behavior models of characters in fairy tales alongside adults and parents helps readers gain a deeper understanding of themselves, and thus avoid transferring their trauma to their children or grandchildren like a domino effect. Paraphrasing a well-known saying: "Tell me who your favorite (or least favorite) fairy tale character is, and I will tell you who you are!"

For instance, one of our clients, while recounting the fairy tales she remembered from childhood, identified the little mouse from "Teremok" as her favorite and "cozy" character. In real life, this client experiences deep discomfort, even when she is at home. She constantly tries to create a festive atmosphere and invites guests, but faces an emptiness she doesn't know how to fill. The example of the mouse in the house-prison metaphorically illustrates this process and its outcomes well. She becomes a pseudo-hostess (since she does not actually manage the space, does not feel it as her own, but rather stumbled upon it and, due to her trauma, is unable to use it functionally), creating an illusion of hospitality and warmth. However, she doesn't know how to build a true home and cannot create a stable and supportive atmosphere. The reasons are stated above. By discussing the analysis and interpretation of the fairy tale with a focus on cultural and psychological aspects, not on herself, but on the mouse, the client was able to approach a psychologist, explore her childhood traumas, and reconsider her current behavior patterns with her family.

Another case involves a Russian-speaking client from the USA, in whose home only emigrants from the CIS gather, all speaking Russian, including a small child. Russian food, Russian holidays... it's a Russian-language ghetto-house-prison within a multicultural and multilingual environment. This is a vivid sign that these individuals

have relocated to another country not mentally but merely physically, in a bodily sense. Here, the problems of integration emerge, with numerous fears and a sense of being lost. When working with such clients, we also compare the fairy tale "Teremok" with "The House That Jack Built" in the English-speaking context, helping them understand the norms and traditions of the culture of their newly chosen homeland.

There are cases of girls from large families in various countries who, upon growing up, start their own families and have many children—not out of an internal conscious need, but because it is what is "expected." Expected by whom? By the parental dogmas inscribed in them at a subconscious level. Moreover, they view children as a limitation to their self-realization, hiring nannies to free up some time for themselves. These grown-up "mice" (often the eldest daughters in their families) find themselves living in "house-prisons"—spaces sustained by husbands, partners or parents, with whom relationships were formed not through conscious choice, but rather "as it happened": shaped by circumstance, inertia, or fear, rather than mutual autonomy.

They are hospitable hosts, always busy, always rescuing someone and solving someone else's problems. As long as they have the strength...

When working with them, we try to highlight alternative pathways—family as a support in business, self-realization as a successful woman growing alongside her children, and so forth. There are also cases of elder daughters who see their role as saving everyone—from their parents, siblings (moms, dads, younger children), and friends to even acquaintances. Rescuing becomes the only acceptable form of self-realization, again, as long as they have the strength. In this context, the help of a psychotherapist is needed to reconstruct their personal space.

In examining the effectiveness of an organization, we often look at the profiles, primarily of the leadership that assembles a team around them. From a profiling perspective, a leader who references the tale of "Teremok" as motivation after a failed project raises concerns. A person who understands the fairy tale as "the old is destroyed—let's build the new," rather than as an opportunity to reflect and reassess paradigms, has a disrupted logic of understanding the world; they do not wish to see cause-and-effect relationships and fail to reflect on negative experiences. In such a case, there is a need for a more thorough examination of the leader's suitability for their position, as one of their key competencies is systemic thinking [41].

Another example arises when profiling the top managers of a team reveals that they are assembled in a manner reminiscent of the inhabitants of the little house—existing under a common deficiency of autonomy. The founder appears as an overpowering "bear," recognizing only their own viewpoint as the sole truth and imposing it on subordinates. The result is the departure of truly qualified personnel who possess developed autonomy. A third example involves the shared trauma of a female leader and her deputies, who are assembled in a way that reveals their failure to acknowledge their inadequacies (stemming from the specific role of the patriarchal father in the family)—their inability to make systemic decisions and effectively fulfill their leadership role. The outcome is a dysfunctional team of imitators who produce beautifully written reports but fail to create any real products.

5. Conclusion

Thus, the lack of personal boundaries established during childhood condemns an individual to stagnation, imitativeness, and a lack of self-realization, while their surrounding environment faces degradation and even demise, whether physical or mental. Personal self-realization, as a form of protection and expansion of one's field of activity, can only occur within a well-defined and consciously recognized personal space concerning its components and their value. When a person spends their entire life solving others' problems, rescuing, and helping, they are, in fact, attempting to fill their own internal void and merely exacerbating their dependence, draining time, opportunities, and life force from both themselves and those around them.

A person's path is primarily one of self-discovery, serving as a foundation for self-help. To ease this complex task, we have developed analyses and interpretations of folk and literary fairy tales, as well as mind maps, which assist adult readers in posing uncomfortable yet effective questions and finding their own answers.

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Notes

1 It is interesting that the entire world, as perceived by the storytellers of later fairy tales, also rests upon a skeleton—the Immortal Koschei, an ancient, skeletal deity who guarded the lower underworld along with his wife, the goddess Mara. The hero's victory over Koschei signifies the destruction of the old paradigm of the universe and the creation of a new world by a victorious hero. However, this hero is one who has proven his worth on the Hero's Journey, demonstrating his readiness to manage reality. In contrast, the heroes of "Teremok" are not independent; they merely consume what is given to them by chance.

2 The teremok as a prison—see further in the article for the etymology and cultural contexts of the use of this word.

3 In the Middle Ages, the fear of rats replaced that of townspeople.

4 A crisis or an attempt to scale success, as an excessive load on any system, serves as the best test of its viability [42].

5 See also Pushkin's "Song of Prophetic Oleg", where the hero accepts the death foretold to him from the skull of his horse, as a sign of fate insurmountable for man

6 Miracle, as a personal chance given to each person precisely for their efforts, is indivisible. This is because all the "input data" for a miracle (worldview, desires and dreams, competencies and skills in walking the Hero's Journey, and much more) is extremely individual. Attempting to divide either an economic or a cultural miracle equally among everyone leads first to the stagnation of those receiving a piece of someone else's miracle without any effort on their part, and then to the collapse of the entire system built on the "distribution" of the miracles of one person or a group of people (such as the nobility or landlords) to other groups (workers, peasants, the unemployed, etc.). This has been confirmed by the examples of Soviet Russia from 1918 to 1990 and Germany from 2012 to 2025. Those who are random beneficiaries of someone else's miracle are not capable of managing it.

7 For example, a mother traumatized by a scene of violence or abandoned by her husband tells her daughter that all men are cruel, aggressive, or unfaithful. However, she does not convey the full context of the situation and only transmits her conclusion. The daughter, who has been instilled with negative qualities of men from childhood, not understanding the source of her mother's trauma, learns her mother's dogma as a lesson. It is unlikely that she will be able to overcome her mother's paradigm in her own life and become a happy wife and mother. Instead, she inherits her mother's fear of pain or loss, which

manifests as a fear of men.

[8] In the Russian cultural context, expressions such as “your belly for your friend” and “you perish, but help your comrade” emphasize strong ideas of loyalty, self-sacrifice, and camaraderie. These sentiments are often less pronounced in the German context, where individualism and personal responsibility may take precedence over such collective solidarity. This difference highlights variations in cultural values regarding friendship and social obligations between the two societies.

[9] Compare “We” by Yevgeny Zamyatin, “1984” by George Orwell, and others.

[10] In this regard, we find the question of the benefits and harms of group reflection of people with identical problems (alcoholism, gambling, aggression...) interesting. In essence, they exchange stories during sessions about options for implementing consequences instead of an individual analysis with a psychologist of the causes and their overcoming [43].

[11] The bear introduces himself as “davish”. Previously, “uverysh”, “poskokish”, “khvatysh” introduced themselves in the same way, naming instead of a proper name—the form of realizing their fears, from running away to extreme aggression. All these self-names, ending with a hissing voiceless consonant sound [sh] sound like “mouse” and resemble the hiss of a snake—a deadly dangerous entity, often in myths, legends and even literary tales connecting life and death, granting another existence, another existence. For example, in “The Little Prince” by Antoine de Saint-Exupery.

[12] Death in a fairy tale is a transformation, a transition to another existence. That is, the establishment of a new norm instead of the non-norm of the teremok.

[13] People with a budget mindset; the generation of parents who were parents in the 1990s.

[14] Not in Education, Employment, or Training.

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