



DOI 10.22363/2312-9220-2023-28-1-92-98

EDN: JLJSYZ

UDC 801.73

Research article / Научная статья

## When verbal and visual arts share the same plot: artistic worlds of Bakhyt Kenzheyev's poem *Hunters in the Snow* and the painting by Peter Brueghel the Elder

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**Abstract.** The authors correlate and interpret the same plot in different types of art, i.e., painting and literature. Such a rapprochement is justified by the intertextual reference of Bakhyt Kenzheyev's poem *Hunters in the Snow* (1984) to the painting of the same name by Peter Brueghel the Elder (1665). The languages of the visual and the verbal are organized differently: the painting offers its viewer a direct contemplation, while the world of the poem gradually unfolds itself in the reader's imagination. The images in the painting are static, whereas textual images reveal themselves in a certain sequence, according to R. Ingarden. The authors believe that the images of the house and the forest are the key difference between the figurative system of the painting and the text. In the painting, the viewer sees the house and the forest from the outside only, while the text gives its reader an opportunity to see them from the inside. The images we see in Brueghel's painting differ from those we see in our mental eye when reading Kenzheyev's poem because the narrator shifts between the space of the painting, here he is one of the hunters, and the position of an outside observer. Therefore, one and the same plot can be translated from the language of painting into the language of poetry, but the change in the format of visibility is bound to cause various semantic changes.

**Keywords:** home, visual in literature, the language of art

**Conflicts of interest.** The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.


**Article history:** submitted November 11, 2022; revised December 20, 2022; accepted December 30, 2022.

**For citation:** Sinegubova, K.V., & Aksionova, A.A. (2023). When verbal and visual arts share the same plot: Artistic worlds of Bakhyt Kenzheyev's poem *Hunters in the Snow* and the painting by Peter Brueghel the Elder. *RUDN Journal of Studies in Literature and Journalism*, 28(1), 92–98. <http://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2023-28-1-92-98>



## Общий сюжет в литературе и живописи: художественный мир стихотворения Бахыта Кенжеева «Охотники на снегу» и одноименной картины Питера Брейгеля Старшего

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**Аннотация.** Соотносится и истолковывается один и тот же сюжет в разных видах искусства – живописи и литературы. Такое сближение обосновано интермедийной отсылкой, которую задает стихотворение Бахыта Кенжеева «Охотники на снегу» к картине Питера Брейгеля Старшего. В этом случае язык живописи и поэзии организован по-разному: картина открывает сферу непосредственного созерцания, а мир стихотворения постепенно разворачивается в воображении читателя. Образы на картине статичны, а образы литературного произведения, как замечает Р. Ингарден, открываются в определенной последовательности. Авторы приходят к выводу, что образы дома и леса – ключевое отличие между образной системой картины и текста: на картине дом и лес показываются только снаружи, а в тексте даны изнутри. Зримые на картине Брейгеля и воображаемые при чтении текста Кенжеева образы не совпадают, поскольку лирический герой стихотворения то принадлежит картине (является одним из охотников), то занимает позицию наблюдателя, зрителя. Перевод одного и того же сюжета на язык живописи и на язык поэзии возможен, но смена формата зримости влечет за собой изменения смысловые.

**Ключевые слова:** дом, визуальное в литературе, живопись, язык искусства

**Заявление о конфликте интересов.** Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

**История статьи:** поступила в редакцию 11 ноября 2022 г.; отрецензирована 15 декабря 2022 г.; принята к публикации 30 декабря 2022 г.

**Для цитирования:** Синегубова К.В., Аксенова А.А. Общий сюжет в литературе и живописи: художественный мир стихотворения Бахыта Кенжеева «Охотники на снегу» и одноименной картины Питера Брейгеля Старшего // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Литературоведение. Журналистика. 2023. Т. 28. № 1. С. 92–98. <http://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2023-28-1-92-98>

### Introduction

*Hunters in the Snow* by Pieter Brueghel the Elder is to be found in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, so a Soviet poet could know it by reproductions only. *Hunters in the Snow* first entered the world of literature back in 1969 when Novella Matveeva published a poem she entitled *Peter Brueghel the Elder*. Some years later, the plot found its way into the world of cinema when Andrei Tarkovsky used it in his *Solaris* (1972) and *Mirror* (1974). As G. Kirshbaum puts it, “Brueghel’s *Hunters in the Snow* became an image that a whole generation could identify with” (Kirshbaum, 2012). Probably, it was only natural that poets

of the seventies started to refer to this plot in their oeuvre. Bakhyt Kenzheev (*Hunters in the Snow*, 1975) and Sergei Gandlevsky (*It was so sad, as if we were step by step...*, 1976) belonged to a group of poets who self-published the samizdat almanac of *Moskovskoye Vremya* (Moscow Time). They declared and shared no prospectus; however, literary scholars did find some trends and values all Moscow Time poets had in common, e.g., their attempt to return back to traditions of poetry (Aizenberg, 2005).

#### Hunters in the Snow

It will all settle down, and we will also be indebted to happiness.  
It will settle down, it will boil itself away: you see, there is no other way.  
No sense in standing here above the shadows, in the snow,  
Delaying the descend to the longed-for home.

Listen, it's time to go home,  
To the warm kitchen, the dry wine, and the sleep.  
Come in without a backward glance and close the door tightly –  
It's time you stopped wandering through the homeless white snow.

No longer blind (from the snow), you can, without fear, look at  
The flame in the hearth where the last embers  
Flicker and turn blue as they try to burn again,  
And they go out like a memory – and now they turn black and die away.

The Flemish sky is darkening. In the silence of the night,  
The floorboards are creaking as you (f.) wake up again and get up;  
You are groping for your way to the baby who has sprawled in his sleep  
And you bend down to straighten his blanket.

There, outside the window, the blizzard darkness is sweeping the land,  
And the silent constellations say goodbye to us in the morning,  
The hunters are leaving, the sick winter goes on,  
And there is nowhere to warm up and nothing but swamp flames...  
(Kenzheev, 1984, p. 25).

This article features Bakhyt Kenzheev's poem because the text is an excellent example of *intermediality* as it represents an interaction of visual and verbal. Sergei Gandlevsky's poem is different: its persona, or narrator, remains outside Brueghel's plot, and the image of *Hunters in the Snow* flickers by as a movie still in persona's memory. Gandlevsky's poem became the focus of G. Shulpyakov's essay published as *Peter Brueghel's Plot* in 1997 while B. Kenzheev's *Hunters in the Snow* still remains understudied and has received no exhaustive interpretation. For instance, S.M. Shakirov reduces Kenzheev's verse down to an exposition of Brueghel's painting (Shakirov, 2015, p. 185). However, we believe it is much more than a simple retelling. Although each stanza indeed contains a fragment of the painting (Shakirov, 2015, p. 185), the poem unfolds its own visual prospective in addition to that of Brueghel's. This secondary visual plan owes its existence to the specifics of literature with its fundamental difference from visual arts. In literature, the narrator is the bearer of the point of view: they can be both an observer of the painting and a part of the world it depicts. In visual arts, the viewer remains an outside observer.

Many literary scholars report the specificity of the visual perspective in the literature. Russian scholars S.P. Lavlinsky and N.M. Gurovich described it in their *Visual in Literature* (Lavlinskij, Gurovich, 2008, pp. 37–39) in *The Dic-*

tionary of Poetics (2008). The publication triggered a number of related studies, e.g., O.V. Dreifeld's *Imaginary World of in Drama* (2014) and V.Ya. Malkina's *The Visual Imagery and Lyrical Plot of V.Ya. Bryusov's Architecture of Ancient Churches* (2018). A. Aksenova concentrates on the recipient and the location of the visual world, which is not in the textual, or material, domain, but in the world itself, i.e., in its ideal domain. A. Aksenova writes that the visual in literature differs from the visual in other arts because the visual image acquires a verbal designation in the receptive act of the reader's imagination (Aksenova, 2020, p. 78). In this article, we consider the actual Brueghel's plot vs. the plot that unfolds only in the reader's imagination.

## Discussion

*Hunters in the Snow* (1665) has an alternative name: *The Return of the Hunters*. The first variant expands and generalizes the meaning of the painting, while the second refines and narrows it: the hunters we are contemplating are not just any random hunters, but precisely those that are moving towards the house. The new thematic-rhematic articulation shifts the semantic center of the poem from the hunters to their return, which is accentuated by the image of house interior.

Brueghel's hunters are depicted entering a residential area; one of them is carrying a dead fox, although the hunting gear shows that they hoped for a larger game than a fox. To sum up, Brueghel's hunters are on their way home after an unsuccessful hunt. It is logical that B. Kenzheev's poem (Kenzheev, 1984, p. 25) opens with the semantics of consolation, which correlates with the situation of failure depicted in the painting. The line *to be indebted to happiness* expresses the hope on a more plentiful killing next time.

The foreground shows a slope, from which the hunters begin their descent, and the entire composition of the painting is aimed at visualizing their prospective route. The first lines suggest that the narrator is one of the hunters: *No point in standing here above the shadows, in the snow, / delaying the descent to the longed-for home*. Since the lines are full of impatience and determination, they probably belong to the first hunter in line. The fact that the hunters are right on the border between the settlement and the forest makes the viewer/the reader see the whole seriousness of the experience the characters are about to live through. The tiny settlement is surrounded by the snow-capped cliffs in the distance and the dark winter forest the hunters have emerged from, which means that this speck of oikumene the villagers reclaimed from nature survives by hunting. Brueghel chose such a view angle that puts the viewer next to the hunters: we do not see their faces because we face the same direction as they do, contemplating the houses and the children on the ice rink below. The opposition of the little care-free skaters and the exhausted hunters points out that the artistic universe of the painting is based on the semantic oppositions between the worlds of adults and children, work and play, civilization and nature, etc.

The hunters are depicted in anticipation of the end of their journey *to the warm kitchen, the dry wine, and the sleep*. The third quatrain describes the environment of the house with the hearth as its semantic center. Brueghel's painting shows us an early evening when the sky is just beginning to darken. However, Kenzheev's poem completes this image with that of the night silence and the house interior, which expands the timeline and takes us inside the picture.

The home belongs to the future in relation to the moment we can see in the painting, and this aspect is reflected by the title. Thus, the poem introduces an internal space into the original image. The thoughts of the hunters also belong to the inner world, which is in line with the whole idea of lyrical poetry as a genre, while the original painting shows nothing but the external visibility of the situation. In the poem, the visual perspective allows the reader to see both the outside and the inside of the hunters' world: together with the narrator, we can see the embers dying out in the hearth and hear the floorboards creaking in the dark of the night. When he is looking at his home hearth, the narrator stops being a hunter and becomes a husband and father. The sleeping child, who is totally absent from Brueghel's painting, becomes the semantic center of the home and a symbol of a calm and peaceful life.

The motifs of the blinding snow outside and the night darkness in the house share the lack of visibility but differ in terms of value and meaning. The outside is *uncomfortable* to wander through and grope for your way, but the darkness of the inside is friendly since the blundering takes place among familiar objects. The image of a tightly closed door in the poem reflects not only the practical need to save the heat, but also the need to switch from one state to another. To enter this space *without a backward glance* means to leave the memories of the hardships of the day behind. By remembering the disappointing hunt, the narrator returns to the previous day, and this mental repetition is like the dying coal embers that are trying to burn again. The verb *to wander* emphasizes the inner state of the hunters: it means to walk slowly; it is a repetitive movement with no particular certain direction.

The first and last stanzas show us the hunters outdoors. However, in the first case, they are moving homewards, *down the slope, to the longed-for home*, whereas in the last stanza, they are moving away from the house and towards the forest: *the hunters are leaving < ... > and nothing but swamp flames*. The image of the will-o'-the-wisps, or swamp lights, introduces into the plot of poem one more space outside the original, visual plot. Will-o'-the-wisps oppose the embers in the home hearth, thus contrasting the home and the forest. The home interior is warm, but the will-o'-the-wisps bring no warmth. The deceptive light of will-o'-the-wisps often lead hunters astray. This natural phenomenon might have been the cause of the failed hunt, and, as a result, the hunters will have to go back to the forest the next day.

Such a semantics of the false swamp light comes from their opposition to the hearth embers. The last line of the poem conveys the feeling that belongs not to the husband and father inside his warm house, but to the hunter who continues

to trudge through the snow. The hunters again find themselves in the snow, and they have *nowhere to keep warm*. This homeless state is the one that a traveler shares with a hunter in an ambush.

Brueghel depicted his hunters suspended at one moment in time, while Kenzheev showed the movement of time where the night replaces the day and is followed by the morning. The poem gives its reader an impression that at least 12 hours have passed by: the narrator comes home from hunt, spends the night there, and goes hunting again in the morning because the hunt of the previous day brought no game. The reader is immersed in the image where the narrator comes home and remembers the happenings of the day.

### Conclusion

The poem establishes visual images that are different from those inherent to the painting. The world of the poem acquires an additional space that is not to be found in the painting, i.e., the house interior and the forest. However, the stable intermedial connection between the poem and the painting makes it possible for the two variants of the same visual image to co-exist. This effect finds additional support in the overlapping motifs of the smoldering coals and the will-o'-the-wisps, the darkness of the sleeping house and the blinding snow. The images we see in Brueghel's painting and those we imagine when reading Kenzheev's poem do not coincide, since the narrator constantly changes his angle of view: he belongs to the painting as one of the hunters only to accept the position of an outside observer a moment later. The original painting shows us neither the house interior nor the forest. The depicted hunters and other people in the background are addressed to the viewer, but the painting does not endow them with a verbally expressed point of view or any verbalizable feelings. The text takes the main images from the painting to render a different meaning. Thus, a visual plot can be translated into the language of poetry, but the change will alter the format of visibility from a direct one in the painting to a speculative one in the poem, which will inevitably lead to semantic changes.

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