

# **Serbian/Yugoslav-Romanian Relations and Interactions in the 20th Century**

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## The Peach – Unnoticed Symbol of the Great War in the Romanian Novel *The Game with Death* and Bulgarian Novel *The Peach Thief*

**Abstract:** The paper analyzes the motif of peach in two Balkan novels: „The Game with Death”, by the Romanian writer Zaharia Stancu and „The Peach Thief”, by the Bulgarian writer Emiliyan Stanev, which were adapted into feature films. The peach motif in them closely resembles with the peach motif in the Serbian legend about soldier’s šantelija. The peach was portrayed as a symbol of suffering in love as well as a symbol of immortality and a new beginning. It can also be interpreted as a symbol of the suffering and victory of the Serbian soldier in the First World War.

**Keywords:** Peach, The Great War, The Game with Death, The Peach Thief, Death and Life

This paper compares two novellas in which the First World War is thematic. The first novella in question is called *The Game with Death*, by the Romanian author Zaharia Stancu.<sup>1</sup> It was published in 1962. The second is *The Peach Thief*, by the Bulgarian author Emiliyan Stanev.<sup>2</sup> It was published

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<sup>1</sup> Zaharia Stancu (1902–1974) was a Romanian prose writer, novelist, poet and philosopher. He was also the director of the Nacional Theatre Bucharest, the president of the Writers union of Romania, and the titular member of the Romanian Academy. In 1921 he became a journalist. In 1933 he finished his studies in literature and philosophy at the University of Bucharest. During World War II, he was imprisoned for his opposition to the government of Ion Antonescu. He wrote *Poeme Simple* (1927), *Descult* (1948), and other important novels as *Şatra*, *Jocul cu moartea*, *Pădurea nebună*.

<sup>2</sup> Emiliyan Stanev (1907–1979) was a Bulgarian prose writer, born in Veliko Tarnovo. Stanev's first book was a collection of short stories named *Tempting Glitters* issued in 1938. His next book was the collection *Alone* from 1940, which set forth a series of works devoted to the relations between man and nature. The books to follow were *Wolfish Nights* (1943), *Workdays and Holidays* (1945), *Wild Bird* (1946), *In a Silent Night* (1948). One of his last and best-known works, *The Peach Thief*, was published in 1948 and filmed in 1964.

in 1947. There are several reasons for comparing these two works. First, in both novellas, most of their content is dedicated to Serbia or Serbs. In a historiographical context, the study of perceptions of Serbian territory, Serbs, and Serbia during the First World War in the literature of neighboring nations remains an overlooked topic.<sup>3</sup> Second, both novellas were written in socialism, so they indirectly bear witness to the thematization of the First World War from that aspect. In this sense, the fact that the suffering of the Serbs is strongly emphasized in both novellas is particularly important, although it is done in different ways. Part of this topic goes into the field of imagology. The common feature of both novellas is the peach motif, which is closely related to the suffering of the Serbian soldier.

### Peach as a Symbol

The stem, flower, fruit and stone of the peach have always had symbolic meanings, especially in the Far Eastern cultures from which the peach came to the West: from longevity, fertility and vitality, to happiness, generosity and protection. Peach belongs to the genus *Prunus* (*Prunus persica*), like almonds, apricots, cherries or plums. *Prunus* is a member of the Rosaceae family, i.e. roses, which impedes interpretations of the peach as a symbol. The country of its origin is China, and it is believed that the tree was first domesticated around 6,000 years BC. Consequently, the motifs of the peach and its blossom were drawn on ancient Chinese paintings, dating back to about a millennium before Christ. Throughout history, the peach tree spread through Asia to the Middle East, and representations of the peach tree and its fruit were found under the ashes in Pompeii. It allegedly came from Persia to Europe with the army of Alexander the Great. In Victorian England, it became a common dessert, while it arrived on the American continent at the beginning of the 16th century.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> On *The Peach Thief* see: Марковић Оливера, „Поглед кроз филм на бугарско-српске односе. Анализа бугарског играног филма „Крадљивац бресака“, *Годишњак за друштвено историју* 2/2010, 49–72; Драгишић Петар, Драгишић Оливера, *Југославија и Бугарска 1944–1980. Хроника неуспешној пријатељства*, (Београд: Stella Polare, 2019); Иванова Дияна, „Емилијан Станев: „Крадецът на праскови“ - от Сътворението до Апокалипсуса“, accessed 10. 06. 2009, [http://www.rastko.rs/rastko-bg/umetnost/knjizevnost/divanova-estanev2\\_bg.php](http://www.rastko.rs/rastko-bg/umetnost/knjizevnost/divanova-estanev2_bg.php) (10. 06. 2009).

<sup>4</sup> In domestic scholarly production, the peach motif is not a prominent theme. In an effort to check how this symbol is interpreted in Serbian literature, folkloristics and ethnology, I consulted a number of scholars, but the answer was uniform - there are no scholarly studies on the peach as a symbol. In this regard, I would like to thank my colleague and professor at the Faculty of Philology, Nemanja Radulović, who teaches Serbian literature, and who pointed out to me the fact that in folkloristics the peach motif is not specially treated. Then, to the professor of Russian language and literature at the Faculty of Philology, Ani Jakovljević Radunović, who pointed out to me Sufism and Russian literature as one of the possible directions for the arrival of the peach as a motif in Balkan literature.

In China, the peach tree is associated with vitality and eternal youth.<sup>5</sup> In songs and legends, the peach orchards were used as a metaphor for utopia or paradise. In the west of China, on Mount Kun-Yun, which symbolizes the heavenly place, grows the mythical peach of immortality, which many have searched for, but no one has found. On that mountain, the Queen of Immortality nurtured a peach which fruits, to anyone who tasted them, would bring immortality.

Representations of Buddha sitting under a peach tree or holding its fruit in his hand are not rare. In Korea, they symbolize luck, honor, wealth and longevity. In Japan, twigs of the tree are used for divination, and festivals are held in honor of the peach blossom as a symbol of purity and fidelity. In Vietnam, the peach is associated with victory, spring, peace and happiness. In art, it is often used as a symbol of the heart, while its leaf, due to its shape, was identified with the tongue in the Renaissance. In the Renaissance, the peach leaf and fruit became attributes of truth, as an agreement between the heart and tongue.

In the Baroque, still lifes with peaches were conceptualized didactically as memento mori. We see them in the works of Caravaggio, Monet, Renoir, while Cézanne used them as a symbol of freed perfection, and the emphasis is shifted to complexity, contradictions and their perishability. In Serbia, they are immortalized on canvases by Sava Šumanović or Paja Jovanović, where the Virgin and Christ are depicted under a peach leaf and fruit. Due to its shape and color, it is a symbol of femininity and female attributes. A peach is at its most flavorful just before it fully ripens, so it is a symbol of an ideal state, reminding us that beauty and youth go together, but also that such a state of body and spirit is transient. In Hungary, they are called the „fruit of calmness” because their taste stimulates the secretion of pleasure hormones.

The peach is a symbol of immortality, an emblem of marriage and the promise of a new beginning, because its flower heralds the arrival of spring. In one of Sergei Paradzhanov's unrealized screenplays, *The Enchanted Castle*, Pushkin's imaginary character eats a peach, then uses a stick to dig up the ground and store the pit in it. This indicated that the life that was stored there, contained in the stone itself, would be resurrected on the pages of his work.<sup>6</sup> Push-

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Then to the ethnologist Aleksandra Pavićević (SANU), who told me that even in the field of ethnology there is no scholarly work on that topic. Aleksandra then referred me to Professor Zoja Karanović, who pointed out to me the mention of peaches in folk poetry, but not the existence of a scholarly work on the subject. Then I turned to Dragan Hamović from the Institute of Literature and Art, but the answer was the same. However, Hamović also pointed out to me several places in local literature where the peach is mentioned. I owe a special thanks to the Turkologist, Assistant professor Irena Kolaj Ristanovic from the Faculty of Philology, who was kind enough to translate several important texts about fruit, and therefore peaches, from Turkish.

<sup>5</sup> See in: *Lice devojke i breskvin cvet: i druge kineske izreke*, ur. Dragana Šutić-Kubota, (Beograd: Filip Višnjić, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Радуновић Јаковљевић Ана, *Сергеј Парацанов. Три сценарија*, (Крагујевац: УК Кораци, 2022), 202–203.

kin translated his mysterious, unhappy „northern love” into literature, while staying in the south, in Bakhchisaray, and planting a seed is a sign of the beginning of the transfer of love's suffering into its new, textual life, i.e. into beauty.

The close connection between peaches and drama, usually some poignant love story, is evidenced by one of the most unusual names of a Serbian Orthodox monastery. In Montenegro, overlooking the island of Sveti Stefan, stands the Praskvica Monastery, dedicated to Saint Nicholas. It was named after a nearby spring whose water has a distinct peach-like taste. However, a dramatic love story is embedded in the history of the monastery. At the beginning of the 19th century, a one-armed man arrived at the monastery and became a monk there, receiving the name Yegor. Yegor was actually a nobleman and an officer in the Russian army. His only daughter unhappily fell in love with a captain, but he did not reciprocate her sincere and deep emotion, perceiving her love as entertainment. Affected by his daughter's pain, the father challenged the captain to a duel and killed him, but in that duel he himself lost an arm. His daughter then disappeared, and the father tried in vain to find her in Russian monasteries for seven years. Finally, he sailed to Praskvica by boat. A few years later, his daughter followed him to the monastery, disguised as the monk Elisey. Father and daughter lived for years in the monastery, without the father knowing that the monk Elisej was his daughter. Making atonement for killing a man, the monk Yegor single-handedly built a stone road about two kilometers long. Soon the monk Elisej fell ill, so his dying hour was also the moment of revealing his identity. The father saw his daughter under the monk's robe and hugged her with one arm.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to rare reflections in legends, literature, art and film production, it remains a secret from where the peach motif arrived in Balkan literature, and then on film. One of the possible directions from which the peach motif could arrive in folk literature is Turkish,<sup>8</sup> but also the Sufi tradition. Sufism further leads us to Persia, where the peach symbolized the difference between the inner and outer world. The most important part of the peach is hidden in its depth - it is the stone.<sup>9</sup>

All the aforementioned aspects of the peach as a symbol are caught up and recognized in the works of two Balkan novelists, as well as in the Serbian

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<sup>7</sup> Ognjenović Vida, *Jegorov put: drama u deset scena sa epilogom u tri stava*, (Budva: Grad teatar, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> A possible direction of influence is also Turkish folk literature because the Serbian word *sheftelija* is of Turkish origin (Turkish: *seftali*). The first written monument of Turkish origin that mentions the peach motif is the work of Abu Heyyan, *Kitabü'l-İdrak li-Lisani'l-Etrak* from 1312. The motif of fruit, including peaches, appears most often in folk songs: turkeys, which are of a love nature. However, it can also appear in songs that celebrate life in all its forms. See: Emine Gürsoy-Naskali, „Kültür Tarihimizde Meyve: Giriş”, *Turkish Studies: International Periodical for the Languages, Literature and History of Turkish or Turkic*, V.3, Fall 2008, 1–5.

<sup>9</sup> Идрис Шах, *Исследование притчи о Ходже Насреддине* / 3, accessed 24. 08. 2024, <http://enneagonpress.ru/en/essay/20>

legend about soldier's *šantelija*. The only scholarly work that, based on the etymological method, tries to figure out the symbolism of the peach, refers to three literary works written within the Western European culture: Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Marvell's *Garden*, and Eliot's *Prufrock*. The interpretation is supported by the analysis of two painters whose works feature peaches: the Symbolist Georges de Feure and the Surrealist Matthew Skenandore.<sup>10</sup>

In this paper, the authors find that the peach in the aforementioned works is a symbol of Parental Sin (Original Sin), as well as other types of transgressions. Thus, the peach is shown as a forbidden fruit, both in religious and moral discourse. Until the 17th century, when Milton wrote his work, the word *mālum* (apple) could be applied to any fresh fruit that contained a stone core: pomegranates, oranges, lemons, peaches, quinces...<sup>11</sup> In the Latin language, the pun allowed the possibility of double use of the word *mālum* in literature centuries later: with a long *ā* meaning „apple” and with a short *a* meaning „evil” (similarity is based on sounds). Thus, the apple came close to the devil in the Book of Genesis with this play on words in literature.

Similar to the wordplay in the case of apple, there is also a pun in the case of the word peach: The French word *pêche* („peach”) closely resembles the French word *péché* („sin”). A further play on words allows the possibility of identifying peach with Persian apple (*Persicum mālum*). Consequently, *mālum* is identified with the word apple, as well as with the word sin. In this regard, the „taste of the apple” is perceived as the taste of evil (*gustatio māli*). There is a similar wordplay also in the German language: „that the German word for 'apple' (*Apfel*) is simply a corruption of *Abfall* (literally, 'a fall from')”. *Apfel* would mean waste, so in that sense Eve also fell away or just fell or became dirty due to the sin committed.<sup>12</sup> In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the transfer from the apple to the peach as a forbidden fruit was made through the description of the fruit itself, after Eve tasted the fruit: the fruit had its own nectar (which can be related to the modern type of peach - the nectarine), „ambrosial” odor, and particularly its „downy” texture. If the peach is a forbidden fruit and if Milton punned upon the French words for peach and sin, then by eating the forbidden peach, Eve ate „sin” i.e. „death”.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Khoddam Salwa, Hodgs Horace Jeffery, *The Peach in Milton's Paradise Lost, Marvell's Garden and Eliot's Prufrock: Etymology, Sin and Transgression*, (Oklahoma City University, Ewha Womans University), accessed 30. 8. 2024, <http://anthony.sogang.ac.kr/mesak/mes241/Peach.pdf>. Subsequent citations will refer to this work as : Khoddam, Salwa, Hodgs, Horace Jeffery, *The Peach in Milton's Paradise Lost*...

<sup>11</sup> Appelbaum Robert, „Eve's and Adam's Apple”: Horticulture, Taste, and the Flesh of the Forbidden Fruit in „Paradise Lost”, *Milton Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 4, December 2002, 224, 225.

<sup>12</sup> Khoddam, Salwa, Hodgs, Horace Jeffery, *The Peach in Milton's Paradise Lost*...

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

In early modern literature, the garden has always been associated with the fall of man. Every garden, including the garden with peaches in the Balkan novel *The Peach Thief*, can thus be interpreted as a place where the fall of man will take place. In addition, in Marvel's work from the 17th century, „The Garden”, nature is shown to be superior to man, that is, to the first gardener Adam and the first woman Eve. In Marvel's Garden, the fruits are intrusive, the richness of the Garden attracts sin and transgression. A peach, just like an apple, can have an ominous undertone, it can have hidden qualities, even a magical attractive force. So the peach can play an active role in the process of falling into sin.<sup>14</sup>

The peach, as a symbol of transgression and forbidden fruit, also appears in T.S. Eliot's work „The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915). In that poem, a woman is described as the greatest challenge to humanity, a temptation that must be overcome, and the peach is her symbol. Although the peach is mentioned only once in that part, its meaning is quite clear: „Do I dare to eat a peach?” (should he transgress, should he commit sin?) Since eating a peach in the context of that poem could be an initiation rite, the protagonist refrains from that, thus refraining from life itself. Although Prufrock managed to refrain from tasting the peach, he never stopped wanting it. Just as Eve's reaching for the forbidden fruit led to „Earth felt the wound”, so Prufrock's reaching for the forbidden fruit would have „disturbed the universe”. In the poem, the motif of the peach is identified with the original sin.<sup>15</sup>

Another work created in 1961 is also worth mentioning because of the peach symbol. It is *James and the Giant Peach* written by Quentin Blake. One day, an orphan boy saw a giant peach in the garden of the family which adopted and neglected him. Having found various insects in that huge peach, he sets off for a transatlantic journey with them. In the story, the peach is associated with the motif of the absent, non-existent mother, and with symbols of fertility and motherhood (the boy enters the peach with his head). By eating the peach from the inside and forming a close relationship with the bugs, the boy eventually became safe in the peach. Inside the peach, he experiences changes through the process of growing up, so the peach in that work is a symbol of transformation.<sup>16</sup>

All of the above meanings of peach can be identified in the Romanian and Bulgarian novellas. However, those two novellas, through the context of

<sup>14</sup> McChesney, John. „Marvel's The Garden.” *Explicator* 10 (1951), 247–248.

<sup>15</sup> Khoddam, Salwa, Hodgs, Horace Jeffery, *The Peach in Milton's Paradise Lost...*

<sup>16</sup> Cesa Laura, „Transpositions of James and the Giant Peach: Analyzing the Signification of the Orphan in Visual Imaginery”, accessed 30. 08. 2024, [https://lfq.salisbury.edu/\\_issues/52\\_2/transpositions\\_of\\_james\\_and\\_the\\_giant\\_peach\\_analyzing\\_the\\_signification\\_of\\_the\\_orphan\\_in\\_visual\\_imagery.html](https://lfq.salisbury.edu/_issues/52_2/transpositions_of_james_and_the_giant_peach_analyzing_the_signification_of_the_orphan_in_visual_imagery.html); Tal Eve, „Deconstructing the Peach: James and the Giant Peach as Post-Modern Fairy Tale”, *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 14, no. 2 (54), 2003, 265–276, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43308629>.

the First World War connect the peach with the Serbian soldier and his suffering during the war, expanding its meaning and possible interpretations at the same time.

### **What are the comparative bases for comparing the two novellas?**

First, both discuss the First World War in the Balkans. Second, they focus on Serbia and Serbs. Third, both works contain references to the Russian Revolution. Fourth, each novella served as the basis for a feature film.<sup>17</sup> *Prin cenuşa Imperiului*, based on a Romanian novella, was directed by Andrei Blaier<sup>18</sup> in 1976, while *Крадецът на праскови*, based on a Bulgarian novella, was adapted into a film by Вуло Радев<sup>19</sup> in 1964, marking the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War.<sup>20</sup> *The Peach Thief* was screened in Belgrade in the same year that Avala made the film *March on the Drina* in Yugoslavia, in Serbia.<sup>21</sup> Both writers, Zaharia Stancu and Emiliyan Stanev, were deeply rooted in the new ideology and the post-war government structure during the time of socialism, that is, they belonged to the new cultural elite. Particularly interesting is the peach motif, which appears in an unusual way not only in novels, but also in the tradition related to the Serbian soldier in the First World War.

Why is Stancu's work called *The Game with Death*? Essentially, Stancu talks about how he became a writer, that is, what kind of experience is

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<sup>17</sup> Станев Емилиян, *Крадецът на праскови*, (София: Захарий Стоянов, 2004); Захарија Станку, *Игра са смърћу*, (Београд: Просвета, 1967).

<sup>18</sup> Andrei Blaier (1933–2011) was a Romanian film director and screenwriter.

<sup>19</sup> Director Vulo Radev was born in 1923 in Lesidren and passed away in 2001 in Sofia. He studied cinematography at VGIK (Высший государственный институт кинематографии; today: Всероссийский государственный институт кинематографии), the All-Russian State Institute of Cinematography in Moscow. Since 1980, he served as an associate professor at VITIZ (Висш институт за театрално изкуство), the Higher Institute for Theater and Dramatic Arts „Krastyo Sarafov” in Sofia. In addition to „The Peach Thief”, his oeuvre also includes the following films: *Нов живот в Родопите* (1953), *Дворец на трудещите* (1953), *Години за любов* (1957), *В навечерието* (1959), *Тютюн* (1962), *Непримиримите* (1964), *Цар и генерал* (1966), *Найдългата нощ* (1967), *Черните ангели* (1966), *Корените на изгряващото слънце* (1972), *Мандолината* (1973), *Осъдени души* (1975) and *Адаптация* (1981).

<sup>20</sup> On the significance of jubilee years and their relationship with culture and art see: Митерауер Михаел, *Миленијуми и групе јубиларне јодине. Зашто ѝ прослављамо историју?*, (Београд, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> Оливера Драгишић, Два филмска погледа на Први светски рат: Марш на Дрину и Крадљивац бресака; датум приступа 5. 9. 2024, <https://stellapolarebooks.com/2020/11/18/> (5. 9. 2024); Ајдачић Дејан, *Књижевно обликовање људства о прошивнику у бујарско-српским рајтовима*, accessed 9. 11. 2020, <https://litternet.bg/publish1/dajdachich/predstava.htm>; Георги Тошев, *Невена Коканова. Години любов*, (София: Книгомания, 2018), 74–83; Mitrović Žika, „Režija istorijskog filmskog žanra”, *Rasprava o filmskoj režiji*, Zbornik radova, ur. Radoslav Lazić, (Beograd: Kultura, 1991), 75–81.

needed to become a writer. A comparative analysis of his biography and the ending of the novella gives us the right to recognize the writer himself in one of the two main characters. And there is no writing without great life experience, that is, without proximity to death and suffering. The First World War provided such an opportunity to many, including a young writer. The novel itself is about the internment of two Romanians, a young, clean, lame but skilled boy and a dirty, old, lying, pushy and unreliable man who posed as a diplomat. Their fates become intertwined when they board a train transporting cattle from Romania to supply the German army in the southern Balkans. Their task was to guard the cattle and then prepare them as food for the German soldiers. From that moment on, their dance with death begins, as the two of them encounter death in different ways from scene to scene, either they attack each other, or they defend themselves from each other, or they are threatened by a third party, or bombs fall, or a train overturns, or they see fields of the dead, or they participate in battles. By the end of the novella, both of them managed to avoid death. But the most encounters with death were during the passage through Serbia, especially in the occupied Smederevo. The terrible images of retribution in that city and avoiding one's own death in a magical way, as well as a series of scenes in which there is nothing but death, are a valuable artistic, as well as historiographical picture of Serbia in the First World War. On his round trip through Serbia, to Macedonia, and back through Bulgaria to Romania, the young man gained deep insights into life and especially death. At the end of his journey, which ends in Bucharest, news about the revolution in Russia awaits him in the newspaper, and he, just like Zaharia Stancu himself, starts working as a colporteur. The story is therefore set in 1917.

On the other hand, *The Peach Thief* is a story describing wartime Veliko Trnovo in 1918. The novella was created for a long time, during the entire interwar and war period, and was finally printed in 1947.<sup>22</sup> Typhus, hunger, thirst, misery and dust reign in Veliko Trnovo at the end of summer. There is a camp with prisoners in the city, and among them there are also Serbian soldiers. The camp is managed by the commander of the place that was wounded by the Serbs in the Balkan War. As a result, he is crippled and degraded in his military career. He has a beautiful wife whom he moved from the chaos of war to the outskirts in a garden with a cottage and peach trees. She is significantly younger than him and there is no happiness in their relationship. The plot begins when a Serbian soldier, named Ivo Obrenović, decides to escape from the camp, driven by an unspecified type of hunger.<sup>23</sup> Ivo Obrenović is played by Serbian actor Rade Marković. Ivo turns away from

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<sup>22</sup> Станева Надежда, *Дневник с продължение*, (София: Профиздат, 1981).

<sup>23</sup> The surname of Ivo Obrenović points to the transformation that this hero undergoes: In Bulgarian: обратен – adj. opposite, reversed. See: Младенов Марин, Бугарско-српски речник, (Ниш, 2000), 318.

the path and moves in an unknown direction, driven by a feeling of hunger. He enters a peach orchard surrounded by barbed wire. The garden is guarded by a guard who has orders to shoot anyone who approaches the garden. Ivo enters the garden to pick peaches and in it he meets Jelisaveta-Liza, the colonel's wife. She gives him peaches, moved by his hunger. A strong love develops between them. The drama ends when the watchman discovers Ivo and kills him on the threshold of the hut. Both novels contain the play of thánatos and eros, while *The Peach Thief* rests on religious motifs. Models of trials and suffering in love are written into the basis of the Bulgarian novel. In both novellas, great suffering happened under the hints of a new time, that is, a new world coming from the East in the form of a revolution. While in the Romanian novella the arrival of evolution is announced through the capital's press, in the Bulgarian novella we see its reflections through anti-war riots in the ranks of the Bulgarian army.

There is also one central motif that unites not only the two novellas, but also the fate of the Serbian hero in the First World War. It is a peach motif, very rare in contemporary art, and even in literature. As a result, it is important to draw attention to him because, as the novels and legend show, this motif, like the more widely accepted Ramonda, is linked to the suffering of a Serbian soldier, but also to suffering in the horrors of the First World War. The peach is a symbol of simultaneous suffering and great love. It is also a symbol of the knowledge of the outer and inner world, their connection and difference. It is a symbol of knowledge. As a motif, it is not unknown to Balkan folklorists, but essentially its meaning as a symbol was developed in Persia, and was especially preserved through Sufism (a sect within Islam). And yet, it is difficult to assume that the peach motif in the Romanian and Bulgarian novella, as well as in the Serbian legend, came from Sufism. We assume that it may have come from life itself, because in all three stories, Romanian, Bulgarian and Serbian, the peach is mentioned in summer when it is the time of its ripening. In the Romanian novella, the heroes who are imprisoned in the train of death and surrounded by darkness and nothingness, experience an unreal moment on the way. The road itself is an allegory of life during which the two main characters fight not only against death, but also against life. There is almost nothing beautiful on that road except for the sight of peach trees. During a stop, a respite, on an embankment near their wagon, they saw young peach trees, covered with ripe fruit. Despite the ban under the threat of death and imperial prison, the heroes head for the peaches. It was not only the Romanian prisoners who tore off peach branches driven by the feeling of hunger, German soldiers also did it. The heroes describe how sweet they ate the peaches: „Beautiful peaches! Sweet peaches! Imperial peaches...” And not only that, they kept the pits and later in the novella, extracted the cores from them. It is an important motif and symbol. The old diplomat tells the young lame

boy to save the pits because they are bitter and sweet at the same time (like life itself).

And what does the Serbian legend say about peaches? In what way does it connect life, death, suffering and eternal life? The legend refers to the Battle of Cers, which was the first major battle and also the first allied victory in the First World War. It was held in August 1915, when the peaches were ripe. Legend has it that a Serbian soldier sat down on a trench in the middle of the battle to rest. His comrades were falling around him. He took out a peach given to him by his girlfriend (known in legend as the „soldier's chanterelle”) and just as he bit into the peach, he was hit by a stray bullet. The soldier fell dead, the peach stuck in his throat. From her bone, that is, from his throat, a peach tree grew, which is still cultivated today in Tekeriš, as a sign of memory of the Serbian soldier.

One of the not so numerous interpretations of the peach as a symbol says that the peach tree grows in front of the cave through which one enters the world of the dead. In this context, the heroes of the Romanian novella, somewhere near Timișoara before crossing into Serbia, struggle to satisfy their hunger with fallen peaches while also damaging the young trees. Then comes their entry into Serbia, which is described as the land of death. Peach fruits are the last worldly pleasure for the one who will set foot in the other world. Having eaten their fill of peaches, the diplomat and the boyfriend enter devastated Serbia on the death train. But they keep the core from the pits because it brings new life, like a peach tree growing out of a Serbian soldier's throat.

Another possible interpretation of the peach symbol is that the peach is a symbol of knowledge and truth. It is a symbol of knowing one's inner self. In the Renaissance, she was painted next to the Virgin and Christ. In that key, the peach opens through the novella *The Peach Thief*. Peach brings inner knowledge to Iva and Jelisaveta. The peach was a sign that due to the proximity of death, a great love would happen to them and that in that love they would both perish. But in that suffering, Serbs and Bulgarians come to an essence that is contrary to the logic of war - that only through love can one reach the essence of earthly existence. That realization was given to them too, but at the price of death.

This research examines the history of an unrecognized symbol of the First World War that has as deep a symbolism as the ramonda. The Romanian and Bulgarian novella reinforce the idea of the peach as a supporting symbol of suffering in the First World War and a possible national symbol, i.e. a symbol of Serbian suffering. It can also be understood as a sign of the suffering of the Serbian soldier.

## Conclusion

The First World War represented a great and difficult experience for Serbs and Serbian soldiers. As in any other war, the proximity of death was immediate, and the suffering of the Serbian population and the Serbian army was great. Immediately after its end, the Serbs created the myth of Soldier and *šantelija*. In that story, the peach, i.e. its pit that got stuck in the soldier's throat, appears as a symbol of rebirth and the possibility of life after suffering and death. The peach itself is a symbol of women and the love between a soldier and his sweetheart who gave him a peach when he went to war.

Immediately after the end of the war, one of the most famous works of Bulgarian literature, *The Peach Thief*, was created in Bulgarian literature. In that novel, a Serbian prisoner steals peaches from the forbidden garden of his opponent, the Bulgarian commander, and falls in love with his wife. A great love is born between them as the last pleasure before his death. Everything takes place in the peach grove, where the peach appears as a complex symbol of transgression, temptation, woman, pleasure and suffering.

A Romanian novella *The Game with Death* also partially deals with the war years in Serbia, since two Romanians pass through the land of death, i.e. through Serbia. The older one advises the younger one to save the peach pits they ate somewhere near Timisoara, before entering the land of the dead, because the pit carries new life within it.

## Summary

The First World War was a great and difficult experience for Serbs and Serbian soldiers. As in any other war, the proximity of death was immediate, and the suffering of the Serbian population and the Serbian army was great. Immediately after its end, the Serbs formed the myth of the Soldier and the *šantelija*. In this story, the peach, or rather its pit that is stuck in the throat of a soldier, appears as a symbol of rebirth and the possibility of life after suffering and death. The peach itself is a symbol of a woman and the love between a soldier and his sweetheart, who gave him a peach when he went to war.

A comparative analysis of the peach motif in two Balkan novellas and one Serbian legend with peach motifs in world and European tradition and art, primarily in literature, allows us to position the peach as a possible symbol of the suffering of the Serbian soldier in the Great War. In this way, the two novellas and the Serbian legend complete the rarely analyzed peach motif in the art and tradition of the Balkan peoples.

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