

Slackers, Fools, Robbers and Thieves: Fairy Tales and the Folk Imagination

by

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Abstract

As has been noted by many linguists and folklorists, folklore - like language - has a naturally collective ownership,^f and thus, it is subject to strict uniform laws: only those features that do not fail to hold attraction to their audience survive throughout time and changing life circumstances.

I look at several conventionally negative types of the folktale hero, such as the Fool, the Slacker, the Trickster, the Robber and the Thief, which – nevertheless – hold a steady popularity in folklore, as can be seen in the two best-known Russian and German folktale collections. I attempt to investigate various psychological, cultural and historical causes that may have produced these types and contributed to their seemingly irrational appeal to the audience.

Another cultural question that interests students of the folktale is whether there is a national mentality that can be traced via folklore. It appears that folklore has been used to determine and reinforce national ideals and specific features of collective values. I examine the connection among all three - the form a text takes, its contents and its functions in a social group, and trace some Russian peculiarities in treatment of these amoral, immoral and criminal types in comparison with the German folktale.

Keywords: Folklore; morality; Fool; Slacker; Trickster; Thief and Robber

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Foreword

When I originally started this project, I had a very different idea in mind. I was going to look at three different types of narratives -- namely folk tales, poetry and mystery fiction -- and examine the ethical functions they may perform intentionally and an influential power they may possess inadvertently. However, the very first part of my project -- a comparison of Russian and German folk and fairy tales -- proved to be such a fascinating field, with such an abundance of new-to-me-information that I finally dedicated the whole project exclusively to fairy tales. I have looked at several conventionally negative, yet steadily popular characters of the folktale hero, and attempted to investigate various causes that may have produced these types and contributed to their seemingly irrational appeal to the audience. What puzzled me most was an apparent satisfaction people derive from learning about particular negative behaviours. Closely reading Russian and German fairy tales in their immediate historico-cultural context, I examined the tales through the prism of people's needs and hopes.

I have discovered a lot of unexpected turns in this wonder-journey, and am glad to share my findings with you.

Overview of the Method

Linguists and folklorists suggest that folklore – like language – has a structure owned collectively, and is subject to strict uniform laws and conventions: only those features that succeed in attracting and interesting their audience survive throughout time and changing life circumstances.¹ In this project, I investigate the branch of folklore known as the fairy tale, with an occasional reference to the folk tale. Although there are many contradicting definitions for these two types of folklore narratives, I will simply define them as follows: tales that have been created by folk imagination over centuries, and have survived to our day. The fairy tale is different from the folk tale in its extensive reliance on the magic elements that play a key role in the hero's adventures. For this project, I will be using "fairy tale" as a generic term, although it is not exactly accurate to use it in the context of Russian tales: there are no fairies in Russian tales. Such tales are called "magic tales" or "wonder tales" in Russia.

One of my central concerns in this project was to explore the folk imagination through fairy tales. I am particularly interested in some features of the folk imagination not so easily explained by common sense: a suspect folk attraction to particular non-virtuous personages. I look at several conventionally negative types of the folk and fairy tale heroes, such as the Fool, the Slacker, the Trickster, the Robber and the Thief, which nevertheless hold a steady popularity in folklore, as it can be seen via the two best-known Russian and German folk tale collections that I am using for this project: *Russian Folk Tales* by Alexander Afanasiev and Grimms' *Tales for Young and Old*. Both these fairy tale collections - approximately 200 tales of the Grimm Brothers, and almost 600

¹ Jakobson 640-641, Propp, Afanasiev, Hartland, Bettelheim.

tales, containing variants, of Afanasiev - are representative of their homelands;² both were compiled in the nineteenth century, although the Grimms' collection is an earlier one, and had been compiled and published several times (1814-1857)³ before the Russian folklorist Alexander Afanasiev took on a similar endeavor himself between 1855 and 1863.⁴

To limit my project to a reasonable size, I had to choose and examine only few types of fairy tale wrong-doers, though of course there is no limit to folk imagination. The Fool, the Slacker, the Trickster, the Robber and the Thief interest me most because all of them – to different degrees and depending on the tale – represent purely human vices, and this is what I find the most interesting from a psychological point of view: why would they attract such loving attention from people?

Evil monsters and witches, belonging to the “other world”, could be explained away as an outside danger that the protagonist manages to shun - this gives the audience an adrenalin rush. But what satisfactions do we find in listening and reading about human wrong-doers? Carefully reading the fairy tales themselves, I have made

² The Grimm Brothers are known to have recorded folk tales first-hand during their travels in Hesse and Westphalia, although some of the tales were taken by them from literary sources. (See Donald Haase “Literary Fairy Tales” for further information). Afanasiev’s collection, on the other hand, consists of several tales heard by him directly from storytellers and those tales passed on to him by the Russian Geographical Society and other collectors, such as Zhukovky and Dahl. (See Roman Jakobson “On Russian Fairy Tales” for further discussion on Afanasiev). Unfortunately, the places of the recording and the names of the storytellers are noted only partially in both collections. Despite some criticism for over-editing the authentic stories, both the Grimm Brothers and Afanasiev were dedicated to taking down the stories faithfully.

³ The first edition was published in 1814; the second edition in 1819- 1822; the third edition in 1837; the fourth edition in 1840; the fifth edition in 1843; the sixth edition in 1850; the seventh edition in 1857.

⁴ The first edition was published by Afanasiev between 1855 and 1863; the second edition in 1873, posthumously.

an attempt to investigate several psychological, cultural and historical causes that may have produced these “negative” types and contributed to their popularity and seemingly irrational appeal to the audience. According to Jack V. Haney, to comprehend the oral text fully, the connection among all three - the form a text takes, its contents and its functions in a social group - must be studied (45). This is why I try not to limit my investigation to the texts themselves, but aim also to understand how these cultural narratives with their embedded ethical values have functioned, and what role, beside entertainment, they may have played in their particular society. Although I fully realize that there are many other, equally valuable, approaches, I chose only those few that I found most helpful to understand my particular “morally wrong” heroes. Thus, this project combines several different approaches and disciplines, rather than surveying a wide variety of them, or focusing on one particular theoretical approach.

While I focus mostly on male characters, this is merely because the particular vices that I have chosen are more widely represented by male fairy tale characters than female ones: unlike the literary fairy tale, a more whimsical and a much later invention⁵ that I mostly leave beyond the scope of this project, we see neither female Robbers, nor professional Thieves in folk fairy tales. An occasional female Slacker or an inadvertent Thief may be present, however.

⁵ In the late twentieth century the most common approaches to the fairy tale were either through gender or through narratology or both. Many writers combined fiction--new versions of fairy tales or of fairy tale motifs--with criticism, addressing both gender and narratological concerns. Among these are Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter, A.S. Byatt, and Marina Warner. I am grateful to June Sturrock for drawing this fact to my attention.

Another cultural question that constantly interests students of the folk and fairy tale is whether there is a national mentality that can be traced via folklore. Notwithstanding the discovery of the universality of most folklore types and motifs, which provoked vigorous multi-discipline research in the nineteenth century, it appears that folklore in general and folktales in particular have been used to determine and reinforce national ideals and specific features of collective values. In this project, I attempt to trace some Russian peculiarities in the treatment of the amoral (The Fool and the Slacker), immoral (the Trickster) and criminal (the Thief and the Robber) types in comparison with the German folktale.

This project consists of four parts. It begins with a following general introduction to the fairy tale, its longevity, adaptation yet resilience to change, the intended audience, including several general theoretical approaches to the fairy tale. Secondly, I devote a chapter to the Slacker and the Fool. A chapter on the Robber follows, while the final chapter discusses the Thief, who failed to become the Noble Outlaw in the folk fairy tale.

The Folk and Fairy Tale: Introduction to Several Traditional Approaches

Every researcher who investigates fairy tales notices the astonishing longevity of this genre. As far as we can judge, this type of folk creativity is present in every culture and has very ancient roots. Although the older, purely oral versions became known to us only via their later written representation, it is obvious that the same motifs have survived throughout many centuries, and that they had originated long before they were “captured” in writing. Moreover, most motifs in fairy / magic tales are present in different and often seemingly unrelated cultures. This fascinating phenomenon interested many linguists as well as psychologists, ethnographers and anthropologists. Several equally valid and interrelated explanations for this occurrence are available: historical, anthropological and psychological.

The Historical Approaches

At least when it comes to the nations of Indo-European origin, noticeable similarity in their legends, popular beliefs and superstitions may be explained by the prehistoric kindred of their peoples. It is possible that some major historical or natural events (such as a great flood, for example) may have once ignited human imagination, creating legends and beliefs, spreading out across continents and, centuries later, giving the ground to what we call fairy/ magic tales now. Evidently, all Indo-European languages are related and still share some commonalities. It is only reasonable to accept that Indo-European mythology would share some common ground as well.

Anthropological Approaches

Anthropologists see an explanation to the universality of the fairy tale from another angle: the similarities in mythology, epos and consequently, fairy tales could be elucidated by the same experiences of our ancestors: the awe-inspiring powers of nature and the overwhelming impressions that they made on the prehistoric human. Worshiping of the Sun and other natural elements is an aspect of all primitive pagan religions. Similar experiences would presumably awaken similar artistic reactions in peoples from different lands.

Psychological Approaches

However, even more interesting will be to investigate the universality of motifs through human psychology. Despite possibly once-shared history and the common human experience of the natural world, the ancient motifs would not have survived for so long, had they not been relevant for us to this day. What is the secret of such longevity? Psychology may have an explanation for this.

A 19th century polymath, Adolf Bastian, believed that “Every human mind inherits a complement of species-specific ‘elementary ideas’ (*Elementargedanken*)”. These “elementary ideas” or “primordial thoughts” are present in the minds of all people, regardless of their culture, and therefore the minds of all peoples function in the same way (“Encyclopedia Britannica”). Later, his ideas would influence Carl Jung’s development of the theory of archetypes, ancient or archaic images that come from the *collective unconscious*. Jung believed that besides our immediate consciousness, “there

exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals” (Jung 43). This collective unconscious is inherited, and consists of pre-existent forms (archetypes) and can be loosely compared to instincts in animals (Jung 43). Although later debate has called these concepts into question and added controversy to the field of study, this hypothetical primary mental framework shared by all humans can provide a possible elucidation of the gaps in historical and anthropological explanations for the astonishing vitality of folk tales and, in particular, the repetitive plots of unrelated origins.

Monomyth and Fixed Laws of the Fairy Tale

In *The Hero with Thousand Faces*, published in 1949, a comparative mythologist, Joseph Campbell, influenced by Jung’s psychology, states that all important world myths share the same fundamental structure, which Campbell called the *monomyth*: “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (23).

Twenty-one years earlier, approaching the same phenomenon in the fairy tale, Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp turns to the *morphology* of the tale: “a description of the tale according to its component parts and the relationship of these components to each other and to the whole” (*Morphology of the Folktale*, 19). Propp bases his analysis of the fairy tale plot on *the functions of the dramatis personae* as the only stable and

constant elements of the tale. In *Morphology of the Folktale*, published in 1928 in Russian, Propp demonstrates that, in the abundance of seemingly different tales, those functions (or morphological units) are very limited. He lists thirty one functions, which include: the hero's departure from home on a quest (xi); reacting to the test of a donor (xiii); receipt of a magical agent (xiv); struggle with a villain (xvi); hero's victory (xviii); the hero returns (xx); pursuit of the hero (xxi); rescue (xxii); solution of a difficult task by the hero (xxvi); wedding and ascent to the throne (xxx).

The sequence of fairy tale events is fixed, and absence of one function does not change the order of the rest, states Propp (22). Moreover, who performs these functions and how they are performed is irrelevant. It could be a tsar, an old wise man or a witch who gives the hero a magic horse, magic carpet or magic ring that will carry the hero to his destination: they serve the same function. And since all these functions interact in accordance to certain, rigid laws, Propp makes a striking conclusion: "All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure" (23). In addition to the longevity of the fairy tale genre itself, the unanimity of all myths and tales as described by Propp and Campbell strongly suggests a powerful drive, almost a law in human societies all over the world: to create, to receive and to pass on fictitious information – to tell made-up stories.

The same powerful constructive force that created language created folk beliefs and folk poetry, according to Alexander Afanasiev, the most prominent Russian folklorist whose collection of Russian folk and fairy tales I will use for this paper: "Formation of the word and the myth went simultaneously, and mutual influence of the language on creation of mythical concepts, and the myth on the language is beyond any doubts" ("Foreword to the Second Edition", web). The English folklorist, anthropologist and

ethnographer Edwin Hartland calls storytelling “the outcome of an instinct implanted universally in the human mind” (2).

Ever changing, yet constant

Now, keeping in mind the above stated structural regularity of all fairytales, let us turn to the variegated assortment of fairytale themes, heroes and characters. As an oral genre, the fairy tale is constantly subjected to modifications. Similarly to language, the fairy tale is owned collectively, rather than individually, and changing everyday life circumstances, place of habitat and even the personality or the profession of a storyteller alter details of the tale at every stage of its formation. Each storyteller is a co-creator and transformer of a tale. However, in changing and reshaping, the fairy tale remains its very essence – its magical nature which does not leave the tale regardless of new modifications.

There is no doubt fairy tales change and will keep changing, adapting and adjusting to the new circumstances of human experience. It is also clear that some of the primordial elements had long lost their touch with reality and thus disappeared or mutated and acquired new forms. Such elements as human sacrifice, worship of multiple deities, once practiced and reflected in tales, superstitions and rites, have found their way to us in fairytales, in much-changed allegorical forms. For example, a fairy tale maiden who has to be given to a dragon or another sort of a monster for a wife may represent a long-ago-practiced human sacrifice, usually of an innocent youth or a maiden, in order to appease some fierce deities of ancient religions. Vladimir Propp in

his *The Historical Roots of the Wondertale* suggests such examples as when a hero sews himself into the skin of a cow or a horse to get out of a hole or to get to the “threetenth kingdom”. Sewed in a skin, the hero gets picked up by a magic bird and it brings him to a mountain or beyond a sea, a place where the hero cannot get to by any regular means. How to explain the origin of this motif? There is a known custom of sewing up the dead into an animal’s skin, suggests Propp. And thus, by sewing himself up into a skin, the fairy tale hero can be transferred to the land of the dead – which the threetenth kingdom must represent in the tale (119-120). This allegorization of ancient rites into magic tale motifs is what Propp calls “rethinking of customs by the tale” (119-120). At times, however, while closely examining fairy tales, a researcher may find a number of primitive elements unaltered, accompanying a tale as though by mistake, without serving any function. The element seems to stick to the tale as an archaism, once meaningful, but having since failed to serve the original function. For example, in one of the variants on the well-known to Russians “Sivko-Burko” tale (#179), Ivan, the youngest and dim-witted son, guards his father’s grave. In return, the father gives him a magic horse, Sivko-Burko, which Ivan can summon in the time of need. Meanwhile, a tsar offers a contest: whoever can jump on his horse high enough to kiss the tsar’s daughter, who sits in her tower, will get to marry her. Ivan’s older brothers, as is usually the case in these tales, take the finest household horses for themselves, and leave Ivan behind with a lame one. So far, everything follows the “normal” fairy tale order. But then, in one of the three variants offered by Afanasiev, Ivan goes to the field with his lame horse, “kills it, skins it, and throws the meat out”. Then, he summons his magic horse Sivko-Burko and wins the contest. He does exactly the same the next two times (as the contest for tsar’s daughter goes in three rounds) thus killing three - even if lame - household horses. The tale does not hold any explanation of why he does it. This

peculiar element is not present in the two other variants collected by Afanasev (#180 and 181), and it may have been considered a random one, had it not appeared in another, although somewhat analogous, tale as well (#182). There, a similar character – now the youngest of the king’s sons-in-law – kills and skins his horse in a similar manner. In this tale, at least, there is a sort of explanation, although as lame as the horse itself: he kills the horse “so the birds have something to eat”. Again, it would have made sense, had the birds helped our hero later on, as it often happens in fairy tales; but no - the birds play no role in this tale. A curious persistence of this element makes a reader think of some lost significance of this – possibly formally sacrificial – ritual that found its place in the tale: The hero has to make a sacrifice to ensure success in his future endeavors.

In fairy tales, we can often find many historical and cultural layers clearly belonging to other eras and different places. Mixed and adjusted to more contemporary attitudes, the folk stories still echo the primitive beliefs and can be traced back to their ancient roots. As Hartland comments, “Man’s imagination, like every other known power, works by fixed laws, the existence and operation of which it is possible to trace; and it works upon the same material – the external universe, the mental and moral constitution of man and his social relations” (2).

Often we can find comic details, such as in “Medvedko” collected by Afanasiev, where a great epic hero executes Baba-Yaga the Russian witch with a rifle; or a magical crystal bridge may carry a locomotive (Ozarovskaya qtd. in Sinyavsky, 64). Such obvious discrepancies are sometimes possible in a tale: it is a magic tale, after all! Andrei Sinyavsky in his *Ivan the Fool: Russian Folk Belief* brings up another comical example of a twentieth-century variation on a very common fairy tale motif: Despite any

practical logic, the hero purchases a snake, who will become his future animal helper. The snake lives in a house with Vanka (the hero) and his mother, but Vanka's mother does not approve. "Vanka's mother did not cotton to the snake. She never called it for meals, never addressed it by its patronymic, or even asked it its name, and whenever the snake went out onto the porch to sit, Vanka's mother made sure to step on its tail. The Scarab snake didn't want to live there anymore: 'Vanya, your mother is very mean to me. Take me home to my Papa'" (65). The style and the language used in the story are obviously newer than the plot itself. The storyteller knows it perfectly well, but, as Sinyavsky expresses it, engages himself into a "form of verbal clownery" to make the old story amusing to the listeners: "It reveals the tug-of-war between plot and language. ... The plot pulls backward in time towards the fairy tale's customary, age-old elements. The language pushes forward in an attempt to give those age-old elements new life. In this struggle, happily, the plot wins. Otherwise... this genre would have disappeared. But the fairy tale remembers and takes pride in its ancient origins, and maintains a balance between the old (plot) and the new (language) that favors the old" (66-67).

Other inevitable modifications occur when the story travels from one land to another. Alexander Nikiforov, a Russian folklorist insists that "mechanically precise transmission of a tale from one country to another is a uniquely rare phenomenon" (Nikiforov, web). On the basis of the law of social rethinking, the fairy tale is dependent on multiple laws of memory and logic, such as memorizing details, their confusion, individualization of a general or a generalization of the particular, co-ordination of episodes, as well as laws of creative thinking, such as amplification of one tale with elements of another, the sum of the two, the multiplication of episodes, characters, creation of action by analogy, replacement by similarity and contrast, zoomorphism,

anthropomorphism, demonization of the characters, and so on (Nikiforov, web). What matters is that the magic plot survives across time and place because it contains something permanent, relevant and common to all human experiences. As child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim puts it, the magic plot does not fail to arouse “universally and personally meaningful associations” (13).

Universal and National Motifs

Notwithstanding the universality of folk motifs, as discussed above, many researchers have attempted to examine the national by looking at folklore. This undertaking, fascinating as it is, stumbles upon numerous obstacles. “The national in a tale is almost always just a variation on the panhuman. . . They are inseparable”, claims an early 20th century Russian religious philosopher, Evgeniy Trubetskoy (my translation, web). The difficulty becomes even greater due to the moveability of the folk tale: it is not attached to one place, but wanders and is passed on from one nation to another. The national is just a branch of universal (Trubetskoy, web).

While obvious universality of motifs has been proven by many folklore investigators, it should not mean that there is no room for the national to operate in at all. A mountain people will have different perspectives on land than a nation living in a valley or a sea-coast people. Simple yet irrefutable grounds for cultural differences may rise from different climate, geographical location, vegetation, available food, and finally, as Hartland points out “the [different] mode of story-telling and the requirements of a story-teller among nations in different states of civilization” (5).

Nikiforov approached the problem statistically and came to the conclusion that folk and fairy tale repertoire, both in specific motifs and in their sum, differs from nation to nation. For example, he claims that the Western European tale is much richer in animal motifs than the Russian tale is, whereas the Ukrainian tale knows twice as many animal motifs as the Western European. Siberian peoples, with all the wealth and originality of their fairytale repertoire, are almost unaware of the European motifs; while in their tales, among other things, a significant place belongs to shamanistic subjects, of which the European tale has no idea. Even those tales that have clearly originated in one place but traveled to another become almost unrecognizable after the cultural transformations (partially mentioned above), Nikiforov asserts in conclusion (web).

Fairy Tales for All Ages

Another important feature of fairy tales is their appeal to all ages. Although now mostly associated with children's literature, originally fairy tales were intended for adults more than they were for children. These narratives were passed from one generation of adults to the next, while children were only listeners. This is why fairy tales contain psychological insight and wisdom, not to mention their poetic enchantment, for children and adults alike. At different ages people find their own different reasons and pleasures in the magic world. In one of his personal letters, Alexander Pushkin says about himself: "Each evening I listen to fairy tales - and thus I compensate for the shortcomings of my damned upbringing. What a delight these fairy tales! Each one is a poem" (my translation). Once I encountered a charming fairy tale about a hapless woman whose life was difficult and unhappy. Naturally, the poor woman complains about her fate and

curses it. Then, by the usual laws of the fairy tale world, she sets out on a difficult journey to find her fate. When she finally finds it, it is a pitiful sight: it is a dirty and hungry woman, also very unhappy. And only after feeding and cleaning and combing her fate, after caressing and being kind to it, our heroine finds her own happiness. How clever is that? While children will enjoy this tale for its journey and the magic elements, I am sure that many adults will find some wisdom in it also.

Do Fairy Tales Influence Our Behaviour?

People are fond of fairy tales, this seems to be clear. The longevity of the genre alone speaks successfully for itself. Moreover, fairy tales seem to appeal to both children and adults. Nevertheless, many contemporary researchers⁶ raise the question of fairy tale's appropriateness for educational purposes: could fairy tales be harmful? Some believe that the fairy tale world, fictitious and untrue, is misleading in preparing a child for real life. Another important opposing voice comes from those who see the traditional fairy tales as too violent and frightening for children. These stories are full of witches, monsters and dragons that devour, burn, boil and torture the hero. Some parents feel that it would be better not to expose their child to this kind of imagery. Bettelheim vigorously addresses this question. He argues that fairy tales are crucially important for children as a learning tool to make sense of the world around them; but even more so, as a mechanism that helps a child to work out his inner struggles. It is the child's inner world that fairy tales speak to, argues the psychologist. A believer in the

⁶ Jack Zipes, Maria Tatar, and others

Freudian theory of the unconscious, Bettelheim suggests that the fairy tale monsters attract the child's imagination because they correspond to the child's own "inner monsters": his or her ambivalent feelings about his/her parents, sibling rivalry, and so on. If parents choose to shield their child from all "bad" characters by exposing him or her only to the "good" ones, all they do is deprive the child of feeling normal: the child himself knows he is not always good. Such id-repressing strategies do not work, insists Bettelheim throughout his book (6-19 and so on).

According to Bettelheim, fairy tale characters help a child work through his own feelings, by first supplying substitute imagery to his inner fears and anxieties, the fear of abandonment, for example, and then helping the child to triumph over them: "If our fear of being devoured takes the tangible form of a witch, it can be gotten rid of by burning her in the oven!" (120). Above and beyond, children simply love fairy tale monsters, witches and enjoy overcoming obstacles and shunning the great fantastic dangers together with their favorite characters. Their imagination longs for adventure.

Maria Tatar points out that it is important for parents to realize that there are variants on the well-known versions of classic fairy tales familiar to us today, and "knowing that Cinderella lives happily ever after with her stepsisters in some versions of her story, and that doves are summoned to peck out the eyes of the stepsisters in others, is something that parents will want to know when they read "Cinderella" to their children" (xviii). This knowledge may give parents, who know their children best, a full license to become a transformer and co-creator of the tales too, choosing and changing

a tale as they wish.⁷ On the other hand, many researchers as well as parents see the value of fairy tales in their educational aspect and the formative power of imagination on a human mind. Folk and fairy tales not only reflected the primitive understanding of nature and the worldviews of their people, they also represented a certain set of values that, as we could see, has survived through centuries.

Many folk tales are openly moralistic. In one of the most famous collections of fairy tales, Charles Perrault's *Contes* (1697), each tale comes complete with at least one moral. Even if we leave aside those explicitly didactic folk genres as fables and proverbs, our fairy tales – the most fanciful kind of folk stories – are still full of folk wisdom, open and hidden suggestions and even plain old judgment, be it ethical or simply practical. Both the tendency to judge and the desire to give advice are very natural to humans and thus it is not surprising that they would find their rightful place in fairy tales.

Many fairy tales openly teach to be grateful to one's parents ("Ungrateful Son", Grimms 145); to treat others kindly, to be polite and respectful to strangers ("The Water of Life", Grimms 97); or to choose friendship over money. We encounter multiple tales where the hero is offered riches, but chooses a dog, a horse, a bird or a person who will

⁷ The Afanasiev collection, with sometimes up to 6 variant forms on a tale, is the most helpful in this matter. After reading the versions, it often becomes obvious that some of these stories, while remaining with their more or less stable "core", consist of something like building blocks that shift from one tale to another. The Grimms collection appears more trimmed and polished: without variants, the tale elements do not repeat and do not get mixed up, as those in Afanasiev. It makes the German collection appear smoother and more organized for the reader. On the other hand, it means that only one of undoubtedly multiple variants on each tale has been chosen by the Grimms themselves, which takes away from the collection's value for the student of folklore.

become a faithful friend and help the hero later. Fairy tales teach keeping one's promises no matter how unattractive the results may seem ("The Frog King or Iron Heinrich", Grimms 3); to value one's words and not make angry wishes or bad consequences will be unavoidable ("Hans My Hedgehog", Grimms 108). Sometimes, the messages are not so obvious but rather deeply imbedded in the very fabric of the narrative. Then, as subtle as it is, the power of the message may be going even further, deeper into the unconscious mind of the listener. Bettelheim gives an excellent example of how a seemingly surplus detail, almost a cliché, has a deep formative impact on a child: One of the stories in the Arabian Nights is "The Fisherman and the Jinny". A poor fisherman, after casting his net three times in vain, finally pulls out of the sea a bottle with a Jinny. The Jinny is mad and disappointed in the world for his long imprisonment, and swears to kill his savior as soon as he is let out. Only by outwitting the Jinny into getting back into the bottle does the fisherman save himself. The conflict in the story has nothing to do with the ever-present narrative formula of doing something three times before getting a result. "Although it would be simpler to begin the story with the netting of the fateful bottle, this element tells the child without any moralizing that one cannot expect success with the first or even the second or the third try", says Bettelheim (33). Most fairy tales have this underlying theme of overcoming obstacles before receiving the desired result. And it seems that the more difficult the obstacles, the sweeter the victory will become. Clearly, such tales are helpful for children in fostering good habits of mind and behavior. Their moral effectiveness works through their attractiveness to the child.

Nevertheless, there are certain motifs, characters and features of the fairy tale that arouse questions and even concerns. Parents quickly realize that fairy tale characters and their behavior and actions do not necessarily correspond with the moral

standards set by them for their children. While the good usually overpowers the evil in the epic sense, this principle does not automatically extend to little everyday “evils” and “goods”. The hero is often a thief, a liar, an opportunist, if not a murderer. “Wherever we turn, fairy-tale characters always seem to be lying, cheating, or stealing their way to good fortune” (Tatar xiv). Princes steal magic objects from their rightful owners; various helping animals lie on their owners’ behalf to promote them to a royal position; beautiful maidens shamelessly trick their parents in order to secretly meet with their lovers, and so on. Here again, it is important to remember that the culture of storytelling originated in the world of adults and was initially intended for adults. And while fairy tale characters and their adventures may occasionally fail to set a good example for a child, they were not meant to be didactic. In a large part, fairy tales simply reflect and embody life’s phenomena, a people’s historical way of life and social organization, not to mention the different stages in evolutionary development. As John Updike puts it: originating in a culture of adult storytelling, “[fairytales] were the television and pornography of their day, the life-lightening trash of preliterate peoples” (qtd. in Tatar, xiii). Most importantly, fairy tales are deeply rooted in human psychology, and as we know now, it is not without complications and complexities.

This project aims to investigate why some of these “morally wrong” characters hold a steady appeal to their audience.

Chapter 1: The Slacker and the Fool

Before we examine the appeal of “morally wrong” characters, let us look at the very fabric of the fictitious world in which they have to exist, the essence that seems to keep the fairy tale going - its dream of a higher universal justice. The fairy tale does not accept an evil unjust world. This is why the most powerless and defenceless triumph over those with power and riches in a fairy tale: children successfully escape a witch, a boy overpowers a giant, and the poorest girl marries a handsome prince against all the odds.

Rather than a privileged hero, folk imagination seems to always prefer the most disadvantaged, most unfortunate one, who has to overcome multiple obstacles, but achieves success and happiness in the end, usually with the help of magic. “Magic here is an expression of divine truth, divine will and divine justice“, says Andrei Sinyavsky in his “Ivan the Fool: Russian Folk Belief” (24). In this way, fairy tale magic partially serves the same purpose as most religions – to console the hapless and the destitute by offering them an alternative life, even if in “another kingdom”. This preference is only natural: both folk storytellers and their listeners often themselves lived in poverty, and desired the hope and reassurance provided by the magic world.

Nevertheless, this general fairy tale principle does not mean that the hero must be a righteous person, as most religions would require. “The hero of the folktale, in the positive sense of the word, may be anyone but an obvious evildoer” (Sinyavsky 27). It is only the evil that fairy tale morals do not accept. Otherwise, the little hero very often transgresses the norms of conventional morality. “Wherever we turn, fairy-tale characters always seem to be lying, cheating, or stealing their way to good fortune,”

Maria Tatar observes (xiv). In examining the nature of folk fairy tales, I would like to take a closer look at some personages that not only do not embody the usual virtues, but openly display features despised in real life. In this chapter I discuss such characters as the Fool and the Slacker common to fairy tales of many nations, by questioning their appeal. I go on in later chapters to examine the appeal of the Robber and the Thief.

The Slacker as a Hero

The fairy tale is not a didactic genre, and rarely do we see hard work being celebrated in it. There are few tales that teach the lazybones a lesson and leave him or her (both genders are equally present) empty-handed, scorned or beaten. Laziness, on the other hand, is a popular feature of folk and fairy tale: a number of tales attend to this – no doubt universal – human quality. A vast majority of tales show a very peculiar tolerance and even cherish a kind feeling towards the lazy hero.

A good example is the Grimm brothers' wonderfully amusing tale "The Three Spinners" about a lazy girl who did not want to spin despite all her mother's attempts to force her to work. The mother finally beats the daughter and the girl cries so loud that a passing-by queen overhears her. The queen gets curious and asks the poor woman why she was beating her daughter. The mother, being ashamed to admit how lazy her daughter is, lies to the queen: "My daughter is so hardworking," she says, "nothing would stop her from spinning and spinning. But I'm poor and cannot afford all that flax." The queen likes this and offers to take the lazy girl with her to the palace and even to let the girl marry her son, if the girl can spin all the queen's flax in three days. The girl goes to

the palace, but instead of spinning, she cries and does nothing for the full three days. When the queen comes to check on her, the girl tells her that she was too upset at being separated from her mother to work; and she is given another chance by the queen. Not knowing what to do, the girl just sits there and looks out of her window: three women are coming down the road. The first has a broad, flat foot; the second has a huge lower lip, hanging down over her chin; and the third one has a broad thumb. The women offer to help her if she promises to invite them to her wedding and, without being ashamed of them, to introduce them to the court as her cousins. The girl agrees and the three women, who turn out to be very proficient spinners, do all the work for her. The situation is happily resolved, and the girl, in turn, keeps her promise and invites them to her wedding as her dear cousins. When the prince, horrified by the three women's looks, asks them about their enormous lip, foot, and thumb, each woman answers that it is spinning that caused this deformity. Hence, the prince firmly decided to never let his beautiful bride touch a spinning wheel again!

As mischievous as this tale is, it does raise a question: why would the folk imagination "want" to let the lazy liar off the hook so easily and so good-humouredly?

Of course, the girl has other characteristics – she keeps her promise, she is not haughty and kindly introduces the ugly women as her cousins to her new royal family. Does it mean that the folk wisdom values kindness and modesty over hard work? It may be so, but only partially: if we examine some other tales about lazy heroes, we often find no explanation, no justification at all.

A good example may be the tale "The Three Lazy Sons" by the Grimms. There, a dying king offers his three sons a contest: whoever is the laziest will become king after

him. The third son, who says he would not bother to save himself from imminent death by cutting a rope around his neck, gets to be the new king. Another example of the lazy hero is the Russian tale “Bukhtan Bukhtanovich”, in which the hero is so sluggish that all he does is lies on a bed, “in cockroach milk up to his elbows” (Afanasiev, #168). This little disgusting detail - cockroach milk - must represent the last stage of the hero’s slatternliness. Yet, he becomes rich and marries a tsar’s daughter in the end.

The apogee of laziness, combined with other negative qualities, is represented by the Russian “Emelya-the-Simpleton”, a well-known tale, which has three variants in Afanasiev’s collection. The youngest brother in a peasant family, Emelya, unlike his clever and hardworking brothers, is absolutely useless: he lies on a stove-bed (an old Russian type of bed set atop a stove) all day long. When his brothers go off to a market, they ask him to help their wives around the house in exchange for red boots, a red caftan and a red hat – red equaling “beautiful” in Old Russian. He wants the red gifts badly enough, and this is the only leverage the sisters-in-law have on him: whatever they ask him to do, he first refuses: “I feel too lazy” is his constant answer. Only after threatening him that they will complain to their husbands and they will not give Emelya the promised red clothes, do the sisters-in-law manage to get him do anything. They ask Emelya to go bring some water from the river, and at first he refuses, as always: “I feel too lazy!” he says. But the usual threats have an effect on Emelya: he takes pails and goes to the river for water. He cuts a hole in the ice and draws water, but notices that a pike has got into one of the pails. The pike begs him to let her go in exchange for gratifying his wishes; he agrees, and starts to exercise his newly-acquired powers right away: “By the pike’s command, by my own request, go, pails, go home by yourselves, and stand in your accustomed place!” Later, when asked to fetch some wood, Emelya

commands the sled to go into the forest by itself; commands the axes to chop wood by themselves; and commands the wood to load on a sled for him. Thus, out of pure laziness, our hero misuses his magic wishes on the most trivial activities. Interestingly enough, in none of Afanasiev's variants, Emelya is shown to be kind, polite, or generous. Moreover, in two variants (#165-166), Emelya accidentally causes much harm: his sled kills many people because they gather to see a sled rolling with no horses, but Emelya does not call out for them to give way. However, our hero is not concerned about it at all: "What is my fault? Why would they not give way?" he answers, once he is summoned by the tsar who has learned about the accident. The tale does not give us anything to excuse Emelya; nevertheless, he is extremely lucky: by the same magic means he makes the tsar's daughter fall in love with him, marries her, builds himself a castle, and - the funniest culmination - he asks the pike to make him as smart and handsome "as everyone else around him".

What does this fairy tale tolerance represent? Why does this phenomenally lazy hero succeed and even becomes royalty? There seems to be a certain fascination with such "splendid" idleness amongst the folk. Could this peculiar fairy tale feature be a manifestation of the real-life universally-human obsequious attitude towards the rich and the powerful? In life, people often have a sort of respect or even servility towards those who can afford not to work; and those who can afford not to work plume themselves on this luxury. Some societies' customs, even such a phenomenon as sumptuary laws on fashion and clothes, directly reflect this attitude: In Ancient China, both rich men and women had very long nails which symbolized wealth and lack of need to work with their hands. The same symbolism was behind the Russian national garment - the caftan - preferred by Boyars, the Medieval Russian nobility: the caftan had very long sleeves

which demonstrated that Boyars never worked with their hands. In the fourteen century Europe, poulaines, shoes with extremely long toes, were introduced by the knights who thus emphasized their non-participation in labour. This obviously unpractical shoe style became so popular that social rank regulations were instituted: “two feet for princes and noblemen, one foot for rich people of lower degree, and only half a foot for common people” (Asimov 113-114). It is also relevant to mention the standards of beauty: ever-changing but constantly favoring the rich and the idle: soft un-worked hands, white un-sunned skin, small unsteady feet, and so on. Quite possibly the fairy tale leniency towards the Slacker is of the same nature. Folk tales reflect life processes after all.

Another general explanation may be rooted even more deeply. Contemporary discoveries in neurology and brain activity seem to show that laziness has its evolutionary benefits: spending less brain energy on things that may be unnecessary, our brains cleverly “save” valuable energy for higher level activities and more sophisticated decisions. A leading neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio, claims that “smart brains are . . . extremely lazy. Anytime they can do less instead of more, they will, a minimalist philosophy they follow religiously” (121). Unconsciously, folk stories reveal this practicality. Without knowing why, folk wisdom depicts laziness as having its benefits.

While the themes of laziness, “not-doing”, and being “good-for-nothing” seem to be present in many nations’ folk and fairy tales, from Aladdin in *The Arabian Nights* to Tom Hickathrift in Joseph Jacobs’ collection, here I would emphasize the special Russian fondness for the heroes with these non-industrious behaviors. Russian folklore is especially representative of these behaviours. One possible reason could lie in Russian history, and – mainly – geography. Caryl Emerson, although in a different

context, sees “socioeconomic consequences that conditioned all domestic Russian narratives” in the vastness of the Russian land itself, with its insecure borders and unevenly distributed population, thin in many areas: “Those who worked the soil did not initially stay put. To guarantee the tillable land its laborers, the army its soldiers, and the state its tax revenues, peasants were tied down to their villages in the late sixteenth century and then gradually enserfed as the personal property of the gentry and noble class” (26). While a form of serfdom existed in most European countries also, Russia was one of the last to abandon it. This social institution persisted well into the nineteenth century before it was finally abolished in 1861. The enormous Russian territories aggravated the conditions, mercilessly trapping the peasant, making him work for his master, with little idleness allowed. In these circumstances, it is only natural that the folks would especially long for stories with a do-nothing hero, as a form of the illicit, unattainable ideal, or even as a gesture of defiance; sly or simpleminded, but successful nevertheless. Jack V. Haney makes a very important point in his *An Introduction to the Russian Folktale*: “The folktale was a powerful form for the expression of social values, and there is evidence that it flourished at times when social values were in conflict with the ideas of a dominating social group” (88).

A good and somewhat sad example is a well-liked Russian tale, “Clever Trade,” about an old woman who is searching for an apprenticeship for her only son. She wants to find a trade that would allow him “not to work anything, sweetly eat and drink, and cleanly dress”. No one can convince the poor old woman that there is no such trade available. She sells her hut and tells her son: “Let’s go, son. We will look for easy bread” (Afanasiev, #249-253). The hard peasant life produces the utopian dream of “easy bread”. Poverty and rigid and harsh work create a need for relief, at least in a

form of a tale. This is why a folklore hero, even a slacker, but poor and disadvantaged, becomes the tsar in the tale.

Significantly, however, representations of laziness and themes of “doing nothing” are present and often noted not only in folk and fairy tales but also in other genres, such as folk Russian epic poems – *byliny* -- for example, as well as in high literature. For example, one of the most celebrated Russian *bogatyrs*, Ilya Muromets, partially a warrior, partially a saint, spends his first thirty three years fully inactive: he lies on his stove-bed, unable even to walk due to a strange illness. When he is thirty three, two strangers come and ask him for water. At first unwilling, he finally gets up. From then on, his illness is cured and he becomes not only, using contemporary language, a superhero, but the greatest legendary defender of the Russian soil, a real Russian hero. If we look at the main plot of these legends, the storyline is not very different from that of Russian Emelya, or the many variants of Ivan the Fool, who will be discussed further: the hero stays completely dormant on his stove-bed until a miracle happens to him; then, we see him in his full glory. Thus we can see that in Russian folk imagination, a special significance is attributed to the hero’s inactiveness: the longer he “does nothing”, the more powerful his heroic “outburst” will be. The “outburst” is also connected with higher forces – magical or divine. This theme goes back a long time and here, serfdom itself would hardly suffice as an explanation: *bylina* as a folk genre is older than Russian serfdom. *Bylina* generally originates in the Kievan period of the Russian history, during the tenth and eleventh century, while serfdom lasted from 1497 to 1861. Yet, these time frames do not necessarily contradict the Russian folk’s tolerance of the Slacker: whereas the theme of laziness as archetypical behavior is common to many nations, as

we could observe, it may have acquired a special resilience on the Russian soil, due to the Russian socio-economic situation.

When it comes to high literature, *Oblomov* (1859) by Ivan Goncharov is an excellent example of how laziness and inactiveness are features of Russian literature beyond the folk tale. Ilya Oblomov is the central character of the novel, a petty landowner, a gentleman who lives in St. Petersburg with his servant. He is a smart, noble and good-natured man, but hopelessly inactive and incapable of making any decision. His life is spent between his bed and a chair, mostly in his dressing gown, and while he is “open to generous aspirations, he is incapable of effort and discipline“ (Mirsky 191). Utterly and irredeemably “stuck in slimy sloth” he goes with the flow, allowing himself to be manipulated, and slowly and inadvertently ruining every hope for his life (Mirsky 191). On the other hand, there is Stolz, Oblomov’s childhood friend. He is practical and energetic, “characteristically represented as half German, a devotee to work and efficiency” (Mirsky 192). He desperately tries to “save” Ilya Oblomov, but to no avail. While the novel was seen as a satire on Russian nobility, it is also, as Mirsky puts it, “the embodiment of a whole side of the Russian soul, or rather of a side of the soul of the Russian gentry – its sloth and ineffectiveness” (Mirsky 191). Due to Goncharov’s masterful narrative, the reader cannot help having an aching feeling of sympathy towards his inept but good-hearted character; whereas the practical and obviously “virtuous” Stolz feels flat and uninteresting.

The Fool as Popular Character

A common character in folk and fairy tales who is at least as interesting as the Slacker is the Fool. Sinyavsky even goes so far as to say that the Fool “is the most popular and most colorful folktale character” (36). Many tales portray the Fool sympathetically: as a younger brother, he is called a fool by his clever but mean older brothers, but in reality, he is no fool at all. His behaviors, seen as foolish by others, testify to his good-heartedness: his kindness and generosity make him purchase a poor tortured animal with his last money, that will become his magic helper later; his bravery and graciousness win over the princess’ heart; and his humbleness will earn him a gnome’s, giant’s or witch’s assistance further on. This way, such fairy tales suggest that these good qualities may be more important in life than cunning and cleverness, usually represented by the fool’s older brothers.

In some tales, however, the portrait we get is not so sympathetic: not only is the Fool a fool, but very often a slacker, a drunkard and a dirty pig, who refuses to wash or comb himself. Furthermore, he also fails to act kindly, generously or humbly towards others. Nevertheless, in the end, he still gets to marry a princess and to inherit a kingdom, as in the “Emelya-the-Simpleton” example shown above. This suggests that it is the vice itself - the foolishness, and not the exculpatory good qualities of the hero, that ignites folk imagination. Thus the question remains: Why should qualities despised in real life be favored by peoples’ tales? There are several possible approaches to this curious fairy tale personage.

Bruno Bettelheim finds an explanation to this phenomenon deeply rooted in human psychology. According to Bettelheim, the figure of the fairy tale Fool stands for a

child. It is for that reason, Bettelheim suggests, that the Fool is usually the youngest son in the family. He is the one who has the least power and influence; the one whose opinions will be the last to be considered; the one whose inheritance rights are the weakest. Influenced by Freud's psychoanalytical findings, Bettelheim skillfully examines the child's thoughts, fears, and draws a parallel between fairy tale motifs and the child's wishes, conscious as well as unconscious. For example, the Fool's victory over his two older brothers gratifies sibling rivalry, familiar to most children (Bettelheim 102-111). This explanation seems plausible: Everyone used to be a child. Therefore, everyone can relate to the feeling of being dependent, powerless and helpless. As a result, the figure of the Fool appeals to the listener.

For the most part, Bettelheim refers to the tales collected by the Grimm brothers. I have attempted to carefully examine the tales about the Fools in the Grimms' collection for evidence in support of Bettelheim's theory. Interestingly enough, several Grimms' fairy tales offer various details that maintain Bettelheim's child-fool connection almost directly. There are eight fairy tales about the Fool in the Grimms' collection, and three of them openly refer to him as "a boy": "The Griffin", "The Golden Bird" and "The Three Languages". Furthermore, in "The Griffin", the youngest son, stupid Hans, wants to go to bring the apples of youth to his father, after his two older brothers have failed. His father tries to dissuade him: "If the smart ones fail, what can you expect? . . . You'll just have to wait till you're smarter", says the father, clearly suggesting that the child still has to grow up.

In "The Miller's Drudge and the Cat", an old miller has three helpers, who are a substitute for sons. "The youngest of the three (Hans) was the household drudge, and the other two thought he was stupid". One day the Miller offers them a contest –

whoever gets him the finest horse will inherit his mill. As often happens in these tales, the older ones don't want to take Hans with them, and leave him behind. He meets a tabby cat who happens to be a disguised enchanted princess, and she offers to help him in exchange for seven years of his service to her. He agrees, and for the next seven years, he lives in her castle: he is given nice clothes and good food. In seven years, she sends him back to the mill but gives him only the clothes he had come in seven years ago: ". . . by then they were all ragged and much too small", comments the tale. This unmistakably suggests that the youngest drudge must have been a child, or an adolescent, who has grown up in his seven years of service to the princess.

These details of the Grimms' tales support Bettelheim's theory; however, it does not seem to apply to the Russian versions of the Fool as successfully. When we look at Afanasiev's collection, the Russian tales about the Fool seem to reflect this phenomenon slightly differently, with their own national coloring, which I will attempt to examine. Sinyavsky jokes that the Fool "is an international hero", and Russians "have no right to make him a strictly national hero"; yet "the folktale Fool [has] found a fertile soil – and therefore fame – in Russia" (39). What is the nature of the Fool's appeal to the Russian folk? Let us look at this "fertile soil".

The Cambridge Introduction to Russian Literature suggests that there are three different types of fools in Russian folk/literary heritage: Ivan the Fool, the youngest, laziest, blundering yet lucky third brother; the "shut" (the Joker or Trickster); and the "peculiar Russian variant on a Byzantine saint, which has amazed European visitors ever since the sixteenth century: the *yurodivy* (fool in Christ, holy fool) or *blazhenny* (blessed one)" (39). However, exploring the Russian fairy tales exclusively, apart from Russian literature in general, I would not make such a clear distinction between these

three types but would rather look at them as three sides of the same personage, deriving their origins from the depth of the folk philosophy of life and displayed in different proportions in various tales.

First of all, it is interesting to notice the popularity of this personage in the Russian folk tradition. Many proverbs testify to this: “The Fool sleeps, and happiness guards him”; “The Fool is always lucky”; “God feeds the Fool”; “The little and the foolish are always forgiven”, etc. The Russian fairy tale is not an exception: without counting the variants, there are approximately twice as many stories about the Fool in Afanasiev’s collection in comparison with the Grimms’. Furthermore, in several of these tales, the Fool is called a fool only nominally, but does nothing stupid at all. Such tales present the third son of a merchant, or even the youngest tsarevitch who is good looking, brave and in fact acts rather shrewdly. The nickname “fool” appears in the opening stock phrase “They had three sons: the two older ones were clever, but the third one was called Ivan-the-Fool”, as though the storyteller mixed the phrase in, borrowing it from another tale to make the present one more attractive to the listeners (#242, *Salt*). These “nominal” fools in Russian tales seem to suggest some peculiar Russian fondness for the very idea of the Fool, even if the plot of the tale does not support it.

Secondly, Afanasiev’s Fool tales do not seem to have the supporting references to the young age of the Fool that I have noted in the Grimms’ collection. On the contrary, in the majority of the stories, the Fool is well into adolescence and is to marry. One example of this is provided by a peculiar tale, which, judging by the number of variants, was the most popular of this kind. This is “The Fine Lad, the Apples of Youth, and the Water of Life” which has eight variants in Afanasiev’s collection (#171-178). In this tale, the youngest brother, called the Fool in some variants but not others, goes on a

quest to get the apples of youth and the water of life for his aging father. The most successful of the three brothers, he avoids the traps of voluptuous but wicked women who seduce and ruin his older brothers. He manages to get to the far-away kingdom and steals the apples and the water from a beautiful maiden-warrior. But when he sneaks in to her marquee and sees her sleeping, he cannot resist the temptation and “kisses her”/ “has his eye on her beauty”/ “wrinkles her beauty” or other equally peculiar expressions, and runs away. Once the maiden wakes up, she sees that she is pregnant and tries to chase the trespasser, but to no avail. Later, with two sons by him, she will find the hero and rescue him from death or misfortune that his brothers have caused him. These details evidently do not suggest the Fool is a child, but give evidence to his marriageable age.

The only instance when the youngest son’s age is actually named by the storyteller is in variant #176: the tsarevitch is as young as ten years old when he goes on the quest. This peculiar variant deserves to be examined further: The tsarevitch starts his journey at the age of ten. He, nevertheless, is extremely physically strong: he “waggles a sword as it were a feather” and not a single horse in his father’s stables can hold him. On his journey, he does not do anything stupid, but rather acts nobly by giving a dead *bogaty*r (the equivalent of the European knight) a proper Christian burial at his own expense; saves two maidens from two dragons, and so on. He acts nobly, that is, if one does not count the incident with the beautiful maiden-warrior, which, by the way, is exactly the same as in the other variants, except that she presents him with his sons exactly twelve years later. This is the only remote reference to the young age of our hero. Even here, however, despite clearly stating the character’s very young age, the tale emphasizes the opposite – his maturity. He is presented not as a defenceless

child, but as an epic *bogatyř*, who – even at this young age – is as strong, mighty and manly as they come.

Not all Russian Fool tales bear this epic gloss though. There is, of course, a gallery of earthy peasant fools, who act plainly dumb, are despised by their families and thrashed and cursed by everyone who comes their way. Nevertheless, in most tales, the Fool gets lucky. In “The Fool and the Birch Tree”, the Fool sells his only possession, a bull, to a birch tree, and patiently waits for a payment. His brothers laugh at him; but when, angered, he cuts the tree down for not paying him, there appears to be a treasure hidden by robbers in a hollow of the tree (Afanasiev, # 402).

Some Russian fairy tales emphasize the cunning side of the Fool – *shut* (the Joker). This type is probably the closest to its European equivalent – the Trickster, the Picaro, who only seems stupid, but actually is quite clever: he or she is a roguish hero, who manages to live by his or her wits in a corrupt society. This character has always been popular amongst the folk. In its literary form, the popularity of this type has manifested itself in multiple ways in European literary history, starting from Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* to Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, to the Picaresque novel, Erasmus’ *The Praise of Folly* and Voltaire’s *Candide*, to Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, and so on. As Isaac Asimov puts it in his *Guide to Shakespeare*: “The great secret of the successful fool [is] that he is no fool at all” (15). The appeal of such a character is clear and fully corresponds with the fairy tale principles: the “lowest” character triumphs over the “privileged” ones. The folk rejoice at such a manifestation of the “universal justice” and the punishment of the unjust or unworthy.

However, among the multitude of the Russian Fool tales, the “elegant” European Trickster is comparatively uncommon, and not without his national peculiarities. In most of these tales, the Russian Trickster-Fool does not care about money or benefits for himself. If he acts cunningly, and not simply idiotically, it is often to teach someone a lesson, or to entertain himself. When a father sends his three sons to seize a magic golden pig, duck, elk or a horse, it is the Fool who captures them. His clever brothers want to buy the wonder-animals from him, but the only currency he would take is a little toe from their feet. Thus, later, when the clever brothers present “their” prey to the tsar, the Fool exposes their deception and thus triumphs over his lying brothers (Afanasiev, #182-184).

Several tales in this category picture a Fool who gets hired by a stingy master who is a wealthy merchant or a priest for a payment of one fillip on the master’s forehead in the end of the year. At first, the cheapskate master sees this as a good deal and happily agrees. Then, when payment time comes, he is terrified by the prospect, but cannot get out of the agreement (#150, 151). In these tales, it is not stupidity that forces the Fool-hero to seek such payments. Rather it is his indifference to money and his disdain for greed that motivate him. He amuses himself making these deals.⁸

And here, the Fool’s indifference to money in particular and mistrust of the calculations of common sense in general deserve special attention. Caryl Emerson provides an important insight into the Russian cultural attitude towards some human qualities that are not so quickly condemned elsewhere. She notices that Russians,

⁸ This plot was later adopted by Pushkin in his “A Tale about a Priest and of His Servant Balda”, and was based on the tales his nurse told him during his famous “Boldino autumn” in 1830 (Robert Chandler, 6). The word “balda” means a stupid or not very serious person.

unlike most post-industrial nations, have developed a far more intolerant mind-set towards the otherwise morally neutral background of material security. With the Russian tendency to extremes, any profit making schemes, paltry accumulation and hoarding of any kind are traditionally perceived as “smugness and spiritual inertness” (Emerson 48-50). It is not that Russians do not like money, but it is the petty caring about money that they respond to with intense disdain and irritation. Emerson attributes this – distinctly non-Western – Russian attitude to prosperity partially to the Eastern Orthodox Christian model of society “which makes no provision for a Protestant elite that justifies its accumulation of wealth (with or without the work ethic) as proof of God’s favour” (50). The Russian literary tradition has produced a gallery of particularly colorful profit-driven mercenary rogues, who are portrayed mockingly, absurdly or sarcastically, sometimes humorously, but almost never sympathetically.⁹

The previously mentioned Russian tendency to extremes is another feature that should not go unnoticed. Several Russian studies in cultural semiotics argue that “the archaic Russian mentality does not acknowledge ‘neutral zones’, [...] and it is significant that the Russian Orthodox wing of Christianity never accepted the Roman Catholic concept of purgatory, nor developed its own analogue for it” (qtd. in Emerson, 76). There are many Russian proverbs that reflect this orientation: “If to fall, I will fall from a raven-black (expensive breed) horse”; “If to love, I will love a queen; if to lose, I will lose a million”; “Either chest in [war] decorations, or head in the bushes”.

⁹ Pushkin’s Miserly Knight in the play of that name, Gogol’s Chichikov and Plyushkin in *Dead Souls*, Dostoevsky’s Luzhin in *Crime and Punishment*, Saltykov-Shchedrin’s Golovlev in *The Golovlevs*, just to name a few.

It is no wonder that the Russian folk-Fool, if he works at all, does not want to work for little pay. He would rather enjoy the opportunity to scoff at the stingy master! Even the Russian language itself reflects the specific Russian aversion to triviality and pettiness. Emerson calls on Vladimir Nabokov's suggestion about language as witness: Nabokov insists that a specific Russian word "*poshlost'*", which is associated with materially comfortable spiritual inertness, has no direct equivalent in the Western world (qtd. in Emerson, 50). The word means: banality, dullness, petty bourgeoisie interests, vulgarity, sexually-inappropriate advances, usually by an older man to a young woman, self-satisfied narrow-mindedness, all in one. Keeping in mind these two valuable insights on the specific Russian world perception helps create a more insightful analysis of the Russian cultural narratives, including the specifically Russian Fool character.

This context brings us closer to the third and the most interesting side of the Russian Fool: the *yurodivy* (Fool in Christ, Holy Fool) or *blazhenny* (the Blessed one), "the most spiritualized in Russia's rich trove of national fools" as he is classified by *The Cambridge Introduction to Russian Literature* (63).

As suggested above, the main principles of the fairy tale "morality" coincides with some ethical aspects of Christian morality: the good must overpower the evil, and the last should become first. But since the fairy tale is more ancient than Christianity, and similar motifs are found in folklore of people who had never experienced Christianity, it is not religious influence that suggested certain motifs and resolutions to the fairy tale (Sinyavsky 27, 35), but rather it is the same human psychological needs that had found their place in both fairy tale motifs and various religions.

Russian Orthodoxy is well known for its reverence for the *yurodivy*. These people were venerated as saints; their feeble-mindedness was seen as innocence in the eyes of God, and their utterances were accepted as the clairvoyance of a higher truth. Even Ivan the Terrible was known to fear and honour Vasily Blazhenny (Basil the Blessed), a *yurodivy* of Moscow. Believing in Vasily's prophetic powers, the tsar trusted him and, after Vasily's death, the tsar personally carried his coffin to a cemetery. It was on Ivan the Terrible's order that the best known Moscow landmark in the world - Saint Basil's Cathedral – was named in honour of this *yurodivy*.

Although insane in the eyes of men, the Holy Fool is an authentic example of goodness in the eyes of God. As a specific form of asceticism, the Holy Fool's provocative behavior is meant to denounce worldly possessions and values, to hide his own virtues and to incur the reproaches and insults of those around. In Christianity, such foolishness is spiritual, imitating Christ's own sufferings, his endurance of the crowd's mockery, as well as his irreconcilability with the norms common to the corrupted and money driven society. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul in the First Epistle to the Corinthians says: "Let no one deceive himself. If anyone thinks that he is wise among you in this world, let him become a fool, that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, "He has taken the wise in their craftiness." (3: 18- 20) And again, "The Lord knows the reasoning of the wise, that it is worthless" (*E-Bible On-Line*).

At the risk of sounding sacrilegious, I will suggest that the fairy tale Fool embodies the same characteristics, however in a much lighter and often comical form. The common denominator of both Fools is their complete impracticality, refutation of common -- that is, worldly-- sense, their disinterest in money, and their openness to

fate's paths. "The Fool's purpose is to show us – in his behavior, his appearance, his fate – that nothing depends on one's intellect, erudition, diligence, or will. That is all secondary and not the main thing in life", Sinyavsky writes (40).

This need for humbleness in the face of Fate or God may be a universal human refuge, one of the basic psychological defense mechanisms: in the most critical life situations, one understands how little is in our control; and sometimes, to trust oneself to Fate or God is psychologically safer than to make desperate and often fruitless attempts to change the situation. Again, it brings to mind a well-known Biblical passage:

Consider the lilies, how they grow. They don't toil, neither do they spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if this is how God clothes the grass in the field, which today exists, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith? Don't seek what you will eat or what you will drink; neither be anxious. Luke 12:27 – 12:29 (*E-Bible On-Line*).

It has been frequently noticed that people increasingly seek God and a higher universal order when their lives become most unbearable. In these circumstances, the only asylum a person finds is in giving up to the forces of the universe, with hope of finding a higher meaning to his or her sufferings. This is why all religions teach resignation to Fate and God's will.

The human need to open oneself to divine truth and justice has manifested itself in many forms. In fairy tales, a hero will go "where his eyes are looking" or "where his legs will take him". When he chooses a bride, he often shoots an arrow to show him the

way, or lets a cotton ball roll in any direction; and in folk superstitions, an unfortunate woman who was thought to be a witch was “tried by water” or “by air”: if she drowned or killed herself by being unable to fly off a cliff, she was considered innocent. In upper circles, knights’ tournaments and aristocrats’ duels symbolized the same faith in divine justice. Innocence will rightfully show itself, was the common belief.

Openness to a variety of life paths, and rejection of the control of reason, which only prevents humans from attaining a higher truth: both these are present in the spiritual teachings and mysticism of diverse religions, not just in Russian Orthodoxy. A higher truth “reveals itself by itself at the happy moment when our consciousness has switched off . . . and our soul is in a state of receptive passivity” (Sinyavsky 40). Parallels may be found in Sufism, Taoism and even Shamanism. Sinyavsky also quotes some of Antiquity’s greatest sages such as Socrates: “I know only that I know nothing”, or Lao Tzu: “The intelligent are not learned, the learned are not intelligent” (40). However, it is worth mentioning here the self- proclaimed messianic idea of Russian religious philosophy that Russia’s divine mission on behalf of other peoples is salvation through the distinctive Russian formula of “passivity, apocalypticism, collectivism, distinctly feminine softness (receptivity and forgiveness), indifference to political grandeur and private property alike, and her anarchic preference for the depths of personality over the superficialities of institutional identity” (Berdyayev qtd. in Emerson, 22). To add to Sinyavsky’s point about Russia’s “fertile soil” for the Fool, this soil evidently attributes value to passivity, meekness and - foolhardiness. The fairy tale Fool personifies these principles almost as much as the Holy Fool.

A number of Russian writers prompted their audience to re-evaluate the relations between holiness and madness. The image of a Holy Fool appeared in works of many

major writers of the second half of the nineteenth century. Such authors as Leo Tolstoy, Gleb Uspensky, Nicolai Leskov, Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin and others episodically portrayed such a character. In Dostoevsky's works, holy foolishness is presented even more widely, and elements of holy foolishness are embodied in almost every work. Indeed, Dostoevsky's prince Myshkin, the eponymous Idiot, becomes a symbol of a man with Christ-like features, rejected and misunderstood by the society in general but also enigmatically attractive to everyone who meets him. Completely impractical, absolutely kind and self-denying Prince Myshkin stands between the myth of Holy Fool and Christ. He cannot adjust to the real world. Given the realist conventions of the novel this must end disastrously and it does.

The fairy tale Fool also takes no thought for tomorrow, unlike the schemers and the wise; but the wish-fulfilling context of the fairy tale provides the liberty to reward such behaviours: the Fool typically gets magic powers. He does not think but he acts on his first impulses, no matter how foolish they seem to others, and magical beings or magical items typically help him out. Not always but most of the time, the Fool wins the magical helper over because he shows some impractical kindness: he is the only son who does not recoil from guarding the father's grave at night, as in "Sivko-Burko" (#179-181); he is the only brother who shares his last bread with a mouse, or buys a tortured dog and a kitten with his last money (#190-191). Further in the tale, the Fool chooses the least attractive option of those offered: instead of accepting a payment in gold, silver or copper, he asks for a "ring on twelve screws" (# 566); instead of taking a sack of silver, he takes a sack of sand (#191); instead of spending a night at a fine inn, he goes to a shabby one (Grimms, "The Golden Bird"). All these choices will become crucially important to his fate. The Fool chooses intuitively, or – more often - on the magic

helper's advice. And, unlike his sensible brothers, he knows to trust the magic helper. Maybe, being a fool, he trusts everyone, including his wicked brothers; and, by the fairy tale laws of justice, the magic has to step in and take care of him. His power is not in intelligence, but in openness to divine - in fairy tales, it is magic - truth. As Trubetskoy puts it: "The Fool is the favorite hero of the tale because the tale does not believe in human mind . . . the true worth is only the magical; and wise is only the one who is willing to give everything up for this - incomprehensible to reason - value; only the one who is, from a worldly point view, considered a fool" (my translation, web).

Through the Fool's image in both fairy tale and real life, we can witness aspects of fundamental human needs: a part of human nature wishes for the simple and the artless; wishes for the higher truth to be revealed to us, to guide us, to help us and to save us.

Chapter 2: The Robber

As is already evident from the discussion of the Fool and the Idler, the affections of the “folk,” just like the affections of the individual, are directed towards vice as much as to virtue. Certainly the Thief and the Robber also play an especially interesting role in folklore. Laziness and foolishness are, after all, only personal vices, not intentionally harmful. Thievery and robbery are much worse – they create victims. This fact makes it even more intriguing to discover and explore the evident appeal of the thief and the robber, as demonstrated by their eternal presence in the fairy tale. In the case of the robber especially, the question of the basis of the many robber narratives is fascinating.

In real life people invariably find some sort of fascination in crime: crime novels, news and movies are very popular. This fascination does not mean that people like the criminal, especially if he or she is violent, malicious or cruel. But there is a certain appeal that the crime itself holds. The crime, however, could be of very different kinds. Similarly, in folklore, people’s sympathies are not with a brutal robber, who harms other people; nor with a trivial petty thief in search for paltry profits. But a noble outlaw or a skilful thief is a different matter: he gives the audience a thrill and a satisfaction. “The folktale often sins against social and common ethics. But it never goes too far in this since at its core is the desire for good,” Sinyavsky notes (27). This distinction is very important, as a closer examination of some fairy tale crime-doers will show.

The Robber

The first fairy tale criminal I discuss is the Robber, or rather the Robbers, as they usually live together, in a group, somewhere in the forest. What is interesting to notice is that the folk tale, with its tendency to dramatisation and polarisation, usually pictures the Robber not just as someone who is after someone else's possessions, but as a brutal murderer. For instance, "The Robber Bridegroom" in the Grimms' collection is a tale about a miller's daughter who is engaged to a rich man whom she does not know well. He invites her to come see him in his house in the forest, and the girl has to go, although she feels uneasy. His house turns out to be a den of robbers. What is worse, they are also brutal murderers, who eat their victims. But, luckily, the fairy tale magic helps the girl: a bird and then an old woman warn her about the danger; she hides behind a big barrel and becomes a witness to a horrifying scene: ". . . The wicked robbers came home, dragging another young girl. They were drunk and paid no attention to her screams and moans. They gave her wine to drink, three glasses full, one white, one red, one yellow, and her heart burst in two. Then they tore off her fine clothes, put her on a table, chopped her beautiful body into pieces, and sprinkled them with salt. . . . One of them caught sight of a gold ring on the murdered girl's little finger and when it wouldn't come off easily he took an ax and chopped off the finger". This tale is full of vivid details of horrors: although never openly named, this description of the robbers' cannibalism implies a murderous group rape to a realistically tuned listener. If the folk imagination is terrified of something, it shows it abundantly, exaggerating the terror in metaphorical ways.

Significantly it is not the very act of killing or causing death to another that terrifies people enough to spur them on to create such stories. There are numerous

tales where the hero kills: In the “The King of the Golden Mountain”, the hero orders his magic sword to kill the whole wedding party of his unfaithful wife (Grimms)! Killing a negative personage - especially a negative supernatural personage, such as a giant or a witch - is obviously perfectly acceptable in the world of the fairy tale. If the hero should kill someone in a fight, by stupidity or mistake, again it would not be considered to be bad. Amongst numerous examples of “fair” fight deaths, we can also find unjustified, but unintentional killings. For example there is a Russian tale about Ivan-the-Fool, the favorite hero, who kills an old man just because the man fails to give Ivan valuable advice (“The Wise Wife”, # 216); not to mention Emelya who kills many townsfolk spectators on his sled (“Emelya-the-Simpleton”, #165-166). It is the gruesome intentional murder, usually of a young woman, that excites and terrifies the folk imagination.

If the basis of such gradation between “allowed” and “sinister” killings is not very obvious to the contemporary reader, it may be worthwhile to consider Eric Hobsbawm’s explanation of the real-life popular and unpopular bandits. According to his study, one of the characteristics of a real “social” bandit – one who is loved and supported by people -- is moderation in violence. Some violence is allowed, and even necessary, given the very nature of the business; but, as Hobsbawm suggests, “the very familiarity of killing and violence makes men extremely sensitive to moral distinctions which escape more pacific societies. There is just or legitimate killing and unjust, unnecessary and wanton murder; there are honourable and shameful acts” (*Bandit*, 51). This distinction certainly seems to apply in fairy tales.

In a Russian fairy tale “The Robbers”, somewhat similar to “The Robber Bridegroom”, a priest’s daughter is left home alone. A robber comes in, but the girl kills

him with an axe. She is smart and understands that his companions, other robbers, will come to collect their loot. So she chops the robber's body and puts it in bags. Then, when the other robbers appear, in the dark, she pretends to be the killed robber himself and gives them bags with the dead robber's chopped body instead of the stolen goods. In the robber's voice she says that she will look for something else, and catch up with them later. Only after arriving home, the robbers realise what had happened. Mad, they decide to kill the girl. They dress up richly and nicely and come to the priest for permission to woo the girl. The girl recognizes them by their voices, but her father does not want to believe her: "Look how well dressed they are!" he says. "He was glad that such fine people had come to woo his daughter and that they did not ask for a dowry" (*Russian Fairy Tales*, 420). Thus, the girl becomes a wife to one of them and is taken to their forest house. They want to put her to death right away, but her robber-husband asks his companions for one night with her. The smart girl manages to escape and after a thrilling pursuit she gets home to her family. The robbers follow the girl to the house of her father, the priest, but this time he has gathered troops who seize and imprison the robbers. Although without such blood-chilling details as in "The Robber Bridegroom", this tale displays many similar details.

Generally, the tales about robbers have common details that deserve special attention: several men communally live together in a forest house; if one of them marries a girl, it is always the group's decision and with a purpose to kill her later; sometimes there is an old woman in the house who either warns the girl about the danger ("The Robber Bridegroom"), or – the opposite – plots against her with the robbers (Russian "A Peasant Son Saves Two Merchants' Daughters"). These fairy tale components recur very often and are similar to another group of tales, where it is

hunters, dwarfs, gnomes or just brothers living together in a forest. In fact, there are so many similarities in these two groups of tales – those about “bad” robbers and “good” hunters/brothers/dwarfs/etc. – that it may be logical to assume their common starting point. Moreover, they may be the two opposite sides of the same story, as a closer look at the common places between the two groups will suggest.

In the tales with the “good” brothers or hunters or gnomes, there is usually a girl who happens to be in a forest, typically in despair, finds their hut and stays with them, becoming their “little sister”. In some tales, it may be a youth left in the forest by his wicked relatives, as in the Russian fairy tale “The Wonderful Shirt”, but usually it is a girl. She cooks and cleans for the forest commune, and all members of the commune love her dearly. “Snow White” who becomes “a little sister” to dwarfs is the most obvious example of this type of narrative.

Three similar tales in the Grimms’ collection (“The Twelve Brothers”, “The Seven Ravens” and “The Six Swans”) tell about brothers who live in a forest, and their real sister who finds and joins them. In all three of these tales, the brothers have to abandon their homes under different, but always unfortunate circumstances, and their beloved younger sister has to save them from evil magic. These three fairy tales most likely come from the same motif, and although there is little open violence there, something sinister is felt in all three of them. In “The Twelve Brothers” a king wishes so much for a daughter that he promises to kill his twelve sons so his daughter, yet to be born, would inherit all his wealth and would not need to share with her brothers. The queen warns her sons and they run away into the dark forest, find an enchanted hut and live there as hunters, but “they grew so angry that they said: ‘Are we to die on a girl’s account? We swear to avenge ourselves. Whenever we meet a girl, her red blood will flow’”. At this

moment the reader feels that the brothers are about to become the classic fairy tale “robbers”, but then they do not: the story goes on without killing girls, at least not in this version of the Grimms’ tales. But the murderous words of the revengeful men hang so heavily, so ominously, that the reader cannot help associating the brothers with classic villains, even if only for a moment, and suspecting that the original version of the tale must have had some details omitted by the Grimm Brothers to make the tale more suitable for a young audience. A similarly suggestive discrepancy could be traced in “The Six Swans”: the brothers, who are not robbers themselves, live in a “robbers’ den” and warn their sister not to stay with them. The real robbers do not play any role either before or after this warning, thus making it unclear why the brothers have to live in the robbers’ den, unless they themselves have something to do with the wicked trade.

The equivalence between the fairy tale brothers and robbers is very suggestive: in some tales, the group of young men are “good” brothers, while in others they are “bad” robbers, but the overlap obviously exists. In any case, the motif of several young men living together as robbers or hunters and a wandering girl who finds their hut in the forest is too common in both Russian and German fairy tales to be ignored.

Vladimir Propp in *The Historical Roots of the Magic Tale* has a perceptive explanation for this phenomenon: he sees it as a historical occurrence, transformed by the folk imagination over centuries. It is, he argues, one of the essential phases following a puberty initiation ceremony practiced in tribal societies. Propp bases his conclusions on a rich ethnographic material collected in the nineteenth century among peoples of America, Africa, Polynesia and Australia, still at a pre-class stage of

development.¹⁰ Propp's main argument is as follows: In its basic structure, the fairy tale preserved people's concepts of death and the afterlife inherent to tribal societies. It also preserved traces of the ritual that is closely associated with these concepts, namely the initiation rites for young men entering puberty which are referred to as initiation, *rites de passage*, *Pubertätsweihe*, *Reifezeremonien*. This ritual is so closely linked with the concept of death, that one cannot be considered without the other. According to Propp, the fairy tale basic structure is as follows: departure from home on a quest, usually at a certain age; tests of a donor; difficult physical or mental tasks that the hero needs to solve; journey to the land of the dead; sometimes even death itself and a following resurrection of the hero; and finally, wedding. Propp compares this structure to the once widespread initiation rites: cruel ceremonies where various physical and mental trials, coupled with powerful hallucinogenic substances were to make the boys achieve a spiritual trance that symbolized death. The boys had to endure beatings, cutting of flesh or fingers, burning of skin and hair and circumcision. They were symbolically cut into pieces, devoured by a totemic animal, and so on. "The point was that the youth should figuratively die, experience his own death, struggle with it, and be reborn" (Haney 60). Once "reborn" the boy would become a full member of the clan and acquire the right to marriage.

Here, a little necessary elaboration might be required: at first glance, a contemporary reader, unfamiliar with the ancient ceremony, may find the senseless cruelty of these rites altogether improbable: why would such dreadful rites take place in the first place? This would seem to impugn the validity of Propp's theory. However, one

¹⁰ These sources include Boas 1897; Frazer 1911, 1912, 1922, 1928, 1933; Frobenius 1898; Gennep 1909; Loeb 1929; Nevermann 1933; Schurtz 1902; Webster 1908.

only has to look at the “initiation rites” of some present-day criminal organizations or at army hazing to see that not so dissimilar cruelty is still applied to the new members as a required proof of their “worth”. Such unsettling encounters as beating a recruit “to a pulp” or forcing a recruit to “endure a gang rape” are practiced to the present day, even in highly developed societies (MS-13 Primer: ‘The Most Dangerous Gang’ In North America). In this light, Propp’s connection of the fairy tale motif with these ancient rites does not seem improbable anymore, especially given the rich material the fairy tale itself offers. Propp believed that, desacralised at later times and then transformed under different societal norms, these elements provided one of the main themes of the fairy tale - coming of age and achieving social and sexual maturity. “Wondertales contain all these themes, and, moreover, they utilize them in a highly ritualized manner. The penetration of the ritual into the tales at some level can scarcely be doubted, even if that ritual must so far remain imperfectly known” (Haney 60).

As a consequence, if Propp’s hypothesis about the connections of this fairy tale theme with the initiation ceremony is plausible, his interpretation of the “robbers’ den” deserves our attention: After the initiation ceremony itself, the neophytes’ next stage would often be communal living in a specially built “men’s house”, usually in the forest, away from the everyday tribal life. “Functions of the men’s houses are diverse and unstable. It can be argued that in certain cases a part of the male population, namely young men from the time of puberty to marriage, no longer live in their parents’ homes, and go to live in a large, built for this purpose home, that is commonly called “houses of the men”, “men’s houses” or “houses of the unmarried” (Propp 203).

There, the young men live mostly by hunting; but also, as Propp notes, quoting from Schrutz’s findings, the neophytes are often granted the rights of robbery in relation

to the neighboring tribe, or, more often, in relation to their own: “The boys are no longer subject to the normal rules and laws, but are entitled to the excesses and violence, particularly theft and extortion of food. In ‘Futa Djallou’ the neophytes can steal for a month and eat whatever they want; in ‘Dar Fui’ they roam the neighboring villages and steal poultry’. This is not an isolated case, but a characteristic phenomenon. ‘The strength of the neophytes extends so far that they can usurp any article belonging to the uninitiated” (Schultz 107, 379, 425 qtd. in Propp). The meaning of this privilege, Propp assumes, is that the boy-soldiers and hunters need to develop opposition to the old house, women and agriculture. Robbery is a temporary prerogative of the new members.

This communal stage may have lasted up to several years, depending on the customs of a particular region. The youths went through long and rigorous schooling. They were taught hunting, secrets of a religious nature, ritual dances, songs, and all that seemed necessary in life. Sometimes totemic masks and other relics of the tribe were stored in these houses. The initiated and those who lived in the forest houses were often conceived and camouflaged as totemic animals, Propp suggests (203). The main weakness of Propp’s argument – something he has been criticized for - was his reliance on non-Slavic ethnographic materials for analysing the Russian fairy tale. As Haney observes “The problem is that every one of the elements just described can be observed countless times in many parts of the world, but no such rites are known among the Slavs, although many of these themes are to be found in other rites practiced by the Russians and described by competent authorities” (60). Nevertheless, Propp’s theory has been very influential, and contemporary folklorists have developed it further, in ways more applicable to the Slavic folklore tradition. One example is a research paper by V.

Balushok on "Initiation rites of Ancient Slavs. An attempt at reconstruction" (Этнографическое обозрение, 1993. № 4). In this article, the author reports a custom of expulsion of young men of a certain age from the village community among ancient Slavs, which was accompanied by a ritual of initiating them as "wolves". At a communal gathering, the young men were dressed in wolf skins and a ritual "expulsion of wolves" from the territory of the community was staged (Balushok, web). According to Balushok, the transformation of the youths into werewolves often occurred by throwing a wolf skin over their shoulders, as it was believed that a man putting on an animal skin turns into this animal. After the initiation ceremony, the youths had to live away from the settlements for some time as wolves. Reminiscences of wolf behavior among the youth unions can be traced in the behavior of Ukrainians and Western Slavs. The members of youth organizations committed ritual raids on villages and on the courtyards of individual owners, and sometimes teetered on the edge of robbery. In the course of these "pranks", these young men stole food and animals, demolished fences for firewood, stole straw for making overnight camps, and abducted young women who later became their wives. These events are reflected in the wedding ceremonies of Slavs, Balushok suggests: "In the central Russian dialects, the best man of the groom was called "a wolf", which ... is also associated with the considered phenomenon, in particular with kidnapping of women by the members of the "wolf unions" (Balushok, web). Here, Balushok refers to an old tradition when the best man symbolically abducts the bride during the wedding ceremony (Ivanov 118-127 qtd. in Balushok). This tradition is still widely practiced in Russia, the Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova up to this day, as I know from personal experience.

This “wolf’s life” taught the youth to control his natural aggression and consciously use it for solving life’s problems. Upon expiration of the term, the young men returned to the community where they were met by another ritual: wolf skins were publicly taken off them, and the “wolf nature” was “cast out” of them by beating them with sticks. After that, white shirts were put on them, which meant that the boys now became competent men, enjoying full rights of their society, were allowed to marry and to equip their own homes. From the moment when “the wolf essence” - rampant, wild and uncontrollable natural male aggression - is banished, a young man loses his rights of an uncontrolled expression of it, and becomes a responsible member of a tribe: “That is, the natural aggression of a man, by the end of the initiation, gets a positive vector, directed at creation – procreation and construction, not destruction of life” (Vasilets, web).

Balushok supports his arguments by referring to such authentic Slavic sources as “Tale of Bygone Years” (the oldest surviving chronicle of Kievan Rus, originally compiled in approximately 1113) that mentions these customs among the ancient Slavs (Повесть Временных лет, 15). The author’s resources also include a comparison of Prince Vsevolod’s retinue with wolves in the description of their upbringing as warriors in “The Tale of Igor’s Campaign”, a masterpiece of Old Russian Literature of late twelfth century. Another typical picture of the capture of women by members of the “wolf union” is provided by an oral epic poem, *bylina* “Volkh Vseslavevich”. Here the Volkh’s retinue, in war with the Indian Kingdom, chops “the old and the young/ only leave by choice / darling fair maidens” . . . and then marry those maidens. Volkh himself, according to the legend, can turn into a wolf, a bull, a falcon, and even turns his whole army into ants during the siege of the Indian Kingdom (Volkh Vseslavievich, web). The author also brings in the ancient Slavic myth about werewolves. “The ritual rebirth of the initiates into

wolves (or dogs) was the case for many Indo-European peoples in ancient times, in particular the Baltic, Germanic, Celtic, and Indo-Iranians” (Balushok, web). Given all these authentic Slavic sources, Propp’s theory may be more grounded than his critics originally thought.

However, other folk narratives aside, the fairy tale material does not supply many clear examples of “forest brothers” turning into animals, as far as we can judge from the Grimms’ and Afanasiev’s collections. There are many tales where the hero, or an anti-hero, has the ability to change his/her human nature into an animal one, but usually he or she is alone, not in a group of peers. In some tales, the witch-man keeps his apprentices in the form of stallions (Afanasiev, “Clever Trade”, #249-253), but this reference is indirect and not strong enough to use it as an example. On the other hand, both fairy tale collections supply multiple perfectly clear examples of “forest brothers” turning into birds: In the Grimms’ “The Twelve Brothers”, the brothers are turned into ravens, and to return them to their human form, their sister has to keep silent for seven years, “without speaking and without laughing”. In “The Seven Ravens”, seven brothers live as ravens, until their sister comes to save them. She needs to cut her finger and use it as a key to open a passage to the top of a glass mountain where the brothers live. In “The Six Swans”, the brothers are turned into swans by a witch-step-mother. To disenchant them, their sister has to sew them six shirts out of starflowers. This may be compared with the Slavs’ custom of putting white shirts on the young men after their “wolf nature” was cast out. In “The Wonderful Shirt”, young Ivan is abandoned in the forest. He wanders around and almost loses hope when suddenly he sees a hut. There three brothers live: an eagle, a falcon and a sparrow (Afanasiev, #209). In the well-known Russian tale, “The Swan-Geese”, the birds steal a little boy, and the boy’s sister

has to rescue him. The Swan-Geese are kidnappers: they are agents for Baba-Yaga the powerful witch whom Propp closely connects with the initiation rites.

Regardless of whether the brothers are “good” or “bad”, they always live together, do everything hand in hand, and share everything evenly. The fairy tale always emphasises that all food and drink is divided in equal portions: the ravens’ food comes “on seven little plates, and their drink in seven little cups” (“The Seven Ravens”); “the table was set for three, on the plates are three loaves of bread and before each a bottle of wine stands” (“The Wonderful Shirt”). In “Snow White”, “there was a table spread with a white cloth, and on the table there were seven little plates, each with its own knife, fork, and spoon, and seven little cups”. Snow White knows not to eat someone’s entire meal, and she eats and drinks a bit from each one of them. It is an important element, always reoccurring in these tales. The true hero knows the rules of the brotherhood! Propp parallels these fairy tale “rules” with the information on real life rules provided by Hutton Webster in “Primitive secret societies”: “The members of these fraternities, as a rule, do not testify against one another, and it would be a great insult to each of them if someone was eating alone when his friends were close. Indeed, their friendship is stronger than that in England amongst young men entering the university together. All members of the Union call each other brothers” (Webster 81, 156 qtd. in Propp). The fairy tale preserved very clear traces of this “male-only” institution, writes Propp.

And here we come to the subject of a woman entering this organization: Needless to say, normally women were not a part of these secret fraternal communities. An old woman, however, could be present in a role of a housekeeper, as she would not be seen as a sexual object and thus not as a regular woman anymore (Loeb 251 qtd. in

Propp). However, if a young woman appeared there it was only under special circumstances: she becomes a common lover for the community of the young men. This was a normal occurrence and the young woman was not treated with any disrespect. After a certain time these women were left to return to their villages, with gifts, and commonly would enter a regular marriage. Propp gives examples from Webster, Schurtz and Frazer: "The girls living in the men's houses were not subjected to any contempt. Parents even encourage them to engage themselves there . . . These homes usually have one or more single girls, who are seen as a temporary possession of the young people" (Webster 165 qtd. in Propp). Force was, however, an element in some communities: "The Bororo people - says Schurtz – meet their young men's sexual needs by forcibly taking individual women to the men's house, where they become lovers to several men simultaneously and receive gifts from them" (Schurtz 296 qtd. in Propp). Frazer provides information about girls living in the men's homes on the Pelau islands: in the time of her service she has to keep the house clean and watch the fire. Men treat her well and she is not forced to provide favours against her will (Frazer 19226, 217 qtd. in Propp).

There could be different reasons for these girls to join the male communities: their parents might have wanted them to join for economic reasons, they might have run from home, or have been kidnapped by the members of the groups. The fairy tale supports all these cases with similar fairy tale material. In "The Robber Bridegroom" and "The Robbers" the girl does not want to marry the suitor, but the father insists: "look how well dressed they are!" ("The Robbers"). In tales like "Snow White" it is an evil relative who forces the girl into the forest; in "The Legless and the Blind Bogatyrs", it is clearly a question of abduction: two heroes live in the forest, "one blind, the other with no legs.

They got bored, and came up with an idea to steal a girl from her father and her mother” (Afanasiev, # 200).

The main discrepancy here, of course, is the role the girl played in actual as opposed to fairy tale fraternities. In the fairy tale, the girl is either a sister, as in the German fairy tales mentioned above, or is treated as a sister, as in the Russian fairy tales mentioned above: “Be a sister to us, prepare some food for us and keep an eye on the house”(“The Legless and the Blind Bogatyr”). “When they looked at her, everyone wanted to marry her, but they could not agree, then took her as a sister, and respected her plenty” (“Magic Mirror” # 210). As we have seen above, Propp brings in a lot of material demonstrating that, in tribal societies’ reality, these young women were nothing close to sisters. He even suggests a couple of fairy tale examples where the hidden truth would sneak out. He refers to a tale where a banished stepdaughter enters the forest home of two robbers. They have to leave. “And they left her different meals and drinks: everything for you - you may eat and drink, and dress thyself as you want! . . . And by that time she begot a little girl with them”. With them, and not one of them, Propp emphasizes (212). Another good example provided by Propp is from a tale from Mongolia, where monogamy was established in law later than elsewhere. There, Propp suggests, the case of a communal lover/wife is expressed much more clearly: in this tale, seven princes go to the woods “to relieve their boredom”. They meet a girl of extraordinary beauty. “Look, what we offer you. We are seven brothers-princes, and we still do not have wives. Be our wife! The girl agreed, and they began to live together” (“Magic Dead” 31, qtd. in Propp 213).

The necessary death or near-death of the girl – Snow White has to appear to die, the bride of the Robber almost dies, the sister in “The Twelve Brothers” and “The Six

Swans” is almost executed by her husband’s mother/step-mother, etc – is also explained by Propp in light of his discoveries: the communal wife would have to ritually die too, before she would be free to leave the brotherhood: these places kept many secrets and must be kept a mystery from other women in the village. “They (i.e., the young women in the men’s house) are allowed to see and hear the songs and dances, from which other women are barred” (Frazer 19226, 161 qtd. in Propp). The symbolic (or maybe actual) death of a newly freed woman might have been seen as necessary for preserving the sacred tribe’s secrets (Propp 215-218).

Thus the conclusion that suggests itself is that the fairy tale motifs of both “good” brother-hunters and “bad” robbers come from the same historical root, and that originally a young woman living with them must have been their communal wife. However, at later stages of civilization, with more exclusive forms of marriage and more punitive attitudes to polyandry, this custom would be banned. And the fairy tale, reflecting on these changes, would need to “justify” it, either by deforming it into a villainous act of kidnapping of a woman or fraudulently taking a bride to kill her later, as we can see in the group of tales about robbers; or by “purifying” this relationship into a brotherly care about “a little sister”, as we have seen in numerous fairy tale examples. As Propp remarks, “If this observation is true, and there really is a historically conditioned analogy, this would mean that the tale reflects a later stage, the stage of decomposition of the old system, the stage when this custom is in conflict with the new system inherent to the agricultural way of life and required other forms of marriage” (Propp 220).

What remains puzzling is why the human imagination would preserve and crystallize the cruellest details of most brutal practices, if the practices themselves almost ceased to exist. Why should a poor sister need to cut her finger off if she wants

to save her brothers, or a wicked mother-in-law not only take away a newborn baby but also “[daub] the queen’s mouth with blood” and “accuse the queen of eating the baby” (“The Six Swans”)? Why would such a chilling description as in “The Robber Bridegroom” survive through centuries? Why not turn all forest brothers into the “good” type? What kind of satisfaction do these disturbing details bring to their listeners?

The very vitality of these details may suggest that they are not so much associated with a particular context of cultural history, but rather express an extra-historical archetypal behavior of human psychology. As far as we can tell, the macabre and supernatural horror themes seem to have startled people from the very early times, and do not fail to do so to our day.

The horror fairy tale of the past may have served the same functions modern psychologists attribute to the horror film these days: to satisfy a “need for excitement, the desire to feel intense emotions, and distraction from everyday concerns” (Goldstein, web). Glenn Sparks, a professor of Communications at Purdue University, suggests that the need for novelty is one of the important psychological reasons: All people are wired to pay attention to irregularity in their surroundings: “danger disrupts routine”. And curiosity about danger needs to be trained as “[it] is important for survival” (Sparks, web).¹¹ Sparks also suggests another explanation for the appeal of horrors, something he calls the excitation transfer process: “Sparks’ research found that when people watch frightening films, their heart rate, blood pressure and respiration increases. After the film is over, this physiological arousal lingers ... That means that any positive emotions you

¹¹ See also Kimberley A. Neuendorf and Glenn C. Sparks, “Predicting Emotional Responses to Horror Films from Cue-Specific Affect.” *Communication Quarterly* 36 (1988): 16-27.

experience – like having fun with friends – are intensified ... Instead of focusing on the fright you felt during the film, you recall having a great time” (Sparks, web).

It has also been observed that horror stories/movies are enjoyed more if the real surroundings of the viewer/listener are safe, familiar and comfortable, with other people around (Goldstein, web). This observation directly corresponds with what we know about the traditional manner of story-telling recorded by researchers: “[People] gather in crowds at the houses of those who are reputed to be good tale-tellers”, or “all the family assemble with the servants and labourers around the old-fashioned hearth, where the fire of oaken logs spirts and blazes, defying the wind and the rain or snow without . . . The children running about grow tired of their games, and of the tedious conversation of their elders, and demand a tale, it matter not what, of giants, or goblins, or witches – nay, even of ghosts. They are soon gratified” (Hartland 6-7). The macabre and supernatural themes seem to be so tenacious and susceptible to artistic refinements because, by playing on the audience’s primal fears, they “prepare” the listener to life’s dangers, and “warn of evil” while in a safe place (Goldstein, web).

Chapter 3: The Noble Outlaw and the Regular Thief

Thievery tales are present in the folklore and pagan mythology of probably every nation. The Greeks even had a god who was a patron of theft – Hermes, whose son, Autolykus, was the Prince of Thieves. In the German legend of the Nibelungen, all steal the gold of the Rhine from each other, the gods and mortals alike. In Russian animal tales, the fox is an archetypal character, who usually is a thief and a trickster. On the other hand, there is another type of a thief in mythology and folk narratives – a noble thief or a bandit who steals or robs not for his own profit, but for the sake of other people. This archetype is also a worldwide phenomenon. A good example is the myth of the heroic theft of fire for the benefit of humanity which is present in the mythology of many different nations: the Titan Prometheus in Greece; the hero Matarisvan in ancient Indian Rig Veda; the fallen angels and Azazel in the ancient Jewish Book of Enoch. This myth is also present in Polynesia and among various Native American tribes, and so on, according to Wikipedia. The following discussion of the Noble Bandit uses rather different material from that employed in earlier chapters, for reasons which will become clear as the argument develops. In returning eventually to the less elevated figure of the thief we also return to the central focus of this project, the fairy tale.

Eric Hobsbawm in his famous historiography *Bandit* suggests that the noble outlaw/robber, the Robin Hood – what Hobsbawm calls “the social bandit” – “is one of the most universal social phenomena known to history, and one of the most amazingly uniform” (20). This type of hero is present in most nations’ folk narratives. He also is richly presented in many countries’ Romantic literature and he even fashioned a genre of the so-called “Bandit novel”, especially popular in German, English and French literature

of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹² In addition, the Pirate novel may be considered an offshoot of the same genre.

In all these stories, there is a noble thief/robber/bandit who has put himself outside the law, committing crimes to protect the poor and disadvantaged. He rights wrongs, he avenges injustice, and he takes away from the rich and gives to the poor. Sometime it is a real historic person whose story acquired a myth; sometimes it is a fully fictional character. The reality of the hero's real existence and his true life are secondary for the Bandit myth, Hobsbawm writes (20). Why? Because in the first place, according to Hobsbawm, the real prototypes of the legendary bandits were very unlike their legends. And second, in this chapter I will speculate that the legend itself is an artistic projection of people's inner needs and wishes, rather than an account of historical events.

Ironically, the real historical persons were hardly as glorious and noble as the folk affection presents them in legends, ballads and songs. While it is unclear whether the archetypical Robin Hood really existed in the thirteenth century English midlands and what exactly he did, Hobsbawm supplies a gallery of recent real-life examples of discrepancies between the real historical "social bandits" and the legend they would attain (*Bandit*, 24). First of all, most of the real "social bandits" were much less significant figures than what the folk imagination made of them. The prototype of the legendary Juro Janosik (1688-1713), a famous Slovak outlaw, about whom hundreds of

¹² Authors of such works include Christian Spiess, Christian Vulpius, Carl Cramer, Johann Zschokke, Ludwig von Arnim, Wilhelm Hauff in Germany; William Harrison Ainsworth in England and Walter Scott in Scotland; Eugène Sue and Alexandre Dumas in France. In Russian literature Pushkin's "Dubrovsky" is an example of the Bandit novel.

songs survive to our day, in reality was “like most social bandits, a provincial robber in some lost corner of the Carpathians whose existence would barely attract the attention of the authorities in the capital” (Hobsbawm 46). Most important, however, is the fact that the questions of the noble bandit’s altruism and generosity are much-debated. Although, as Hobsbawm suggests, it is clear that the bandit would not rob the local poor as he needed their support against the authorities, it is also evident that some bandits did give to the poor sometime “whether in the form of individual beneficence or indiscriminate largess. . . No doubt, many bandits may have gained their reputation for generosity simply through paying generously for the services, food and shelter of the local population” (49-50). Besides, most historical social bandits did not behave nobly at all most of the time. But this would be forgotten, whereas their glory and benevolence to the poor folk would be exaggerated to mythic proportions. In this fashion, in Russian culture, for example, Stepan Razin (1630-1671), a cruel Cossack leader, known for debauchery, marauding and looting villages, has become a folk hero not only in Russia: he, in fact, was the first Russian about whom a thesis was defended in the West, right after his execution (Krotov’s Library, web). The German Johannes Schinderhannes (1778 -1803), who was known for petty theft, break-ins, armed robbery and blackmail and who, to save himself and his mistress, testified against his fellow gangsters - hardly a noble act - was nevertheless pronounced the German Robin Hood and highly romanticised in literature and popular culture. As Dr. Stephen Snelders of the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam suggests, the general attitude of such folk heroes “may more have been such as ironically depicted in the 1969 comic book *Jesse James*, a volume in the famous *Lucky Luke* series. This is an excellent though simplified example of how a cultural script works: Jesse becomes a bandit inspired by a book on Robin Hood, but

then decides to keep the booty he takes from the rich in his own (poor) family” (Snelders, web).

Even these few examples demonstrate that folklore, although rooted in reality, operates by its own laws. The disproportion between the myth and reality should not be any more surprising than that between “the realities of medieval knighthood and the dream of chivalry,” remarks Hobsbawm (45). Folklore answers to people’s inner needs. This is why it does not really matter if the noble outlaw myth originated from a real person or was a complete invention: it is the folk imagination and not the reality that appears to give rise to the myth.

What is important, however, is that people all around the world apparently have and have had a desperate need for such a hero. The Robin-Hood myth speaks to the human dream of a higher justice. Evidently, the need is so strong that “if there are no real [heroes], unsuitable candidates are pressed into service” (Hobsbawm 46). So then, what is this dream and who is this hero? His characteristics are more or less the same worldwide. Hobsbawm in “Bandit” summarizes the noble outlaw myth into nine essential points (47-63). Let us take a quick look at some (not all) of Hobsbawm’s points: First, as is already obvious, the hero’s key slogan is: take from the rich and give to the poor, “something instantly recognizable by all people who find themselves poor and have a grudge at what they see as the undeserved and anti-social wealth of the rich” (Snelders, web). A second feature of the noble robber is that he is forced into his career of outlawry as a victim of injustice, not in search of easy profits. Again, he uses violence but moderately. Moreover, he is just, and therefore “he cannot be in real conflict with the fount of justice, whether divine or human. There are a number of versions of the story of conflict and reconciliation between bandit and king” (Hobsbawm 58). Another important

element in these narratives is that the noble outlaw is invincible: “To some extent it expresses the wish that the people’s champion cannot be defeated . . . For the bandit’s defeat and death is the defeat of his people; and what is worse, of hope. Men can live without justice, and generally must, but they cannot live without hope” (56). Finally, Hobsbawm notes a characteristic that is especially interesting in relation to this project: his invulnerability “is almost invariably due to magic, which reflects the beneficent interest of the divinities in his affairs” (56).

Such a hero seems to be a perfect candidate for the fairy tale. Surprisingly enough, he is not. As far as we can judge from the Grimms’ and Afanasiev’s collections, the Robin Hood figure does not seem to be present in the fairy tale. The fairy tale hero may occasionally perform a heroic act, like slaying a maiden-devouring-dragon (an echo of human sacrifice), and thus free a whole country from evil (Afanasiev, #176); but when it comes to stolen goods, he is not in a hurry to distribute them. Disappointingly, he does not take from the rich to give to the poor. In fact, if our folk or fairy tale hero is a thief, he always steals for himself or for a family member. The only instance of the thief’s profit “distribution” – an ironic act of misused generosity – we can see in some Russian folk tales: when the thief is asked where the stolen money is, he answers: “I drank half, and squandered the rest on strumpets” (Sinyavsky 46). In the entire German collection, there is also one instance of an attempt to justify the Thief’s occupation: “I’m a master thief.... I steal only from the rich, from people who have more than they need. The poor have nothing to fear from me, I’m much more likely to give to them than to take,” says the Thief to his parents (“The Master Thief”). Promising at first, this tirade, however, is misleading: the story continues, but the Thief steals for his own satisfaction only, without so much as helping his poor parents, not to mention “the poor”

in general. This discrepancy may suggest a later moralizing addition by the Grimms rather than an element in the original tale. Other than that, the folk and fairy tale thief's philosophy is purely individualistic: be it a magnificent mystical firebird or a prosaic sack of money, the stolen goods are there for the thief himself and sometimes for his immediate family.

In a way, this is a more honest standpoint on the question of theft than the highly romanticized legends about the Noble Outlaw, which, as we have seen, rarely correspond with reality. It may also suggest that the fairy tale generally is of a more ancient origin than the more "socially conscious" ballads and stories picturing the Noble Outlaw: a more instinctually self-centered mindset with its conservative values seems to be an attribute of earlier stages of civilization. This implication corresponds with what researchers such as Propp, Haney, Hartland, and Sinyasky believe about the ancient past as the time of the birth of the fairy tale. According to Propp, the fairy tale elements go back to the events and ideas of pre-class societies (429). By contrast, Noble Banditry as a socially-conditioned phenomenon "seems to occur in all types of human society which lie between the evolutionary phase of tribal and kinship organization, and modern capitalist and industrial society, . . . including the phases of disintegrating kinship society and transition to agrarian capitalism," as Hobsbawm asserts (21). These socio-economic time references place the origins of all Robin-Hood myths in a significantly later period than those of the fairy tale. However this account does not explain the worldwide "Prometheus myth" - the theft of fire, which seems to fit in the Noble Thief myth, but belongs to earlier periods of civilization than those suggested by Hobsbawm as the Noble Thief myth time reference. On the other hand, if we examine the theft of fire myth across cultures, we will see that it features a supernatural being, not a human,

who steals for mankind: Prometheus was a Titan; Azazel a demon; Mātarišvan a deity. When it comes to similar Native American myths, it is a totemic animal –Coyote, Beaver or Dog in Pacific Northwest (Judson 1912); Rabbit in the Creek Native American myths - who brings fire to humans (Swanton 1929); Grandmother Spider in Cherokee mythology (Erdoes, Ortiz 1984). A totemic animal is, again, a supernatural being, a magic ancestor. And this quality classifies the Prometheus myth as closer to the creation myths, in a very different category from the Robin Hood legends, despite their superficial similarity.

Having established the important contrast between the narratives of the Noble Bandit and the characters of the folk tale, we can return to investigating the regular fairy tale Thief who is neither noble nor divine. He steals for himself or for the pleasure of practising the art of stealing, but he too appeals to the folk imagination: this character is richly presented in both fairy tale collections under consideration. The folk and fairy tale generally takes a positive attitude towards thievery. Comparatively few fairy tales picture thievery negatively. In those, the Thief is not the hero of the tale, but his/her antagonist. Such is the case, for example, in “The Magic Table, the Gold Donkey, and the Cudgel in the Sack” in the Grimms’ collection. Three brothers are looking for apprenticeship in different places, and each one of them is rewarded by a magic object at the end of the term. The older son receives a little table made of ordinary wood. This table, however, sets itself and can feed any number of people. The second son gets a donkey that spits gold. And the third one gets a magic sack with a cudgel that will beat anyone up on its master’s command. It happens so that the two older brothers in turn spend a night at an inn run by an unscrupulous innkeeper. The innkeeper steals their magic gifts by substituting them with regular objects, and the two older brothers return home cheated.

The third brother, however, gets to use his cudgel on the innkeeper, and thus recovers the magic table and the gold donkey for his family.

Afanasiev's collection also provides an example of the thief as antagonist. In his tale "The Slandered Merchant's Daughter", a Tsar sees a portrait of a merchant's daughter, a humble and beautiful girl, and falls in love with her. But his minister, evil and envious, smears her reputation, saying that she is a dissolute woman, and he himself has slept with her. To prove his story, he steals a ring from the girl's night table and shows it to the Tsar. In another version he is helped by a spiteful old woman. When the wicked plot against the girl is discovered, the minister is punished by the Tsar, and the girl becomes a Tsarina. Again, in the short, sad and highly moralizing tale "The Stolen Pennies" in the Grimms' collection, a dead child comes home every day because "it had known no peace in its grave": the child had stolen two pennies that were meant for a poor man. These tales are self-explanatory and do not require much analysis. A much more interesting subject for examination is the abundance of fairy tales that have a thief for a hero. Generally, there are two main types of tales of theft: one involving magic and magical objects (magic tales), and a more grounded, materially-minded theft (everyday folk tales). Thus in our analysis it is important to distinguish between the magic thievery and the everyday thievery. These tales are significantly different, and the thieves in them are of different kinds.

The main difference between the two kinds is obviously magic. When analysing the tales, it is essential to keep in mind the very special role that magic plays in folk imagination. Magic is supremacy. It can suggest divine knowledge, captivating irresistible beauty, universal justice or terrifying power. This is why the theft of magic objects is seen in a very different context from the everyday theft of money or other non-

magic goods. When it comes to stealing magic objects, the wrong-doing somehow goes unnoticed, disguised by enchantment and miracle. As Sinyavsky says, “Sorcery conceals thievery” (45).

In some of the “magic” tales, the thief’s abilities in fact are indeed magical, not human. In “The Thief and His Master” in the Grimms’ collection, the master thief is a capricious wizard, rather than a thief. In this tale, a man gives his son as an apprentice to the master thief. “I’ll teach your son all there is to know. Come back in a year’s time, and if you recognize your son you won’t have to pay me. If you don’t recognize him, you’ll owe me two hundred talers,” promises the master thief. In a very similar Russian tale #249-253, the parents would lose their son completely if they fail to recognize him. The father goes home, and his son stays and learns witchery and thieving. After a year of apprenticeship, the father, who does not have the money, becomes very worried that he will not recognize his son, but on his way there he meets a “little man” who teaches him to recognize his son in a bird’s disguise. So, the father takes his son home. Now the son, who has learned the trade, turns himself into an excellent greyhound and asks his father to sell him for good money to a passing lord, promising that he would come back right away. The father does it and the boy soon returns home as a human. Then he performs the same trick turning into a horse. The only problem is that the master thief, who is evidently a dangerous wizard, even a devil in some variants, feels cheated and attempts to get the boy back. In a succession of magic transformations – the wizard chases the boy as a sparrow, as a fish, as a fox - the boy finally wins and “bites the master’s head off”.

In the same –“magic” – category, there are plenty of tales where the thief is not a thief by occupation, but a fine young man, even a prince, who steals different magic

objects or – very often – a special magically beautiful or equally magically clever bride. In the “The Fine Lad, the Apples of Youth, and the Water of Life” (#171-178) discussed above, the “fine lad” with the help of Baba Yaga, who in some variants act with her two sisters, steals the apples of youth and the water of life from his future wife.

In the first variant of the Russian “The Magic Ring” (#190), a peasant’s son, otherwise a good lad, “feels like taking a ring from a dead tsarevna”. He does, and the ring turns to be magical. When he turns it, three hundred strong lads and one hundred seventy bogatyrs appear from it to fulfill all the owner’s wishes. This motif is somewhat similar to the Middle Eastern “Aladdin’s Lamp” tale, except that in the Arabian tale, despite being good-for-nothing, the boy finds the lamp in a cave on the Sorcerer’s command, rather than stealing it. In the Russian tale, however, not only does the hero steal the magic ring, he steals it from a dead body – normally, an exceptionally shameful act. But it goes somehow unnoticed since the ring is magical, and, with magic things, different “rules” apply. The lads and bogatyrs from the ring help the peasant’s son marry a tsar’s daughter, but she is not happy about marrying a commoner. She makes her new husband drunk; extorts the secret from him; steals the ring for herself and, with magic help, runs away leaving her husband to death. Luckily, the peasant’s son has helpers - a dog and a cat, whom he had saved in the beginning of the tale. The dog and the cat return the wicked wife and the ring to the hero. What is interesting that in one variant (#191) the evil wife is punished, whereas in another (#190), her misdeeds are excused: “The princess got up in the morning and sees that she is in the old place, she got frightened and did not know what will be done to her? And her husband came to the king, ‘Your Majesty! How do we punish the princess? ‘-’Oh, my dear son-in-law! We

will embarrass her with words, and you two go on living happily!’ After all, she too stole a magical object, not a simple one!

Another good example is the Russian fairy tale “About Ivan Tsarevich, Firebird and Grey Wolf”. In this tale, Ivan-tsarevich’s first task is to steal the Firebird that ruins the orchards of his father from its owner, another Tsar. Then, caught by that tsar in an attempt to steal the Firebird, Ivan-tsarevich is forced to promise stealing a Gold Steed in exchange for the Firebird from yet another Tsar. There, caught by the third Tsar, the owner of the Gold Steed, Ivan promises that he would procure Elena the Beautiful for a wife to the third Tsar, in exchange for the Gold Steed. With the help of a grey wolf, Ivan manages to steal all the desired creatures, but he falls in love with Elena the Beautiful and does not want to give her away; similarly, he does not feel like parting with the steed and the firebird. Thus, with the wolf’s help, he ends up stealing all three, Elena, the steed and the firebird for himself (#168). In this fairy tale - typical of its kind - the triple theft is not considered as thievery but as adventures, or even as “feats of chivalry”, as Sinyavsky calls it (45). The German “The Golden Bird” is a very similar tale, with a fox instead of a wolf for a helper.

Interestingly enough, in the last turn of the tale, two older tsareviches, Ivan’s brothers, find Ivan happily and light-heartedly sleeping with his beloved in a meadow. Jealous of his successes, they kill him in his sleep, and also, in their turn, steal his magical possessions. These last two acts of murder and theft are clearly regarded as criminal by the folk imagination though: in the end of the tale, the wicked brothers are tried and executed, while Ivan is happily revived and reunited with his beloved Elena the Beautiful and his precious bird and steed.

It is worth paying attention to two occurrences: first, the “illegitimate” murder, and then, the “illegitimate” theft. When sleeping Ivan is killed by his brothers and Elena the Beautiful cries: “I am the Princess Elena the Beautiful, and it is tsarevich Ivan who got me, whom you wicked men betrayed. If you were good knights, you would have taken him to an open field and defeated him there; but no, you killed him asleep . . . What praise can you receive for this? A sleeping man – he is like dead!” Here, using Hobsbawm’s words quoted above, the reader can see how the folk world-perception is “extremely sensitive to moral distinctions” between just and unjust killing, as already noted in the earlier discussion of *The Robber* (51). Again, the same principle is applied to theft: stealing from a stranger is acceptable and is not considered criminal by the folk, but to steal from kin is a grave offence. This “formula” helps in understanding many other fairy tales with thievery motifs.

A common motif, for example, in both German and Russian fairy tales, is stealing various magic objects from strangers or some other non-human beings. In “The King of the Golden Mountain” in the Grimms’ collection, the hero steals or rather cheats three giants out of their magic sword, a cloak that makes one invisible and boots that take one wherever one wishes. In “The Raven”, also in the Grimms’ collection, the hero steals a magic stick that opens door, the invisible cloak and the boots from three robbers attempting to share their loot. In the German “The Drummer”, the hero steals a magic saddle that can carry one anywhere from two arguing men. In “Night Dances” (Afanasiev #299) the hero steals the invincible hat and the fast-running boots from two peasants who do not know how to share their possessions. In “The Tale of the Strong and Brave Undefeatable Bogatyr Ivan Tsarevich and his Beautiful Spouse Tsar-Maiden” (Afanasiev #562), the hero steals from two forest spirits, who also try to divide their

possessions. Invariably, in all these fairy tales, the hero is either asked to help or offers his help in distributing the goods between the owners. Instead of helping, he cheats them and steals the objects for himself. This seemingly ignoble act does not seem to bother anyone except for the cheated owners. This repeated motif seems to suggest that cheating a stranger must not be seen as shameful if it helps the hero's goal and success. This world-view is especially obvious when we glance at the animal tales, which are considered to be amongst the most ancient kinds of folk tales (Haney 89-92). There, in Russian tales, a fox almost invariably steals from other animals and cheats them. In the German ones, it is a cat that usually plays this role.

Generally, the animal tales are beyond the scope of this discussion, but the characteristics that Haney suggests for them could also be applied to the thievery in magic tales of the kind discussed above: "What then might peasants have extracted from animal tales? The conservative virtues: trust in one's self and one's family, and be suspicious of "others, " whose physiognomies and values are different; achieve, regardless of the cost to others; save and do not share, steal but within the law; trickery and deceit are quite acceptable" (92). Since the animal tales depict exactly human characteristics rather than actual animal behaviour, we can see a certain "survival manual" in these not-so-virtuous behaviours.

If we turn this discussion of the thief from "magic tales" to "everyday tales", we will notice that this category deals with a "professional" thief and is rooted in everyday affairs. This category is also very popular amongst the folk, as we can see in both our collections. In the "everyday" tale, the Thief proudly brags about his excellent abilities. He self-importantly declares that he can steal a count's favorite horse from the stable guarded by many people, a bed sheet from under the sleeping count, and even the

priest from the church (“Master Thief” in the Grimms’ collection). In the Russian collection, the Thief manages to steal his landowner’s wife (#387), eggs from under a duck (#388) and pans from a walking man (#384).

All these tales are abundantly supplied with “loving details” on how exactly, by what tricks or skills, the Thief manages to steal the hardest to steal objects (Sinyavsky 46). In Grimm’s “Master Thief” for example, this is how the Thief tricks the guard to steal a stallion: “The master thief went to the nearest village, bought an old peasant woman’s clothes and put them on. He stained his skin and painted wrinkles on his face, and when he was done no one could have recognized him. Finally, he mixed a powerful sleeping potion with some old Hungarian wine, filled a keg with it, and put the keg in a basket which he slung on his back. Then with slow, reeling steps he made his way to the count’s castle. . .” (586). The storyteller seems to savour every bit of the story.

Such folk appreciation of skillful thievery puzzled and depressed the Russian religious philosopher Evgeny Trubetskoy. Working with the Russian tale, he saw Russian moral degradation in the folk’s love for the Fool and the Slacker, and even more for the Thief. It is in the Russian tale, Trubetskoy proclaimed despairingly, that sympathy for laziness and thievery is creating an apotheosis of the Slacker and the Thief: “If in some folktales, the thievery is concealed behind a mysterious magic veil, but in others, depicting the lowest level of moral consciousness, the thievery is undisguised and unadorned, it appeals in and of itself, as the ‘art’ and the science of living well” (Trubetskoy, translated by Turnbull and Formozov in Sinyavsky, 48).

In response to this moralistic approach, Sinyavsky comes to the defence of the Russian people, commenting that the folk tale Thief is known to many nations, and is by

no means exclusive to Russia. “This has nothing to do with their moral level and rarely reflects on their real way of life. Thieves and deceivers feature in many German folktales, for instance, although Germany is not as thievish a country as Russia is,” he suggests (49). Sinyavsky’s assertion is very true, as the following examples will show. He offers a very different explanation for the Thief’s popularity: the Thief in these tales is presented as a skillful master of his art; and it is this mastery, not thievery in itself, that is celebrated by the folk. “The folktale Thief has no (or almost no) relation to real-life thieves. For one thing, he doesn’t hide the fact that he’s a thief” (49).

In support of Sinyavsky’s argument, we can see that one characteristic of both Russian and German thief tales is that it is not the money itself that the thief is usually after. As Sinyavsky puts it, “stealing for him is not a means of gain or living well . . . but an end in itself. It is a pure art” (49). Moreover, stealing provides a chance for the Thief to prove himself, to show off his skills. That is what inspires him: “Count,” said the master thief, “think up three exploits, the harder the better, and if I fail to perform them, do what you like to me” (“The Master Thief”, the Grimms). The thief is bold and daring, and the audience admires his intrepid ways rather than what and how much he steals. “His methods are wonderfully sly and surprising, which makes them a matter of aesthetics... [And] since stealing in the folktale fulfils a purely playful, entertaining and aesthetic function, the Thief’s part may be acted by any number of other characters – a simple peasant, a soldier, or even Prince Ivan, or various animals, most often the Fox, famed for his cunning”(Sinyavsky 49).

In most of these tales, the so-called theft is not even an actual theft really, but rather a trick that a skillful thief manages to perform. In several variants of Afanasiev’s “The Thief”, Klimka the thief makes a bet with his landlord that he will steal his wife from

him. He waits for the landlord and his wife to go for a ride, runs in front of them and pretends to hang himself from a tree. When they see him, they assume he is dead and drive away in a rush; but Klimka jumps off the tree and runs on ahead of them and hangs himself up from another tree again. "Again the landlord spied him and said, 'Can it be that we've got two Klimkas?' He stopped his horse and said to his wife, 'You stay here and I'll go and take a look at that Klimka'. The landlord got up and walked away while Klimka got down from the tree, sat next to the landlord's wife, and rode away".

Obviously, both the teller and the listeners extracted enjoyment from the thief's adventures! This too should not surprise us at all. In discussing the Robber, we commented on the various explanations of the pleasure arising from narratives of horror. Similar arguments apply to tales of thievery. The thief tales must have given their listeners the same thrills that contemporary movies and stories about excellently planned and executed bank robberies give the audience today. Rephrasing Sinyavsky's words, mastery also conceals thievery.

Moreover, in support of Sinyavsky's explanation, we might look a bit more closely at the non-magic Thief tales. Significantly, the more rooted into reality the folk tale is, the less sympathy it has for the thief himself. Here, in the everyday-life tales especially, the practical side of folk culture shows up. While the Thief's tricks may be appreciated, the pleasure of the tale does not preclude a deserved punishment for the thief sometime later. This combination should not be understood as moralistic, however. It is just that the tale does not concern itself with the Thief's future beyond his present adventure. This, for instance, is how a Russian folk tale Thief ends up: "Sen'ka extricated himself out of trouble, grew a beard anew, and started to live well again, and to put his clutches in another's goods, and would have lived a long time, but he was recently hanged" (#

390). After enjoying the thief's adventure, the pragmatic folktale shows a bit of practical common sense: in real life people do not like thieves.

Similarly, although with a bit more respect, the German "The Master Thief" ends with: "The count said: 'You're the prince of thieves, and you've won your wager. This time you're getting off with a whole skin, but see to it that you leave my territory. If you ever again show your face in these parts, you can count on a prompt elevation on the gallows.' The prince of thieves took leave of his parents and went back into the wide world. He hasn't been heard from since".

Another example of the thief threatened with punishment can be found in "The Robber and His Sons" ("Der Räuber und seine Söhne"), excluded from the Grimms' collection at my disposal, but available in Russian translation online. There, an old Robber, who is an equivalent of a thief in this tale, develops an aversion towards his occupation, and attempts to talk his sons out of the thief's/robber's profession: "Oh, dear children, - said Father - why you do not want to live in peace and be content with less? Live honestly – you will live longer. Robbery is an evil and dishonorable thing, it leads to a bad end: you will not enjoy so-acquired wealth. You will finally be caught and hanged on the gallows" (The Grimm Brothers Tales, web). Of course, the sons do not pay attention to their father's plea, and attempt to steal a horse from the queen. They are caught and only their father's life adventures related to the queen save them from sure punishment. The father amuses her with his stories in exchange for his sons' lives. This tale is less materialistic since the sons' everyday theft is only an excuse for the father's fantastic life stories that involve escaping a terrible ogre (in the Odyssey's manner) and saving a beautiful woman with a child. This is probably why the tale sympathises with

the father's goal and lets the sons successfully escape the gallows: everything magical is appreciated by the fairy tale.

Another small hint about the folk attitude towards everyday thievery in the Russian narratives are the thieves' names themselves, or rather the pejorative forms of their names: Russian allows several different forms of the same name, formed by special suffixes; some suffixes have an endearing connotation, while some others are derogatory. The suffix "k" suggests either a close friendship amongst peers or, if not with peers, a mild disrespect or condescension. Sen'ka, the thief of the tale mentioned above ("The Thief", Afanasiev), should and would have been called by his full name of Semyon, had the story character been held in high esteem. The same is with "Van'ka" instead of the more appropriate "Ivan" in another variant of the same tale (Afanasiev # 389). And this fact also supports Sinyavsky's point: it is not the thieves themselves the Russian folk like; they like a good story.

Nevertheless, a similar ending of a similar tale suggests something else as well: "Klimka came out into the open, on a free Cossacks spree, carousing and stirring until he laid his impetuous head down" (# 387). On the one hand, Klimka is another pejorative name-variant of Klim. On the other, the widely spread poetic epithet "laid his impetuous head down" suggest admiration for the character himself; admiration for his audacity, boldness and unruliness, so curiously intrinsic to Russian culture. Here, we observe another phenomenon – the romanticized ideal of a free life. To a Russian peasant, trapped in everyday life, unattainable freedom would always be romanticized, even if this freedom could only be achieved by means of thievery and the cost of one's life in the end.

The German tale treats its everyday Thieves with similar disregard: In the tales about “the thievery proper”, the folk did not bother to name the Thief at all: he is called simply “a thief” (“The Four Artful Brothers”). In the “Master Thief”, a bit more appreciation is shown: he is called “the master thief” and “prince of thieves” to pay tribute to the Thief’s exceptional abilities. Such treatment also suggests that for the German folk as well, a thief is a thief, and it is only his skills and mastery that are of interest, not the Thief himself. However, if the German tale is not about thievery per se, but rather about the hero’s magic adventures, the hero is called somewhat lovingly “the son”, as in the “The Thief and His Master”, or “a boy”, as in “The Golden Bird” and “The King of the Golden Mountain”, because his main role in those tales is that of the youngest brother. Sometimes the hero is called by his “real” profession – “the drummer”, as in “The Drummer”.

All these examples, Russian and German, support Sinyavsky’s argument about folk sympathy invested in magic, not reality. The fairy tale magic is what transforms the everyday life, “elevate[s] the downtrodden and mak[es] the unhappy happy” (Sinyavsky 35).

Conclusion

Throughout this discussion, it is clear that the folk and fairy tale values do not always correspond with those established by conventional morality, which is in itself an artificial concept in any case. However, most of the “sins” committed in these tales can be explained by the people’s historical situation, and by their fading customs, while the attraction of narratives based on such “sins” comes from the people’s needs and hopes. Fairy tales are important as a unique and indispensable product of human vital functioning. In all folk and fairy tale manifestations, people’s imagination reflects life processes. The tales could be as didactic as real life can be, as opportunistic as real life can be, or as cruel as real life can be. And most importantly, folk and fairy tales, through the magical, realize people’s wishful thinking. “[The fairytale] is a dream about the triumph of the wretched, about the metamorphosis of a hind into a tsar” (Jakobson, 651).

No matter how fantastic the fairy plots may be, the tales always seem psychologically true: they reflect those human features and needs that have survived through centuries and have not lost their relevance to us today. As Maria Tatar puts it: “What keeps [fairy tales] alive and pulsing with vitality and variety is exactly what keeps life pulsing: anxieties, fears, desires, romance, passion, and love” (xix).

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