

Feminist Analysis in Russian Fairytales
Monika Skuriat Russian Fairy Tales, Russian 0090
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Russian fairytales can be analyzed in a multitude of ways. One such way is through Feminism. After the section on feminist analysis, it became very clear that fairytales were not always fair to their female characters. Analyzing a fairytale this way reveals the kind of prejudices and social inequalities shown in them.

In many of the stories, it became quite obvious the male characters were better off than the female ones. The male characters had many more speaking parts in tales, were portrayed as active, heroic, valiant, brave, rational thinkers, and overall very dominant. On the other hand, when it came to the female characters of these tales it seemed as though they were always quiet, did not have many speaking parts, very passive, never fought physically for themselves, and when it came to their actions they were more impulsive and acted on feelings rather than logic like the males. When women in these tales had many speaking roles they were automatically portrayed as witches, disobedient wives, or nagging and chattering women. They used negative descriptions by saying that the women nag and chatter when they talk to show that when a woman talked too much it was a very negative quality of hers because she was not supposed. In a modern way of putting it, her place was in the kitchen barefoot and pregnant.

These such stories are not very good role models for children to follow because it makes it seem like it is acceptable for the men to dehumanize and discriminate against females as youths and then as they grew into adulthood. Also, it leads the females to believe that this is the way it is simply supposed to be.

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The story entitled “The Mayoress” (141) is a very good example of this kind of negative example towards women. The story begins with a wife being described as ambitious, and implied that it is a bad thing that she is ambitious. However, if it were the other way around, then the husband would be considered aspiring and it would be a positive attribute. The woman has quite a few speaking parts, but they are all considered bad, because she shouldn’t really be talking so much. The husband comes home from the council, no doubt made up of only men, and the woman asks what they talked about. The husband mentioned that they wanted to elect a new mayor and she volunteered saying she wanted the position. The husband went to the elder’s and told them that she wanted the position and they elected her. He did not do this because he thought she was a good candidate or because he thought that she would do a good job. He did this because he started that she needed to be taught a lesson and punished because she was a bad wife. Nothing in the story prior to this indicated that she was in any way a bad wife. However, because she was outspoken and wanted to be in a male dominated position this was a negative characteristic. The only thing mentioned was that she was ambitious which women were apparently not supposed to be.

In the next half of the story the woman was not only made out to be a bad wife but also an incompetent mayoress. She was not able to collect the poll tax in time and was even mentioned as taking bribes. When the Cossack came to collect them she did not admit to doing wrong but was portrayed as a coward that hid to try to get away from the responsibilities she neglected. The husband, instead of actually trying to save her, hid her in a sac with the other bags of grain. The Cossack came in and asked the

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husband where his wife was. He did not try to protect her or shield her from harm, but instead he let the Cossack whip the bag she was in until she screamed that she did not want to be the mayoress anymore. This clearly shows young girls listening to this tale that only physical punishment can come from wanting to be in a man's position of authority. It requires responsibility and is clearly not a place for her. The physical punishment of the wife changes her mind, and let's her see that that is not the correct thing for her to be doing. She is beaten like a farm animal that is misbehaving and not doing the job that is his duty. The conclusion of the story states that she no longer wanted to be the mayoress, because that wasn't her place in life, and that she obeyed her husband from then on. Needless to say, this teaches young girls that they are supposed to obey their husbands as if the husbands own them.

Another common quality of a fairytale is how the maidens, even the wise ones, are always portrayed as beautiful. They never have bad tempers and they seem shy, quiet, and morally good. Most of the ugly female characters are also shown as being mean, having bad tempers, and being ambitious because, apparently, that is something no girl is supposed to be. When a female character is beautiful, that is her gift and the only thing she needs in life. Even if she has to suffer a little bit in her life, it only makes her more intriguing and desirable because she faced hardships and became kind, quiet, and beautiful anyway. She is beautiful, and because of that she will be chosen by the prince and then she will get to marry into wealth and status. The entire goal of her life is to be married, but that is where the fairytale ends. They never show what married life is like after the wedding. They do not show the realistic part that explains how difficult a

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commitment like that is and how there is a chance she'll be miserable with her "prince." It leads girls to believe that a handsome wealthy prince will come and find her because of her beauty, and not because of who she really is, and will make her life happy and perfect. This is not the case in reality for most women.

The marriage into wealth and status is her reward in life for being beautiful. She is rewarded with a man. The man is put on a high pedestal because he is the great reward that she wants to get through her beauty. She is no one's reward. A good example of all of this is the story entitled "The Princess Who Never Smiled" (360). In this story there is a princess who is sad all of the time and never smiles. She is described as beautiful and glorious, but she just sits around and doesn't talk much, and shows no outward emotions as if she were dead inside. The King decides that what she needs is a man, a man that can make her smile. He sets up a contest; whoever can make the princess smile can have her as a bride. He does not care if she wants to marry that person, or if she wants to marry at all. The only thing on his mind is to give his daughter away as a beautiful prize because she is so beautiful that any man would be happy to have her no matter what kind of man he is. He treats his daughter like an object by overlooking her wants and giving her away as if she were his to own. The middle of the story describes a young worker who is honest and hardworking. He meets magical animals that talk to him and offer to help him whenever he needs it if he gives them a coin. He gives it to them and travels to a different kingdom where he ends up in front of the princess's window. He faints and falls in the mud and the animals come back to clean him up. Technically, these animals cleaning him make her laugh not the man alone. So the father asks who it was and the

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princess points to the worker who turned into a handsome youth. In one of the last sentences in the story it states that “The King kept his royal promise and gave him what he said he would.” It does not say “who”, it says “what.” This strongly implies that she is nothing but an object to both her father and the men who want to marry her.

Many fairytales have female characters that are characterized as being more or less smart. However, this does not really break the feminist barrier because of the fact that the female is smart but must be beautiful and is still always rewarded with a man and marriage.

In conclusion, many fairytales dehumanize and discriminate against women. In the two examples I have given they do not give them their won voice by having the father make most of their decisions for them. The good women are portrayed as quiet, meek, and beautiful. The bad women are portrayed as talkative, because the men did not believe that a woman should talk much. The women in these fairytales are rewarded for their beauty and quiet personalities by getting to marry handsome princes. These things teach young girls reading these tails that they too should not speak their voice, should obey make figures, and that beauty is the most important thing in life. Also, it teaches them that they will be rewarded in life by getting to marry a prince, which deceives them. The fairytales also never mention in detail what happens after the marriages.

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- 1.) Afanas'ev, Aleksandr. *Russian Fairy Tales*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books. 1945.