

Symbolism of the Rooster in Eastern Slavic Folktales

For this research project three different folktale texts were examined. The three chosen texts include *Ivanoushka the Simpleton*; *The Fox, the Hare, and the Cock*; and *The Tale of the Golden Cockerel* by Alexander Pushkin. All three texts originate from and are relatively well-known in Ukraine, Russia, and/or Belarus. Additionally, these three texts were chosen because they all contain a rooster character, yet this character is used in very different ways. In *Ivanoushka the Simpleton* a rooster is used repeatedly in the background, but does not have any noticeable importance to the characters or the audience. In *The Fox, the Hare, and the Cock*, the rooster is a main character, anthropomorphized, and is given autonomy and dialogue. In *The Tale of the Golden Cockerel*, the rooster is again a main character, but is less of an autonomous being and acts more as an object. By looking at the use and symbolism of roosters in these different contexts, a larger scope of analysis was possible.

In modern eastern slavic culture, roosters are a widely popular and beloved symbol: they are often featured in embroidery, painted onto tea pots or other tableware, made as ceramic or straw-woven statues kept around the home, and are even a very popular lollipop shape. Although roosters are a relevant symbol to the eastern slavic people today, the historical reasoning for this animal being held in such high esteem may be largely unknown. This research paper will be exploring historical cultural beliefs about roosters, and if and how these beliefs have influenced the representation of roosters in eastern slavic folktales.

To explore the cultural significance behind the rooster, this paper will examine historical folk beliefs, customs, traditions, and celebrations in the eastern slavic nations by using volume four of *Slavic Antiquities: Ethnolinguistic Dictionary* (“Славянские Древности: Этнолингвистический словарь”), collected by Nikita Tolstoy. *Slavic Antiquities* is a series of volumes with rich and in-depth collections of mythology, folklore, and traditions of the slavic nations. *Slavic Antiquities* volume four contains a chapter on the rooster, and provided a rich base of knowledge for this research. All the following information is sourced from *Slavic Antiquities* as a reference text.

The rooster is host to a large variety of symbolism. Across the slavic nations, the rooster connected to the sun and to fire, he is a major symbol of male sexuality and fertility, and he is believed to be kin with angels and to hold powers capable of dispelling demons, witches, disease, and other unclean forces. The rooster holds the esteemed role as the guardian of cities, land, homes, and of his owners. The culmination of these beliefs of the roosters of being a guardian, casting out evil, and promoting fertility has led to a series of traditions involving his sacrifice, often additionally with the burying or spreading of various body parts or blood, for the prosperity of people.

To begin, the rooster has some broad natural symbolism that associates him with the sun and with fire. This symbolism is mostly drawn from the roosters appearance and behaviour. The roosters bright red comb and feathers earn his connection to fire, visually bringing forth the imagery of flame. In Ukrainian and Belarusian beliefs, dreaming of a red rooster is an omen of a house fire. In addition to their red comb and feathers, many roosters often golden feathers as well. This golden image of the rooster helps to connect him to the sun, along with the habit of

roosters to begin crowing at sunrise. Different Russian legends claim that the rooster is either a brother of the sun and crows out of happiness seeing the sun every morning, or that he is actually calling for the sun to rise. Overall, the roosters symbolic connection to the sun and to fire is based heavily in reality due to the roosters behaviour and appearance.

The rooster is also heavily associated with male sexuality, fertility, and often marriage as well. Often the rooster was used in a crude and joking manner in rituals, symbolizing the sexual lewdness of men in their youth (often only the period between puberty and marriage).

Occasionally at bachelor parties a mock trial would be held for a rooster as a personage for the groom. The roosters sins would be listed, often sexual in nature, and the rooster would be killed with the grooms 'sins' along with it, allowing for a happy marriage. In certain Ukrainian cultures, an ornament made of rooster and goose feathers was made as a decoration for a wedding. In Russian tradition, roosters would be sculpted from dough and placed on wedding bread loaves. The reason roosters are so heavily intertwined with male sexuality is likely due to their flagrant and abundant sex-based behaviours. Among the farm animals commonly kept by landowners, the rooster is likely the most vocal and promiscuous with its sexual behaviour, including frequent mating and mate-guarding. In sum, the natural behaviour of roosters have likely made them the lead symbology for male sexuality and fertility.

Perhaps the roosters greatest role is that of guardian. Across the slavic nations, the rooster is seen as a being who is capable of driving off negative, evil, or otherwise unwanted forces. In this respect, roosters are occasionally likened to the angel's counterpart on earth in Polish and eastern slavic legends. It was believed that the rooster was able to perform this banishment with his crowing. When the sun rose, the rooster would sing, and all supernatural beings of the night

(including witches, the undead, werewolves, demons, and other spirits) would be chased out. The rooster was also widely believed to be able to chase away death and disease. In Russia it was thought that cholera could be cleansed from a person or a town, either by bathing a black rooster in the water supply, sacrificing a rooster and burying him at the towns entry gates, or by killing a rooster and giving the sick blood from the comb to drink. After death, an individual's bed sheets were hung in the chicken coop for 3 days so the rooster could sing upon it and dispel any negativity clung to them. The rooster was also predominantly seen as a protector of the house, keeping both the structure and the homeowners safe. In Belarusian and Russian historical beliefs, a rooster was sacrificed and buried in the ground where a new home was to be constructed in order to cleanse the land and protect the family. In summation, the rooster was thought to carry the practical role as guardian of homes and homeowners, able to ward off disease, death, misfortune, and negative spirits.

To begin the analysis of the rooster role in eastern slavic folktales, we will look at *Ivanoushka the Simpleton*. In this folktale, a wise man has three sons. On his deathbed, he asks that his sons each spend one night at his grave after he passes. When the time comes, the two eldest boys are unwilling to go and convince the youngest, Ivanoushka, to go in their place. As a result, Ivanoushka visits his father's grave three nights in a row. Each night, he falls asleep and awakens to his father's ghost. The two men chat until dawn when a rooster crows to guide in the new day, and Ivanoushka's father's ghost is forced back into his grave. After the three nights his father rewards Ivanoushka with a magic steed and Ivanoushka goes off on many an adventure, getting a wife and impressing a tsar. As mentioned previously, in this story the rooster only plays a small and seemingly insignificant role. However, if we look closer we see that the roosters

historical cultural symbolism is quite apparent. In this tale, the rooster shows connection with the sun, and he shows his role as guardian and dispeller of unclean spirits. The rooster only appears in the story at the dawning of a new day. In this respect he is associated with the sun, crowing as it begins to rise. His guardian role is clear when Ivaoushka's father's ghost is banished by the rooster. Although the father is not necessarily evil, his ghost is a supernatural being of the night and has no place amongst the living during the day, and so is forced back into the grave.

Additionally, the ghost is only banished by the roosters *crowing*, which is in accordance with historical cultural beliefs. Overall, although the rooster plays only a minor role in *Ivanoushka the Simpleton*, the roosters cultural symbolism is still present and clear.

In the second tale, *The Fox, the Hare, and the Cock*, a hare is run out of his home by a fox. The hare wanders the street until eventually a pack of dogs crosses his path. They see his sorrow, and upon learning a fox stole his home, they vow to help him. However, once they arrive at the home and call on the fox, she threatens them and they run away with fear. The hare continues on his way and meets a bear. The bear hears the whole story, and tells the hare he will get rid of the fox. However, once again the fox yells out threats and the bear flees. This ordeal occurs once more with an ox. Finally, as the hare has given up hope, a rooster holding a scythe comes across his path. The rooster tells the hare they he will be able to drive the fox out, and goes to the house. He begins to sing a menacing song: "Cock-a-doodle-doo! I'll cut that fox in two with my scythe so sharp and true!" This frightens the fox, and she rushes out the hare's home out of fear. As she flees, the rooster cuts off her head with his scythe. The hare is ecstatic, invites the rooster to live with him, and the two live happily ever after. In contrast to *Ivanoushka the Simpleton*, this tale shows the rooster as a main character who has autonomy and personal

drive. This story shows once again the roosters role as a guardian, driving out negative forces. Although usually the rooster is known to banish supernatural creatures, in this tale the fox acts as the antagonist who is an unwanted intruder and so still fits into the motif. As well, the rooster is once again shown to expel negative forces with his song, which have threatening lyrics in this tale. Further, this story also shows how the rooster is seen as a protector of the *home* and protecting the owner of the home, which is the most common protective role of the rooster in historical beliefs. Overall, *The Fox, the Hare, and the Cock* portrays the rooster as having an intrinsic motivation to protect homeowners from unwanted and evil forces.

The final story is *The Tale of the Golden Cockerel*. In this story a powerful king wages many wars in his youth, but begins to grow tired of them in his older age. He asks a sorcerer for help, and receives a magical golden rooster with a crimson comb. The rooster was able to know when, who, and where an enemy would attack. The king was pleased, promised to repay the sorcerer, and set the golden cockerel on the tallest spire of his castle. The rooster would crow out when he sensed an attack, warning the king and allowing him to send out his army to meet the enemy. After being thwarted in their attacks time and time again, his enemies lose heart and stop attacking, allowing the king to live in peace. However, some years later the rooster crows 3 times in succession. The first time, the king sends his eldest son to meet the foe. The second time, his youngest. The third time, he goes out himself. The king comes across his two sons dead by each others blades, but is distracted from his grief by a beautiful foreign princess. Seduced, he forgets his sons and brings the princess back to the castle. Once he arrives at the palace gates, the sorcerer appears and asks for the princess to be his reward in exchange for the golden cockerel. The king denies the sorcerer and kills him. Upon seeing this, the rooster flies down from the

spire and kills the king. In this story, the roosters once again has a clear role of protecting the homeowner and eliminating evil. The rooster is magical and sings when enemies are planning to wage war which dissuades them after time, this is another reiteration of the rooster casting out negative forces with his crowing. Later in the story when the rooster kills the king after he murders the sorcerer, it may seem that the rooster has turned back on the usual motif as he murders his owner. However, the king at this moment has now established himself as evil and the roosters actions are actually still consistent: he smites the evil force (the king) after it killed his original owner, the sorcerer. Additional to the protector role, the roosters solar symbolism is also predominant in this story. As opposed to *Ivanoushka the Simpleton* in which the symbolism was shown by the rooster's crowing at dawn, in *The Golden Cockerel* the connection is instead shown by the roosters appearance. The beautiful golden feathers and crimson red comb are a direct representation of the birds solar connection, invoking the imagery of the bright golden sun. Overall, the roosters protector and solar symbolism is once more shown in *The Tale of the Golden Cockerel*.

In summation, the rooster is a prominent and historically important symbol for the eastern slavic people. The rooster symbolizes natural elements such as sun and flame, male fertility and sexuality, and played a major role as a guardian from death, disease, and unclean spirits. In folktales from this region the roosters portrayal remains consistent with cultural beliefs, as the rooster is often portrayed as a benevolent protector with solar attributes or connections.

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