

Baba Yaga - The Villainess of Russian Folklore

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The first person to publish Russian fairy tales was Dr. Samuel Collins (1619-1670), an Englishman and a physician to Tsar Aleksey, father of Peter the Great. After his return to London and his death in 1671, several tales, together with his notes, were published as *The Present State in Russia*.

The most comprehensive collection of Russian fairy tales was compiled by Aleksandr Afanas'ev. Afanas'ev (1826-1871) was a lawyer by education who collected and published the tales from 1855 to 1864. Selections from Afanas'ev's collection were translated into English and published by Pantheon books.

Here we will use Pantheon's collection of Afanas'yev's collection of fairy tales.

Baba Yaga is a common character in Russian fairy tales. She is not unique to Russian folklore, but appears fairly regularly throughout Eastern European fairy tales.

In Pantheon's collection, there are 12 stories that mention Baba Yaga.

We will go over these three:

The Frog Princess, p.119

Baba Yaga p.194

Vasilisa the Beautiful, p. 439

Baba Yaga plays many roles. Alternately, she is a villainess, a kidnapper and devourer of small children, an ogress, a powerful sorceress, or a helpful grandmother-like figure.

In the *Frog Princess*, Baba Yaga is the Helper - gives advice to Prince Ivan looking for Elena the Fair, a.k.a. the Frog Princess

In *Baba Yaga*, a tale bearing striking similarity to Mother Holle, from Grimm's fairy tales, she rewards the good daughter and kills the bad one.

In *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, Baba Yaga is a powerful, and evil, but helpful sorceress, of all fairy tales, this one presents Yaga as the most powerful, controlling the Sun, Day, and Night.

In all the countless stories, there are recurrent elements, which are independent of what role Baba Yaga plays:

-the hut is in the forest.

-the hut has chicken legs, and is turned away

-hero has to say special words, to make the hut turn, so the hero can enter (for some reason, he or she can't just walk around)

-Baba-Yaga is referred to as “The Bony Legged”. She never walks, she flies in a mortar, prodding it with a pestle, and sweeping her traces with a broom

-she “smells the Russian smell”, threatens to eat the hero up, and sometimes does just that.

- instead of running away, the hero demands food, drink, and place to sleep, to which Baba Yaga instantly agrees.

Interpretation of fairy tales

In the book *Historical Roots of Magic Fairy Tales*, V.A. Propp draw parallels between the fairy tales and the rites of passage practiced by the primitive societies. Based on this theory, we are going to interpret the recurring elements of the Baba Yaga tales.

hut in the forest - the hut is always in the forest - huge, dark, mysterious and dangerous. That’s where the real adventures begin. In many mythologies, the road to the world of the spirits, dead, or just a different world leads through the forest.

Sometimes, the hut is described, as “no door, no windows”. It straddles the border between the two worlds - one cannot walk around it, but must go through it. In order to go through, one must know the magic words. By knowing what to say, the hero proves, that he is the hero - some things he just knows.

Bony Legged- Yaga is always lying down - on the stove, or on the floor. Sometimes she flies in a mortar, but she never, ever walks. Also, she is described with her nose “grown into the ceiling”. However, she is not a giant. It is her hut that’s too small, confining, like a coffin. She is guarding the other world, world of the dead, so she herself is dead.

Fie, Fie, I smell Russian smell - not necessarily Russian (English ogres smell Englishmen), but human, a.k.a.. living being. In many tales, dead/spirits recognize the living by their smell: to the dead, the smell the living is as unpleasant and disturbing as the smell of dead is to the living. Additionally, as live people can’t easily see spirits, the dead can’t see the living. That’s why Yaga relies on the scent, not sight. In some fairy tales, she is actually described as “not seeing”.

demands for food and drink - When Yaga threatens the hero with imminent death, he demands food, drink and a place to sleep. Instead of getting angry, Yaga usually agrees with his demands. Why? By demanding the food of the dead the hero states that he belongs to “this other world”. If one wants to leave the world of the spirits, he must avoid the food of the spirits, but if he intends to stay in this world to complete the quest, he actively seeks it out.

chicken legs, Or, rather, bird legs - are a reminder of the prior zoomorphic appearance of the hut. In his book, Propp cites numerous examples, where the houses in which the initiation rites took place had animal appearance: with doors representing jaws, animal legs, etc.

Additionally, Baba Yaga herself has power over animals, birds, etc. In some parallel fairy tales, Baba Yaga is replaced by an animal. Her bony or, sometimes, animal leg is her connection to the animal world.

In a hunter-gatherer society, the ancestor worship was closely related to the animal worship, a.k.a. a totem animal. In some cultures, death was perceived as turning into an animal - a totem animal or just reincarnation in an animal state. With time, the animal spirit guide took form of a human with animal traits. Incidentally, humans with animal traits, especially legs, are common in folklore - satyrs, Scandinavian trolls, or devil's hoofed foot in Grimm’s fairy tales.

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