

# TEACHING RUSSIAN FOLKLORE

## R E P O R T

### Designing a Russian Fairy Tales Course

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#### BACKGROUND

By 1996 the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Pittsburgh, like many other Slavic departments in the country, had experienced a significant decline in both the number of Russian language majors and overall enrollments in our language classes. On the other hand, in addition to Russian and other Slavic languages, our Department had a long history of teaching Russian literature and Russian culture in English, and these courses had always proven popular among undergraduate students seeking to satisfy one or another of the University's general education requirements. Because we identified general education as a successful but still underutilized area where a Slavic department can play a significant and visible role in a post-cold-war university, one of our faculty proposed that we expand on our general-education successes by offering a new course in what for us was a non-traditional area: Russian Fairy Tales. In order to maximize the number and range of students who might enroll, this new course would have no prerequisites and would strive to accommodate even incoming freshmen with no prior training or preparation. Although one principal motivation underlying the development of this course was the expectation that expanding our Department's role in the undergraduate curriculum would serve the important educational mission of making Russian culture more widely available and accessible to the University community in general, two other considerations also influenced our planning. First, we hoped that offering a new and potentially

popular course could increase our Department's overall student credit hours, since we recognized that our administration could not reasonably be expected to allocate new resources to a Department that did not participate in undergraduate education in a numerically significant fashion. Second, we hoped that the access to additional students provided by a popular new course in English would enable us to recruit interested students into our Department's other offerings, both those in English and those involving Russian language study.

#### INITIAL ASSUMPTIONS AND COURSE DEVELOPMENT

Our principal source of primary fairy tale texts was, of course, Afanas'ev's collection, but we understood from the beginning that our course should involve more than just an opportunity for students to read Russian fairy tales. Accordingly, we set ourselves the additional goal of encouraging students not only to read and learn about Russian fairy tales, but also to approach the study of fairy tales from new perspectives. With this in mind, we integrated the tales themselves into four contextual modules:

1. Russian folk belief (based on Linda Ivanits' book with the same title).
2. A psychoanalytical approach to the study of fairy tales (based on Bruno Bettelheim's *Uses of Enchantment*).
3. A selection of primarily sociological readings (e.g., feminist and neo-Marxist approaches to fairy tales, Marina Warner).
4. Reflections of Russian fairy tales in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian literature (Pushkin, Gogol', Tolstaia, Sadur) and visual arts.

To help provide a familiar context for the study of unfamiliar Russian texts from unfamiliar theoretical perspectives, we incorporated selected Western texts (Grimm, Perrault, Disney) into the course, as well. And to help focus the students' attention on the theoretical foundations, we promised them on the first day of class that by the end of the course they would never again read fairy tales the way they had previously, a goal that students almost invariably agree we have achieved by the last course meeting.

In addition to primary fairy tale readings and secondary theoretical readings, the course has relied heavily on non-literary sources and transpositions of Russian and non-Russian fairy tales, including film (from the pagan festival scene in Andrei Rublev to contemporary animated and non-animated American cinema), ballet (e.g., Swan Lake), opera (e.g., Sadko), orchestral music (e.g., Prokof'ev's Cinderella, Musorgskii's Night on Bald Mountain), painting and drawing (e.g.,

Vasnetsov, Bilibin, Zvorykin, icons, Palekh, folk art), and costume and stage design (e.g., Bakst, Benua). The course was taught for the first time by two instructors to approximately sixty students, a number that has increased steadily since that time, and that would probably continue to expand if we did not cap it at the limit of our teaching resources. The remainder of this report describes how we have adapted the structure of the course in response to this growth in popularity.

### WHAT MAKES RUSSIAN FAIRY TALES POPULAR

#### General Education Requirements

While students select their major subjects according to their professional aspirations and, if we are fortunate, their intellectual interests, in many universities, including ours, their choice of other courses is often controlled by the need to satisfy a large and complicated set of general education requirements. Russian Fairy Tales at our university satisfies a requirement in non-western foreign culture. While many students enroll in our course because of a genuine interest in the subject matter, many others simply consult a list of courses that satisfy this requirement and choose from among them something that sounds reasonably familiar or appealing. Many such students might never have enrolled in a course in Russian Fairy Tales had it not been accepted by the undergraduate curriculum committee as satisfying a general education requirement.

#### Reputation

Several courses at our university have achieved a reputation with both undergraduate students and their advisors as interesting, educationally valuable, and accessible to students with little previous training not only in the subject matter of the course, but in college-level education in general. These courses are not "easy A's" (the percentage of A-type grades in Russian Fairy Tales has fluctuated between a low of 6% and a high of around 20%), but they do not require, for example, that students have acquired the skills they will obtain later by completing the University's basic expository writing course. Furthermore, one of our graduate students has a regular, full-time job in our University's undergraduate Advising Center and has ensured that all undergraduate advisors are aware that Russian Fairy Tales will provide a meaningful course not only to specialists in folklore or children's literature, but also to the average first-semester freshman. Through word of mouth on the part of both students and advisors, Russian Fairy Tales has almost never failed to fill to capacity. We have kept people apprised of its existence by

offering it every semester and in an increasing number of venues. In general, our Advising Center has informed us that one of the keys to maintaining interest in a popular course is to offer it every semester, so that both students and advisors can rely on it as a permanent option.

### SUBSEQUENT DEVELOPMENT

#### Texts

As new instructors have taught the course, the literary and non-literary texts have changed in many ways. An instructor with a particular interest in structuralism and formalism added an essay by Jakobson and Bogatyrev on folklore as a special form of communal creativity, as well as selections from Propp's Morphology of the Folktale. Another instructor with similar interests introduced excerpts from Max Lüthi's European Folktale. The release of Snow White: A Tale of Terror after the course had first been established enabled us to incorporate an effective cinematic representation of the horror aspect of this classic fairy tale as a treatment of the same subject matter dramatically different from the version produced by Disney Studios. While feminist approaches to the study of fairy tales have remained a constant part of the course, the specific feminist theoretical texts have changed with the interests of the instructors. More philologically-oriented instructors emphasize, for example, Ruth Bottigheimer's analysis of verbs of speaking in the Grimms' tales in her 1986 Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion, and Paradigm. More culturally-inclined instructors have concentrated instead on the sociologically-oriented essays in Jack Zipes's Don't Bet on the Prince.

#### Enrollment

Russian Fairy Tales has grown to the point where in fall 2000 the main course (taught by two instructors) quickly met an enrollment cap of over 200 students. Student interest remained so great that the Advising Center urged us to add another section of 100 students (taught by a single instructor), and provided extra funding to support this course. We regularly offer an additional section of this course in the University's extension school, called the College of General Studies – an arrangement that makes the content available to nontraditional students who may need to take courses on weekends, in the evening, or off campus in some of the surrounding communities. CGS underwrites the cost of a teaching assistantship to support this instruction. Most recently, we have begun teaching Russian Fairy Tales in the University's summer sessions (a time when our Department had traditionally scheduled only language courses), and the University has made

additional teaching assistantships available to summer instructors. We are mindful, of course, that we are not a "Department of Russian Fairy Tales," but, by trying to respond to student demand to the extent that our faculty and graduate teaching assistant resources permit, we have managed to make the Slavic Department part of the education of hundreds of students every year who might otherwise never have known that we exist.

### Technology

Much as our materials have changed in response to the different and growing knowledge of an increasing number of instructors, so have our classroom methods. The multimedia nature of this course was new for many of the instructors – our early sessions were taught in classrooms that required us to bring in and set up slide projectors, VCRs, CD players, and tape players. We quickly learned not to attempt to use more than one or two different pieces of equipment in a single meeting, and we also learned to schedule the course in classrooms already configured for multimedia teaching whenever possible. Here we were fortunate that the University of Pittsburgh had been diligent in anticipating and satisfying, through equipment purchases and installations, an expanding interest in media-supported instruction. As our class size grew to over one hundred students, we began using transparencies and overhead projectors, enabling students in ever larger auditoria to follow outlines of lectures while taking and organizing their notes. In the second year the course was offered we developed a support site on the World Wide Web, where we repost the overheads and visual images that we use in class, and where we also publish supplementary material (such as a glossary of Russian terms used in Linda Ivanits' Russian Folk Belief). Most recently, we switched from overhead transparencies during lectures to Microsoft PowerPoint, which has enabled us to incorporate still images directly into our presentations and thus eliminate the use of a separate 35mm slide projector. One of our greatest organizational challenges has been preparing the web versions of the PowerPoint presentations sufficiently in advance to enable students to print their own copies and to bring them to class as a way of organizing their notes.

### EVALUATION OF STUDENTS

Our evaluation methods began with attendance, class participation, short essay testing, and two optional extra-credit writing assignments: an original fairy tale (which had to conform to the conventions of the genre as studied in the course) and a more traditional research or analytical paper.

### Examinations and Quizzes

Originally, the course required four examinations during the semester, with examination structures that combined multiple choice types of questions (true/false, mix-and-match, short identification) with short essays. As the enrollment grew to the point where it became impossible for the two instructors to grade over two-hundred essay examinations, we shifted, reluctantly, to four machine-graded multiple-choice tests. We subsequently added short-answer quizzes, which are laid out on a single page in a way that makes it possible for a single person to correct two hundred of them in less than an hour. In the spring 2001 semester the exam- and quiz-based portion of the grade relied on four examinations (25 points each, for a total of 100) plus the best four of however many quizzes we administer (10 points each, for a total of 40). Some instructors have awarded additional points for regular attendance and for oral participation, while others have found it too difficult to keep track of oral participation in a course of this size.

### Class Participation

Student participation in class was one of the original requirements of the course, since all our instructors have considered active learning an indispensable part of effective undergraduate teaching. As the size of the course has grown, the instructors who continue to incorporate class participation explicitly in the grade have had to develop new ways to track it. One successful strategy that we developed to promote participation has been to award vouchers to students as they speak (intelligently) in class. We have found that handing out these physical tokens to recognize their contributions has two benefits: it helps focus the students' attention on the importance of participation and it makes it easier for us to keep clear and consistent records of how much each student participates (students write their names on the backs of their vouchers and return them at the end of the session, so that we can update our grade books accordingly).

As a different approach to expanding the opportunity for student participation, in the fall 2001 semester for the first time we are teaching the large section of the course with over 300 students in a new format, with meetings of the entire class twice a week and "recitation sections" (of 25 students each) once a week. Following our University's suggested guidelines, the person with primary responsibility for the course conducts the two large meetings and also one recitation section, while teaching assistants or other instructors (including one undergraduate teaching assistant, an accomplished Russian major) each conduct up to four one-hour recitation meetings. In addition to providing a smaller and more comfortable environment for student participation,

we anticipate that the additional assistants will enable us to add short essay questions to our examinations and perhaps to incorporate a small number of short writing assignments. We have been guided in this development by the experience of colleagues in other departments, such as Anthropology, where there is a tradition of teaching popular undergraduate courses to several hundred students at a time.

#### Extra Credit

As was noted above, some instructors have provided optional extra-credit writing assignments as a way of addressing student interest in creative participation. Given the high enrollment and limited personnel we have been able to devote to this course, the extra-credit options are manageable only because not all students take advantage of them. In fact, one reason instructors enjoy these assignments is that so many students who are successful in the course in general (and who do not actually need the extra credit to improve their grades) choose to submit them.

#### WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

Russian Fairy Tales continues to be far and away the most popular course in our Department. Its popularity has inspired us to add other new and successful English-language general education courses in Slavic culture ("Science Fiction: East and West" regularly meets its enrollment cap of 50 and our new course "Vampire: Blood and Empire" reached its cap of 120 within a week of the beginning of the course registration period the first time it was offered, and has enrolled approximately 200 students in three sections in the fall 2001 semester). Our Department's overall student credit hours have increased steadily over the past several years, even while such numbers have stagnated or fallen in many other Slavic departments. Currently our enrollments are roughly average for Arts and Sciences departments at our university, which is an above-average achievement for a Slavic department at the start of the twenty-first century.

As noted above, we are not, of course, a "Department of Russian Fairy Tales." While adding new general-education courses, we have maintained successful older ones, including surveys of Russian culture and Russian literature. The personnel to support our new courses has come primarily from consolidation elsewhere in our curriculum, including a more efficient distribution of lower-enrollment advanced Russian language courses and graduate seminars. Furthermore, because undergraduate general education has a high priority at the University of

Pittsburgh, our Dean has provided additional teaching assistantships and instructors to cover increased enrollment in Russian Fairy Tales and other general education courses.

We have noticed that a few Fairy Tale students subsequently decide to study Russian language, and even more enroll in our other general-education courses, but thus far Russian Fairy Tales has not proven as fertile a recruitment tool for our language program as we had hoped. One reason for this is surely that many students simply do not have room in their schedules (alongside majors, minors, general education requirements, internships, study abroad, etc.) to make the sort of long-term commitment required for serious language study. But we suspect that another reason is that we have not done all we can to recruit effectively. With this in mind, last year for the first time we incorporated a "Russian Alphabet in Thirty Minutes" module in the Fairy Tales course. We hope that the experience of learning to recognize Bilibin's signature in Cyrillic at the bottom of his drawings will tap into the excitement that some students experience when learning a new alphabet, and will also help overcome the irrational fear on the part of some students that they will be unable to come to terms with an alphabet of only thirty-three letters, half of which they already know either from English or from campus fraternity and sorority life. Because the alphabet module is intended to support a general recruiting goal, we scheduled this session to fall just before students begin selecting their courses for the coming semester.

The World Wide Web site for the University of Pittsburgh's course in Russian Fairy Tales is <http://clover.slavic.pitt.edu/~tales/> and is accessible to the general public. Other Slavic departments interested in developing their own courses in Russian Fairy Tales are welcome to visit that site and to adopt any materials that they consider useful. We look forward to improving our own course in response to innovations developed by colleagues at other institutions. Interested readers can reach David J. Birnbaum at [djbpitt+tales@pitt.edu](mailto:djbpitt+tales@pitt.edu). The names of other faculty and graduate students who have taught our Russian Fairy Tales course over the past several years, and who contributed to this report either directly or through their development of course materials, are listed at the beginning of this report.