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Individual essay contest

“Unity in Diversity: Russia and the English-Speaking World. Time for Equal Opportunities”

Research work (essay)

“Images and traditions of riddles in Russian and British folk culture”

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Thesis plan

Introduction

- Some people underestimate the importance of the riddle genre and focus only on its entertaining function
- A riddle is a complex phenomenon reflecting people's knowledge of the outside world and their national philosophy
- Different cultures have their favourite images in folklore, and by analysing them one can draw conclusions about the world picture of a particular nation.

Main part

- Russian and British folk riddles about the human body reflect the spirituality of the Russian people and the pragmatism of the British.
- The human activities reflected in Russian and English riddles are different due to the historical and geographical context of the countries.
- Both cultures widely reflect one of the natural elements and demonstrate a reverence for nature and its role in sustaining folk’s existence.
- Some natural phenomena cause great fear among the British people, while in Russian riddles natural phenomena mostly do not have a negative connotation
- Generally, Russian and British riddles depict the same animals using images that emphasise its stereotypical traits, but there are also notable differences in the depiction of animals, that allows us to see the difference in the worldview of these peoples

Conclusion

- The study of Russian and English folk riddles has revealed the distinctive features of these peoples

Each nation has its own unique culture that can provide insight into the characteristics of its society. It's incredibly interesting to plunge into the culture of a country to understand the features of the people living in it. Folk culture, including riddles, is an important aspect of understanding a nation's mentality and worldview. For a better comprehension of the subject of this essay let's refer to dictionaries. From the definition of the Oxford Advanced Lerner's Dictionary[1], the word riddle is a question that is difficult to understand, and that has a surprising answer, that you ask somebody as a game. This is not an entirely correct definition, as a riddle is not always a question. Dmitry Ushakov[2] gives a slightly different interpretation: "A riddle is an allegorical representation in a short formula of an object or phenomenon to be guessed; an expression requiring a solving". Both definitions focus on the entertaining function of the riddle. However, this is too superficial view of its essence. For some people underestimate the importance of the riddle genre I suggest digging deeper into this topic to get the full picture of why it's important to study folk riddles in order to fully embrace the national philosophy.

Folklorists are convinced that riddle is a collection of people's knowledge about the outside world and is an overview of the people's world view, covering the complexity and diversity of the national picture of the world, including in this concept the attitude to certain objects and phenomena and the reflection of folk beliefs and everyday life. From this perspective, the riddle is like a repository of the centuries-old experience of the people and helps to pass it on to the next generations by means of the oral tradition[3]. "Riddle is the only genre of folklore that is devoted to minor objects and phenomena that are constantly presented in human life", folklore researcher Vera Mitrofanova[4] says. These objects

[1] Hornby (2000)

[2] Ushakov (2008)

[3] Oral tradition is a form of human communication wherein knowledge, ideas and cultural material is received, preserved, and transmitted orally from one generation to another.

[4] Mitrofanova (1978)

and phenomena express their typical, standard features, recording a naive way of knowing the world. At the same time, metaphorical and narrative complexity complicates the perception of the object by shifting attention to its abstract or profound aspects, making it difficult to guess.

Hence, the riddle is not just a word game or a fun exercise, it has deep roots in the culture and traditions of peoples that are very interesting to study and analyze. Different cultures have their own favorite images in folklore, and by comparing and analyzing such images from Russian and British folk art, we will be able to draw conclusions about the peculiarities of the world perception of these nations, which will be the aim of my research. To do this, I suggest exploring two of the most popular thematic fields in folklore: man and nature.

The theme "man" is presented through riddles containing the image of the human body (nose, leg, hair etc.) and riddles telling about his life, his activities. Russian folk riddles about the human body often use metaphors and comparisons to describe body parts e.g.: *"Two brothers live side by side, but they don't see each other" (eyes).* It also often contains elements of folklore, for example: *"*The *Red Maiden sits in the dungeon, and* the *scythe on the street" (carrot).* In contrast, British folk riddles are often more straightforward and concrete than Russian ones: *"What has a head and a tail but no body?" (coin)*. Moreover, British folk riddles about the human body are often based on logic or wordplay, such as *"What always runs but never walks, often murmurs, never talks, has a bed but never sleeps, has a mouth but never eats?" (river).*

These differences reflect the disparate cultural values and worldviews of Russians and British. Russian culture is traditionally oriented towards spirituality. Russians often see the world through the prism of metaphors and symbols. Instead, British culture values pragmatism, logic, and science, viewing the world as a collection of specific objects or events controlled by logic.

Human activities captured in Russian and British riddles are also dissimilar. Russian riddles focus mostly on agricultural work (*"Standing there are nine*

brothers under one hat" (a heap of rye)), reflecting the importance of agroculture in Russia, needlework (*"She clothed the whole world, but she herself was naked" (a needle)*) and cattle breeding, represented by the riddles about animals (cow, horse, chicken).

English riddles, in turn, often revolve around military and sailing themes due to Britain's geographical location and historical context. The British's active participation in wars and their reliance on the sea made these topics prevalent in their folklore. Sailing is represented by riddles about the seas, oceans, ships and their constituents (anchors, sails). War riddles in English folklore often discuss battles, weapons, and military traditions. Weapons and trophies are perceived with respect and reverence, often personified and speaking on their own behalf. The participants of military events are brightly opposed: "us" are positive characters expressing courage, nobility, loyalty, and "alien" are negative characters, endowed with the qualities of vileness, cunning, wickedness.

Then, if it comes to blows and battle,
I feel no fear of this murderous foe.

The number of war riddles pointing out that the military sphere was so important in the life of the people that it was firmly established in folklore. In contrast, there are not many folklore works on this subject in Russian culture. The undeveloped theme of war in Russian folk riddles suggests that war was not an integral part of the lives of most Russian people and they viewed war as a temporary and unnatural state, disrupting the normal course of life.

In the topic "nature", the basic images differ greatly between the two cultures. Both Russian and British folk culture widely reflect one of the natural elements: earth in Russian culture and water in English. Water in English folklore symbolizes freedom and lightness, power and human utility (*"Three lives have I / Gentle enough to soothe the skin, / Light enough to caress the sky, / Hard enough to crack rocks"*). It is a source of life and is historically connected with the basic activities of the peoples, such as navigation and fishing. The reason for this is the peculiarities of the geographical position of the UK, surrounded by

water. In Russian folklore, the most reflected element is the "earth", which is portrayed as mother ("*The mother was angry, but she covered the children with a downy blanket until the red day"*) or feeder (*"She feeds the world, but she doesn't eat anything herself"*). This image traces the respect of the people for the earth, as agriculture was the basis of their life and the harmony between man and nature. Earth provided food and determined people's existence. Despite the differences in imagery, both cultures demonstrate a reverence for nature and its role in sustaining folk's existence. It is treated with deep respect, reflecting the gratitude of people.

Natural phenomena are also reflected in riddles. The main image in the British riddles is a storm. It is strong, militant, violent, bringing destruction. It shows that some natural phenomena cause great fear among the British people.

The waters ferment, sea-horses foaming.
The whale-mere roars, fiercely rages,
waves beat upon the shore; stones
and sand, seaweed and salt spray, are flung
against the dunes when, wrestling
far beneath the waves, I disturb the earth,
the vast depths of the sea…

Natural phenomena depicted in Russian folk riddles mostly do not have a negative connotation. The image of snow and frost, often appearing in Russian riddles due to the long and cold winters in the country usually carries a positive connotation: Frost is compared with an old man who builds ice bridges (*"*An *old man* with *no axe is building a bridge"*), draws patterns on the windows (*"He has no arms and no legs, but* he *can draw"*) and tries to get into the house (*"No knocking, no tinkling, he runs under the bench"*). Snow is also represented through a variety of comparisons, mainly with positive connotations: white tablecloth, swan, oat, down blanket, carefully covering the ground. Its image is connected with purity, care and a new beginning, which indicates that despite the harsh winters, the people were not afraid of natural manifestations and per-

ceived them either neutrally or even positively, for example including winter attributes in their traditions and culture.

Animals and birds are one of the most numerous groups of riddles in both cultures. In Russian folklore there is more mention of domestic animals and livestock (cow, sheep; dog, cat), reflecting the importance of cattle breeding in Russian culture. Wild animals and birds such as wolves, foxes, bears, hares are also commonly mentioned, mostly in confrontation with humans, as ones posing a danger or pests. In British riddles wild animals such as wolves, foxes, squirrels, hedgehogs, and birds such as swans, nightingales are often found. Pets and cattle such as dogs, pigs, chickens are less common. Animal-human interactions are mentioned less frequently than in Russian folklore, the animal is usually represented living its own life. There are some differences in the animal imagery used in riddles between Russian and British cultures, associated with the characteristics of the fauna of a particular country, but, overall, they often describe the same animal. Both cultures use imagery that highlights stereotypical features of the animal. For example, the British fish riddle emphasizes its lack of legs (*"No-legs lay one-leg, two-legs sat near three-legs, four-legs got some"*) and the Russian one says almost the same thing (*"It has wings, but it doesn't fly; it has no legs, but it can't be caught"*).

However, there are also notable differences in how the same animal is portrayed in each culture's riddles. E. g. the bull in British riddles is associated with freedom and evokes sympathy, while speaking on its own behalf. This allows a reader to see him as an equal and feel empathy towards him.

I was little ... my sister fed me. ...
Often I tugged at four dear brothers,
each one gave me daily to drink,
through a hole freely. I throve happily
until I was older and left all that
to the swarthy herdsman.<...>
I had a ring on my neck,
suffered woes on my way, was forced to perform
my share of labors. Often the goad hurt me
sorely on my sides. But I was silent,
never spoke out to any man,
if ever the pricks were painful to me.

At the same time in a Russian riddle with a similar plot bull is portrayed as a working animal, without emphasis on its emotions, which allows not to sympathize with the animal and take his work for granted: *"When I was young, I played four pipes, when I became old, I raised the earth"*. So, the differences in the images of animals in the two cultures allow us to see the differences in the world picture of these peoples through their views on animal labour.

Summing up, it can be stated that the study of Russian and British folk riddles revealed the distinctive features of these peoples. To draw the conclusion, I can say that folk riddles are a valuable source of understanding of the unique cultural features and outlook of these two peoples. I was able to see the specificity of each nation in their similarities and differences to reasonably conclude: "Unity in diversity!"

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Appendix 1

Examples of British war riddles:

Uuob is my name read in reverse.
I'm a beautiful thing, shaped for fighting.
Whenever I am bent and there flies from my bosom
the poisonous dart I am all eager
to drive afar off the deadly bale.
Whenever my master who shaped me that pain
loosens my limb I am longer than before,
till I spit forth again the death-blended bane,
that very fell poison which erst I swallowed.
This that I speak of leaves no man easily
if that which flies from me should ever touch him,
so that perforce he purchases surely with his life
that fatal drink, a full atonement.
Unstrung I obey no man, but only
when skilfully tied. Tell me my name. (A bow and arrow)

I protect my hearth, my hoard and my home,
surrounded by strands and filled within
with excellent treasures. Often by day
I spit abroad the terror of spears.
My success is the greater the more I am filled.
My master sees this, how darts fly from within me.
Sometimes I swallow the swart dark weapons,
the poisoned darts. My entrails are good,
precious to warriors, the hoard that I hold.
Many remember what goes through my mouth. (Ballista)

I'm a strange creature, shaped for a scrap,
dear to my lord, finely decorated.
My clothing is motley and bright metal threads
mount the deadly jewel my master
gave me <…> A king enriches me
with silver and precious stones, honours me
in the hall; he doesn't stint but sings my praises
to the gathering – men swigging mead. <…> (Sword)

<u>Examples of British riddles about sailing:</u>
A strange creature ran on a rippling road,
Its cut was wild, its body bowed,
Four feet under belly, eight on its back,
Two wings, twelve eyes, six heads, one track.
It cruised the waves decked out like a bird,
But was more – he shape of a horse, man,
Dog, bird, and the face of a woman –
Weird riddle-craft riding the drift of words –
Now sing the solution to what you've heard. (A ship)

Often I must war with the waves, fight with the wind –
strive with both at the same time – when I depart to seek
the earth beneath the waters; to me my home is an alien place.
I am strong in the struggle if I hold still –
if I slip, even slightly, they are stronger than I
and, wrenching me loose, soon force me to flee;
will carry away the thing I must keep safe.
I can avoid this so long as my tail endures,
and the stones against my strength have power

to keep firm. Guess what I'm called. (An anchor)

An example of British riddles about water:

You hear my song
From quite afar.
It's in the pebbles ringing.
I'm running down
To reach the lake.
I'm gay, I'm fond of singing. (A Streamlet)

Examples of Russian riddles about earth:

Во всё стреляют,
всё убивают,
а меня не убьют.
(Everything gets shot at,
everything gets killed,
but not me.)

Никого не родила,
а все матушкой зовут?
(She gave birth to no one,
and everyone calls her mother?)

Examples of Russian riddles about snow:

Скатерть бела
Весь свет одела. (Пороша)
(The tablecloth is white
She's dressed all the world. (New-fallen snow))

Вдоль села
Бежит кобыла весела,
Под конец хвоста
Висит полон кошель овса,
Бежит да потряхивает. (Вьюга)
(Along the village
A jolly horse is running,
At the end of her tail
Hanging a purse full of oats,
She runs and shakes it. (Blizzard))

Белый лебедь на яйцах сидит. (Снег на полях)
(A white swan sitting on eggs. (Snow on the fields))

Сердита матка, да прикрыла деток до красного дня пуховым одеяльцем. (Земля под снегом)
(The mother was angry, but she covered the children with a downy blanket until the red day. (The ground beneath the snow))

Examples of British riddles about birds and animals:
I saw them, all ten, treading the turf,
the six brothers and their sisters too,
living and lively. Their skins hung plainly,
visibly manifest, on the wall of the house,
each and every one; nor was any the worse,
nor side the sorer, though thus they must,
despoiled of their raiment, roused by the power
of heaven's Lord, tear with their mouths
the gray-green leaves. Their garment is renewed;

having now come forth they leave their coverings
lying behind them as they tread the ground. (Ten Chickens)

My neck is white, my head is tawny
and so are my sides. I am swift in my stride.
I bear weapons of battle. On my back there is hair
and the same on my cheeks. Over my eyes
two ears stand up. I walk on my toes
in the green grass. My doom is certain
if anyone finds me, if a slaughterous fighter
finds me hidden where I make my home,
bold with my bairns. And there I abide
with my little family when the stranger comes
to my very doors. Death is their doom.
I must carry them off, save them by flight
with fear in my heart away from my home.
If he crowds me hard, moving on his belly,
I dare not abide that fierce one in my burrow
(that would be surely not a good counsel)
but bravely I must with both hands and feet
create a path through the high hill.
Easily I can save them, my beloved kin,
if I can bring my household by a secret way
through the hollow hill; for there I need fear
never a whit the murderous whelp.
If the hateful foe follows me hard
through the narrow track he shall have no lack
of the clash of battle when we meet in the burrow;

when I get to the top of the hill and turn on him
with weapons of war, whom I formerly fled from. (Badger)

Examples of Russian riddles about animals:

Страх тепло волочет. (Волк и овца)
(Fear carries warmth. (The wolf and the sheep))

-Певица, певица! А где ваша царица?
-Наша царица ушла в городы
По ваши головы. (Мышь и котенок)
(- Singer, singer! Where's your queen?
- Our queen has gone to the cities
For your heads. (A mouse and a kitten))

Пришла из лесу птичница
В рыжей куртке
Кур подсчитать. (Лиса)
(The lady came from the woods
In a red coat
To count the chickens. (A fox)

Не пахарь, не столяр,
Не кузнец, не плотник,
А первый на селе работник. (Лошадь)
(Not a ploughman, not a joiner,
Not a blacksmith, not a carpenter,
But the first worker in the village. (A horse))