

The Rusalka and The Vampire

In analyzing Slavic history, it becomes evident that the most important beliefs of the Slavs have, in some representation or another, made an appearance in Slavic folklore. The vampire and the *rusalka* are two Slavic demons that have similarly embodied the customs and beliefs of the Slavs. The emphasized Slavic belief in life after death surfaces in the fact that both the vampire and the *rusalka* consistently appear as animated forms of the dead. Additionally, both the vampire and the *rusalka* have been described as taking the form of a bird in Slavic folklore, demonstrating the importance of cremation to the Slavs.¹ The Slavs also believed in consequences after death for those that were involved with dark magic or evil spirits. This belief is exemplified in the connection that the vampire and the *rusalka* are depicted as having with the devil.²³

However, these seemingly similar demons evolved throughout folklore to become more distinct than they originally seem. Their differences are evidenced in the way the two demons were killed. Vampires were typically staked and burned, while the figure of the *rusalka* was modeled in straw and then torn apart.⁴ Additionally, very unlike the vampire, the *rusalka* acted as a symbolic representation of life, demonstrated by the fact that her image consisted of allusions to water and vegetation.

¹ O.V. Golubkova, "Ornithomorphic Perceptions of the Soul in Komi-Zyryan Beliefs.

² W.R.S. Ralston, *Songs of the Russian People*, 409-410.

³ Linda J. Ivantis, *Russian Folk Belief*, 73.

⁴ W.R.S. Ralston, *Songs of the Russian People*, 143.

Appearing as reanimated corpses in most folktales, both the vampire and the *rusalka* are demonic embodiments of the Slavic obsession with death. Additionally, both the vampire and the *rusalka* are associated with having “unclean deaths.” It was often thought that those who dabbled in black magic or similar evils would become vampires upon their death, and according to the Servians and Bulgarians, “unclean spirits enter into the corpses of malefactors and other evilly disposed persons, who then become vampires”.⁵

While the vampire is consistently portrayed as an undead corpse, the image of the *rusalka* varies throughout Slavic folklore. In Southern Russia and Ukraine, accounts of the *rusalki* “paint a picture of sisterhoods of lovely maidens in league with the unclean force... an image highly evocative in its interweaving of beauty and treachery”.⁶ However, in the North, “the figure tended to be older and unattractive with large breasts and long, disheveled hair”.⁷ While the southern image of the *rusalka* is the most widely accepted and is how the demon is generally described in folklore, it should be noted that “the most essential aspect of the figure was its association with unclean dead,”⁸ much like the vampire. Examples of an “unclean death” include a young woman who died before she had married, a drowned child born out of wedlock, an unbaptized child, or a woman who committed suicide (particularly by drowning herself). The shared image of an undead corpse that has experienced an “unclean death” is perhaps the strongest similarity between the vampire and the *rusalka*. This commonality also bears the strongest connection to the Slavic beliefs that spirits of the dead continue to exist after death, and that the spirits which are evil may take the form of a demon upon death.

⁵ Dudley Wright, *The Book of Vampires*, 62.

⁶ Linda J. Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 74.

⁷ Linda J. Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 75.

⁸ Linda J. Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 73.

In addition to the fact that both the *rusalka* and the vampire appear as the reincarnated corpses of those that have suffered unclean and evil deaths, in certain folklore both demons are described as having a strong connection with the devil. In his *Songs of the Russian People*, Ralston says that “the Little Russians attribute the birth of a vampire to an unholy union between a witch and a werewolf or a devil.”⁹ Similarly, it is noted in Ivantis’ *Russian Folk Belief* that in certain areas it was believed that the *rusalki* “received their beauty and eternal youth directly from the devil, who boiled them in a cauldron.”¹⁰

While the themes of an undead appearance and connection to the devil are relatively persistent throughout Slavic folklore, there are certain similarities between these two demons that are not as dramatically apparent. For example, both the vampire and the *rusalka* have been described as taking the form of a bird in folklore. In *Narrative 64* of Ivantis’ *Russian Folk Belief* an attack by the *rusalki* is described as follows: “Suddenly a whole flock of *rusalki* in the form of birds attacked the peasant. They flew on him and pecked at him; and they would’ve pecked him to death, but the hired man ran up to his master at his cry.”¹¹ In his *Vampires and Vampirism*, Montague Summers relays a similar description as he writes of a vampire attack that appears in folklore: “A second afterwards a huge bird swooped upon him [the bridegroom] and pecked out his eyes with its beak. So this horrible Vampire blinded the newly married pair.”¹² The idea that the human soul may take the appearance of a bird is widespread among different belief systems, including the Slavs. In fact, it has been written that “the association between the soul and the bird stems from the belief that the soul leaves the body through the smoke produced during

⁹ W.R.S. Ralston, *Songs of the Russian People*, 409-410.

¹⁰ Linda J. Ivantis, *Russian Folk Belief*, 73.

¹¹ Linda J. Ivantis, *Russian Folk Belief*, 183.

¹² Montague Summers, *Vampires and Vampirism*, 245-246.

cremation.”¹³ For the Slavs, cremation was an incredibly sacred act as it was their primary means of disposing of the dead. The Slavs also believed that cremation prevented evil spirits from having a vessel to come back to, and thus would prevent demons such as the vampire and the *rusalka*, who were reincarnated corpses, from existing. The fact that both demons take the form of birds in Slavic folklore demonstrates the importance of cremation and the releasing of the soul to the Slavs, exemplifying how that belief became a prominent part of Slavic lore, unspecific to one demon.

One of the primary differences between the vampire and the *rusalka* is how the two demons are generally killed in Slavic folklore. In *The Soldier and the Vampire*, the warlock (vampire) reveals to the soldier “If anyone were to make a pyre of aspen boughs... and were to burn me on that pyre, then he’d be able to get the better of me.”¹⁴ While in order to expel the *rusalka*, “a figure made of straw is draped in women’s clothes, so as to represent a *Rusalka*” and “eventually it is torn to pieces, and the straw of which it was made is thrown to the winds.”¹⁵ It should also be noted that the *rusalki* are not explicitly killed like the vampire, but rather are expelled from the area by the Slavs. This difference also highlights the idea that the *rusalki* could be thought of as an evil spirit that takes a human form, while the vampire is quite literally a restless dead.

Another fundamental difference between the vampire and the *rusalki* is that the *rusalki*, while still undead, have a stronger connection to life than the vampire. Ivantis describes the *rusalki* as a “complex and somewhat contradictory image” because while the *rusalki* could cause crop damage, illness, and death, their “association with water and the belief that where they

¹³ O.V. Golubkova, “Ornithomorphic Perceptions of the Soul in Komi-Zyryan Beliefs.

¹⁴ Dudley Wright, *The Book of Vampires*, 66.

¹⁵ W.R.S. Ralston, *Songs of the Russian People*, 143.

frolicked the grass grew thicker indicate that the spirit was connected with spring vegetation.”¹⁶

The association of the *rusalki* with life and fertility is strengthened by their portrayal as women, which bears no similarity to the vampire, typically depicted as a male. However, the *rusalki* are usually described as having wet hair, and in some folklore it is said that if their hair dries, the *rusalki* will die. This dependency on water as an element of life is analogous to the vampire’s need for blood, which could also be considered an element of life.

Although the vampire and the *rusalka* have many fundamental differences, especially those that seem to make the *rusalka* appear more “alive” or spirit-like than the vampire, it is clear through their similarities that both of these demons evolved throughout Slavic folklore from the same ancient beliefs, and that their distinctions are a result of folklore developing over time and location. However, throughout the changes in folklore, it is evident that the most important Slavic beliefs have prevailed. Folklore involving Slavic demons, specifically the vampire and the *rusalka*, demonstrates the Slavic belief in life after death through the persistent images of undead corpses. The Slavic understanding that a connection between the living and dead must be destroyed with cremation, in order to disallow the creation of a demon by the devil from an unclean death, is evidenced by both the vampire and the *rusalka* through their appearance as birds in lore. These ancient beliefs of the Slavs have endured centuries of modernization, but because of the consistencies in the representation of the vampire and the *rusalka*, as well as their embodiment of many of these Slavic ideas, the pagan beliefs that the Slavs were founded upon remain central to their history and culture today.

¹⁶ Linda J. Ivantis, *Russian Folk Belief*, 76.

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