

HEROES AND VILLAINS IN HUNGARIAN AND SLOVAK FOLK TRADITION AS REFLECTION OF CULTURAL PREFERENCES

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Summary

The paper addresses the issue of similarities and differences between the Hungarian and Slovak cultures based on two interrelated approaches. First the cultural dimensions of Geert Hofstede are used to illuminate the centrifugal and centripetal powers causing the similarities and differences between the two chosen cultures. Further, the vast treasure of Hungarian and Slovak folk tales is exploited to present and prove those tendencies. The behaviour patterns of the heroes/heroines and the villains/villainesses are used to exemplify in particular folk tales both the supported and discouraged modes of operation. Simultaneously, the value of folk tales as transmitters of cultural values is proposed and strongly accentuated.

Key words

behaviour pattern, culture, folk tales, hero, villain

Összefoglalás

A tanulmány célja, hogy bemutassa a magyar és szlovák népmesék közötti hasonlóságokat és eltéréseket két, egymáshoz szorosan kapcsolódó megközelítésben. Elsőként azt szemléltetjük, hogyan jelennek meg Geert Hofstede kulturális dimenziói abban a centrifugális és centripetális erőben, amelyek a két kultúra közötti hasonlóságokat és eltéréseket okozzák. Ezt követően a legjobb magyar és szlovák népmesék elemzésén keresztül bemutatjuk és bizonyítjuk a fenti tendenciát. A népmesékben szereplő hősök és gonoszok példájával szemléltetjük, melyek a támogatott és ellenzett működési módok. Ugyanakkor külön hangsúlyt fektetünk a népmeséknek arra a tulajdonságára, hogy azok kulturális értékeket közvetítő szerepet is betöltenek.

Kulcsszavak

gonoszok, hősök, kultúra, népmesék, viselkedési minta

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Introduction

The paper deals with the topic of cultural differences by means of comparison of heroes and villains as represented in the tradition of folk tales. We claim that the behaviour of those protagonists reflect the values and patterns of behaviour generally accepted within the cultural community.

The fact that we engage to display a comparison of cultures represented through their heroes and villains in folk tradition stresses our high esteem of folk tales as transmitters in the process of acculturation. As it is not an inborn attribute, culture needs to be handed over from one generation to the next one in a more or less organised and by society sanctioned manner. It takes the form of nurture and education of children from an early stage of life which calls for both formal and informal methods. Tales and legends can be utilised as ideal informal instruments to show children the difference between good and evil, right and wrong the way it is perceived by the particular cultural community. Even psychologically, tales may present children with some dilemmas that they have to face in real life while suggesting proper and desirable solutions to them. They can identify with some of the heroes or heroines and strive to imitate their behaviour. In that way they can embrace the behaviour patterns that are supported, and avoid those discouraged and rejected by their own culture.

Crucial terms and definitions

We will start with a definition of the key terms reoccurring in the paper. As the topic deals basically with the protagonists of various folk tales, it is befitting to define the term folk tale as first. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a *folk tale* is “a characteristically anonymous, timeless, and placeless tale circulated orally among people” (Merriam-Webster, 2008). The typical features of folk tales include collective authorship by a cultural community, topics relevant for the particular audience, clear-cut black-and-white perspective, and both entertaining and educating plots. As those tales were originally spread by oral tradition and only much later recorded by enthusiastic collectors, there are usually several versions of the same story changed by the storytellers either accidentally (slip of the mind) or purposefully to stress an important idea or aspect. But they always comply with the cultural norms of the community and its values. From that perspective we can study and compare cultures through their folk tales and try to find similarities and differences between them.

We decided to look at selected Hungarian and Slovak folk tales with special attention to their protagonists whose behaviour represents the dichotomy of right and wrong exemplified in the stories. The key positive protagonist is known as a hero or heroine. The term can be defined in the following manner; a *folk hero* is “someone who is admired for their achievements by the ordinary people of a particular region” (Merriam-Webster, 2008). In other words, such a character represents the cherished and strongly endorsed personal traits and behaviour patterns. A hero acts righteously. His opponent is known as the *villain* and is described as “a character whose evil actions or motives are important to the plot” (Merriam-Webster, 2008). He or she represents in the story everything that is wrong, despised and condemnable within the specific culture.

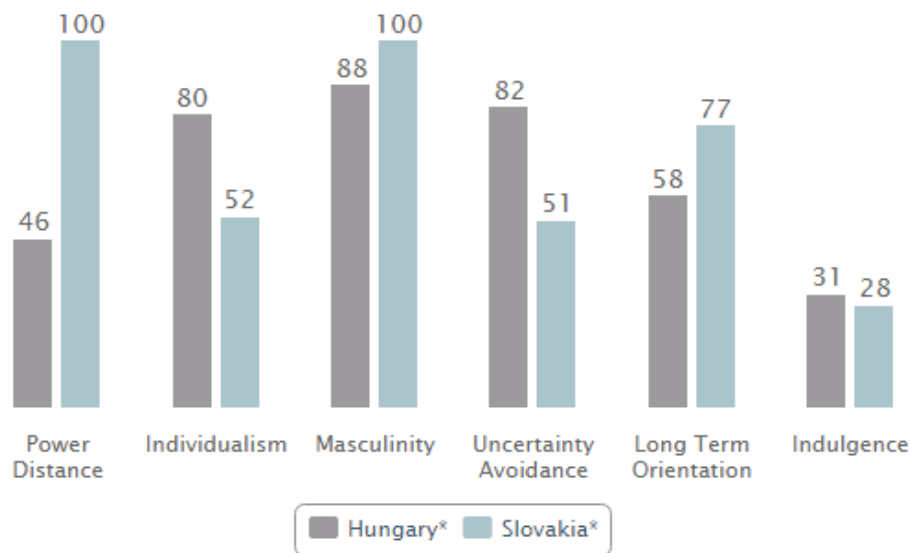
Comparison of the Hungarian and Slovak culture

When attempting to compare two neighbouring cultures, we need to keep in mind two competing forces in action. First of all, it is the historical experience that the two cultures gathered through centuries of co-existence and the involved degree of mutual influence that may have occurred. It is a fact that the Hungarians and Slovaks lived side by side for more than 900 years within the same political units (Hungarian kingdom, Habsburg monarchy), later facing similar political developments (period of communist regime, democratisation processes) so they inevitably collected experience and knowledge which influenced and

formed their cultural preferences in the same direction. At the same time, the two cultures do not share other important aspects (e.g. language group affiliation, geographical conditions, demography) that set them apart. Therefore, we may expect some differences in their perception of the world, opinions, values and proper behaviour patterns.

To support our previous assertion we compare the two cultures based on the cultural dimensions proposed by G. Hofstede.

Figure 1: Comparison of Hungarian and Slovak cultures by G. Hofstede (Geert Hofstede, 2015)



Source: Hofstede, G. 2015

As visible in Figure 1, the chart shows both similar and dissimilar tendencies. Similarity is noticeable in the dimension of masculinity vs. femininity where both cultures display a strong preference for masculinity. The dimension can be interpreted as indicating that the society is driven by competition, achievement and success. Such approach starts in school and continues throughout people's life. Within the family a clear distinction in bringing up boys and girls is perceivable. In the folk tales, the girls are usually depicted as docile and modest, while the boys are very active, independent and purposeful. We can mention the Hungarian tale "The industrious and the lazy girl" (A szorgalmas és a rest leány) and the Slovak one "The Golden Hair" (Zlatovláska) as examples. An interesting presentation of the necessity of female obedience is exemplified in the Hungarian story of "The raven girls" (A csóka leányok) where the twelve daughters of a couple change into raven as a consequence of their improper, noisy and for the parents irksome behaviour. Only after their improvement and long journey of their little brother they can return home in human form.

The other dimension that is similar enough in both cultures is a tendency towards restraint rather than indulgence. This dimension is defined as the extent to which people try to control their desires and impulses, based on the way they were raised (Hofstede, 2003). Relatively weak control is known as *indulgence* and relatively strong control is labelled *restraint*. In contrast to indulgent societies, restrained societies do not put so much emphasis on leisure time and control the gratification of their desires. People with this orientation may feel that indulging themselves is somehow wrong. In both Slovak and Hungarian tales the heroes never spend much time in pleasures. They work hard and even in their leisure time go and help others. It is usually the villain who is spoiled, lazy and hedonist as in "Rosy Annie" (Ružová Anička) or in "The industrious and the lazy girl" (A szorgalmas és a rest leány).

The other four dimensions show different preferences in the compared cultures. The most pronounced contrast can be discerned in the perception of power distance. As visible from Figure 1, Hungarian culture tends towards low power distance which means that being independent and demanding equal rights are praised and valued, while hierarchy is kept for convenience only. Control is disliked and attitude towards superiors is informal (Hofstede, 2003). On the other side Slovak culture is very high on power distance. It is generally accepted that some people have more power than others and it is equally expected that these people also use their power; however not in a negative way but to create clarity and structure for people around them.

The Hungarian folk tale “The star-eyed shepherd” (A csillagszemű juhász) nicely represents the Hungarian trend towards low power distance. The story’s hero, a young shepherd refuses to obey the whims and caprices of the king even when threatened repeatedly by death. He accepts the inequality of their positions in life (king and shepherd) but refuses to be an obedient puppet in the hands of the powerful. His stance and bravery are eventually rewarded and he marries the king’s daughter. Only after becoming the king’s equal as his son-in-law he is willing to pronounce his blessing after the king’s sneeze which had been the cause of all his troubles. The moral of the story is that one has to stand his ground and oppose nonsense wherever it comes from.

We can compare this tale with a typical Slovak tale “The golden horseshoe, the golden feather, the golden hair” (Zlatá podkova, zlaté pero, zlatý vlas). The hero of the tale is an equally poor young man who serves his king faithfully. Even when the king behaves cruelly and ruthlessly, he never protests but fulfils every dangerous task. He is finally rewarded by the hand of a beautiful princess too but the moral of the story is that reward comes to those who are patient, know their place and are not pushy.

As for individualism vs. collectivism, both cultures tend towards individualism but Hungary scores much higher than Slovakia. In Hungary people are expected to take care of themselves and their immediate families. The Slovak culture stands in the middle between the two extremes of the dimension and does not show clear preference for either. Family is extremely important but not just the immediate nucleus family but all relations are aided by a mutually beneficial network. The Slovak tale “The son of the poor parents” (Chudobných rodičov syn) emphasises that one’s good fortune can be only complete if shared with others. On the other hand, the happy ending in the Hungarian tales usually includes only the hero’s or heroine’s parents. In some cases the hero even makes a fool of his brother like in “The round stone” (A kerek kő).

Concerning the next cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance, the Hungarian culture seems to shrink from ambiguous situations more than the Slovak one; it scores high in uncertainty avoidance which is usually connected with relatively high number of rules and strict standards of behaviour. In Slovakia, the score is in the middle again which on one side shows that Slovaks do not consider ambiguity positively as an opportunity but on the other, they have learned to live with uncertainty. During most of their history they were in a dependent position and decisions about them were made often without their involvement and they had to manage whatever the situation was. It is quite difficult to identify this dimension in tales but we can find it for example in those types of tales where the hero/heroine is forbidden to enter some rooms or open wardrobes or doors. Those who are able to resist the temptation and play by the rules are eventually rewarded, while those who break the rules are punished as in “The industrious and the lazy girl” (A szorgalmas és a rest leány).

The final dimension deals with long vs. short-term orientation. Though both cultures are relatively far from the East-Asian ideal of long-term orientation, they both still tend towards it, while the Slovak culture shows even more affinity than the Hungarian one. Both cultures display an ability to adapt traditions to a modern context i.e. pragmatism, a

propensity to save and endorse thriftiness as opposed to normative cultures that believe in immediate rewards and quick returns of investments. The Slovak tale “The old man and the apple trees” (Starček a jablone) praises perseverance and hard work even when knowing that one will never enjoy the results of that endeavour.

Folktales and their heroes

A classification of the folk tales which is still used and appreciated by contemporary scientists was introduced in *The Types of the Folktale* (1961) by Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, later updated by Hans-Jörg Uther (Uther 2004).

Another eminent and even earlier research studying the tales from the formalist’s point of view was carried out by V.J. Propp, a Russian scholar. His *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (1928) is still appreciated as one of the most detailed studies in this field. Propp describes a “two-fold quality of a tale, its amazing multiformity, picturesqueness, and colour, and on the other hand, its no less striking uniformity, its repetition.” (Propp 1928) Based on this uniformity, he was able to find repeating patterns in the fairy tales and managed to find common structures in them including types of heroes and villains.

“A tale usually begins with some sort of initial situation. The members of a family are enumerated, or the future hero (e.g. a soldier) is simply introduced by the mention of his name or indication of his status.” (Propp 1928, 12) In literature in general, heroes need not to be exclusively positive characters but it is a rule in folk tales. Even if the figure does not seem positive at the beginning (a case of lazy and fool antiheroes), he always becomes so at the end (Propp 1928). As defined by Propp, “the hero of a tale is that character who either directly suffers from the action of the villain in the complication (the one who senses some kind of need), or who agrees to liquidate the misfortune or need of another person. In the course of the action the hero is the person who is gifted with a magical agent (or a magical helper), who makes use of it or is served by it” (Propp 1928, 31). The attributes and actions of a typical folk tale hero are similar in both Hungarian and Slovak stereotypes and people are used to them since their first tales read during childhood.

Shared features of heroes

In most European folk tales, including Hungarian and Slovak ones, readers usually accept the protagonists’ beauty, as a result of a stereotype that the good ones are always the beautiful ones and the ugly ones are the villains. The beautiful characters are the ones who win and are awarded. Brave kings, princes, princesses and other humble and virtuous girls belong to this group. Illustrations in the books of folk tales follow the same fashion. The ideal of beauty in tales is often even intensified; the heroes and heroines have silver or golden hair or even a golden star on their forehead. In spite of that, the look of main characters, mostly males, is not always described straightforwardly. A detailed description is more frequent in tales with women as protagonists.

“We often encounter a hero who becomes even prettier after achieving success than before. The same transformation happens often after revival of the protagonist” (Veliká 2011, 69). The process of becoming more beautiful represents a specific rebirth; the look of the hero differs from his previous existence. He never returns back to his previous status, he shifts to greater perfection. He also becomes more self-confident. The main character’s beauty has various functions. For instance, the beauty of a poor young boy or a girl may compensate his or her low-born origin and therefore be a justification to marry a prince or a princess. (Lüthi 1975, 12) The charm of the hero is an inevitable part of his achievement of happiness. Another function of protagonist’s loveliness can be a compensation of a hero’s lack of wit.

The protagonists do not have to necessarily present themselves directly as beautiful in the tales. The hero often lives a double life and denies his or her presence. The double life may acquire many forms; the most frequent one is a change of clothes, e.g. pretending to be a

beggar and later a servant, as in “The Mouse Cloak” (Myšacia bundička) or “Popolvar”. The camouflage automatically presupposes that the hero will not be recognized.

The hero mostly accomplishes great things. He usually goes forth to seek his fortune or to find his future wife or to rescue his sister or a princess or relieve a country of a monster’s plundering. This man is determined to do anything to gain his lady, to protect the weak ones and to punish villains. He does not need to be especially bright, but finally, he always makes smart decisions. He never goes against his parents’ will and obeys them. Slovak folk heroes succeed when they are honest, humble and smart, when they help the weaker ones and fight the representative of evil. There is a similar tendency of non-resistance in many Hungarian tales as well, but mostly when females (wives or daughters) accept their lot and are even ready to die if that is the king’s wish as in “The enchanted princess” (Az elátkozott királykisasszony) or “The smiling apple” (A mosolygó alma). That seems to reflect the traditional view of women in the Hungarian masculine type of culture.

Tasks which the heroes need to complete are not always of a serious matter. The heroes’ fighting and taking risks do not need to have any educational results full of moral values as when rescuing a lady in despair or punishing evil. In some folk tales, stout young men only fulfil obligations and tasks invented by a whimsical princess or their father, merely to deserve her and prove their suitability, e.g. in “The Snake, the Cat and the Dog” (Had, mačička a psík). The determined hero achieves anything required and competes for his wife-to-be even despite of her own vanity and capriciousness. We found a similar motif in some Hungarian tales too like in “Little Susie and the devil” (Zsuzska és az ördög) though in that case it was a poor but clever girl who had to satisfy the whims of the king and eventually married him.

We can identify two main groups of male heroes; brave, hard-working men who must fight to deserve their happy ending and then the second group; lazy and simple country boys who succeeds only by accident. The protagonist can be a prince, king, wealthy gentleman or a poor village boy; a shepherd, an orphan, motherless or fatherless. The character is described as an honourable man with virtuous goals and represents chivalrous behaviour. The princes and kings are usually young and determined to find a future wife or save their sister (kidnapped by a villain) or they are challenged by their fathers to go forth and seek their fortune. Even if their task is to save their sisters or to wander from place to place, they always end up married to a princess in the end. In Slovak folk tales we can often find a story about a poor village boy or shepherd who goes forth to seek his fortune (analogously to any princes or kings), but with motives which are often associated with poverty. Struggling to survive, the protagonist’s parents send their son to earn some money or bring something to eat. As a reward ordinary low-born youngsters marry a princess or a noblewoman. A typical Slovak hero achieves his goals by obeying his parents, sharing food with wayfarers, helping the weak ones and animals, having mercy on the vulnerable and defending the innocent. We found a similar tendency in Hungarian folk tales; great regard for one’s parents, necessity to overcome the difficulties caused by the powerful and tender feelings for the nature as in “Raven Johnny” (Holló Jankó). Both cultures highly praise the role of family.

The second group of male main characters is widely spread in Slovak folk literature: the antiheroes. They are lazy, fools, naive and after all lucky young men. Thanks to God’s grace they finally find their fortune even when they do not do their best. Janko (a typical Slovak name) is usually the only child who is sent by his mother to seek his fortune or find a wife. He often misinterprets directions he was given and causes humorous situations. He is always a warm-hearted character, he gladly shares his food with the others and therefore he deserves a reward at the end: a wife or riches. “He achieves it thanks to supernatural powers; Janko often meets a helper who gives him advice or donates him some magic objects or he deserves this object” (Veliká 2011, 133). Janko is often depicted as a handsome man that

helps to compensate his foolishness and a reason why a princess fell in love with him. His status of a fool is thus annulled. We found a Hungarian tale with a similar kind of main character who wins thanks to his generous heart “Cinderella Prince” (Hamupipőke királyfi) or “About a lazy boy” (A rest legényről).

When a folk tale is not based on a young male hero then the protagonist is usually a young innocent woman, an example of virtuousness, purity and sometimes even naivety. The female heroines unlike the male heroes are usually directly described as beautiful. Their extraordinary attractive appearance is also the main reason why these girls are chosen by a prince or a nobleman to become their wives. The beauty is as mentioned before often intensified; the heroines have golden hair or gold star on their forehead, e.g. in “The Golden Hair” (Zlatovláska). On one hand, this young heroine can be born in a royal or a rich family. In this case the princess or lady leaves home (a castle) because of a disagreement between this lady and her father. The reason is mostly banishment or escape. The princess is banished by her father after she offended him – always unintentionally. In this pattern of a story, the heroine finds a new temporary home in exile, after overcoming several difficulties she finds a prince or a nobleman and becomes his wife. The recently married couple visits the girl’s father who regrets his mistakes. The Slovak tale “Salt More Precious than Gold” (Soľ nad zlato) is the most famous example of banished daughters. The consequences of an escape are almost identical, but the heroine leaves her home as a result of her own resolution and she runs away in secrecy. The reason can be the refusal to marry her own father, as in “The Mouse Cloak” (Myšacia bundička). In this version, the girl marries a prince and then visits the afflicted father who regrets his earlier behaviour.

One the other hand, the main female characters are often poor and modest girls. This model is very frequent in the Slovak folk tales. The heroine is usually exploited; by her step-mother as in “The Three Pigeons” (Tri holúbky), or by a witch who employs the heroine as a servant as in “The Golden Hair” (Zlatovláska). These female characters are not banished and do not run away from home, they usually live with a person who harms and mistreats them, accomplish various missions and are chosen and saved by a prince or a rich gentleman (Stehlíková 2012). Similar to the Hungarian tales, we can recognise the gender role division of a masculine type of culture “The man with a stone heart” (A kőszívű ember).

An exception in this pattern is again a female antihero; a naive and passive young girl who does not achieve anything but finally gets married to a gentleman and lives happily ever after. An example can be found in a Slovak tale “The Gold Spinner” (“Zlatá priadka”). As a result of a deceitful lie of the girl’s mother, the heroine gets into trouble, but the problem solves itself and she undeservedly ends up with a wealthy husband. Despite of this exception, the whole moral message of such heroines is very transparent; good, humble, obedient and virtuous young virgins always end up as happy women married to admirable men. Interestingly, we found a very similar tale in the Hungarian tradition “Panci Mančí” but in that story the antihero is a more active character who succeeds in making her husband, the king first believes she can spin gold and later forbids her any further spinning fearing she would lose her beauty as a consequence.

Villains

Villains are an important element of the folk tales in any culture. They are the opponents of the hero/heroine and only the comparison of their behaviour can exemplify the difference between right and wrong. As explained by Propp, “a new personage, who can be termed the villain, enters the tale. His role is to disturb the peace of a happy family, and cause some form of misfortune, damage or harm” (Propp 1928, 14). Villains use various methods how to harm the protagonist; they steal his magic or precious objects, try to kill or eat him, and threaten a person who the protagonist wants to save or threaten the whole country. But the hero invariably defeats the villain and the good wins. The representative of evil is always punished,

banished but mostly killed. The hero defeats him thanks to his power or bravery, smartness or using magical help or object he has obtained before.

We can divide the folk tale villains into two major groups of non-human and human villains. The non-human adversaries are represented by dragons, giants or devils, though the last mentioned type can be also placed into the second group as devils often take up human form to lead their victims into destruction. The second group, human villains, includes those owning magical powers (e.g. sorcerers, witches, dwarves) and non-magical villains (stepparents, usually stepmothers, siblings, landlords, kings and others in a power position).

Giants and dragons represent the most powerful enemy in folk tales. In these tales the dragon or giant probably represents the power of nature that people feared and at the same time tried to conquer. In both Hungarian and Slovak folk tales, the dragons are much more frequent than giants and it is even possible to find a good-natured giant as a helper too as in "Piatko and Pustaj". But the folk tales usually present the villain as a man-eating giant as in the Slovak fairy tale "The Three Lemons" ("Tri citróny"). The giants are mostly stupid in their nature and the hero easily tricks and conquers them.

The dragon is a more dangerous enemy. The protagonist becomes a hero thanks to his ability to defeat the monster. He usually manages it on his own, but sometimes magical objects, magical helpers or some companions are used, too. We can name some examples of such stories like "Three feathers of the dragon" (Tri perá z draka), "The sick king" (Chorý kráľ), "The orphan" (Sirota) or the Hungarian tale "The sky-high tree" (Az égig érő fa). Dragons kidnap and capture princesses and keep them as their treasure, e.g. in "The Biggest Slacker in the World" (Popolvár najväčší na svete) and in "The stargazer, the thief, the hunter and the tailor" (A csillagász, a lopó, a vadász meg a szabó), or they want to eat the princess, e.g. in "The Cursed Mountain" (Zakliata hora), or they plunder the whole country, e.g. in "The Proud Lady" (Hrdá panička). The hero kills him by cutting off all his heads. Dragons usually have three, six, nine or twelve heads. The most common situation in a Slovak fairy tale is a battle with three dragons. The hero encounters three dragons and they gradually have three, six and nine heads or six, nine and twelve. The Hungarian folk tales do not use dragons as villains as often as the Slovak ones.

The devil as an opponent of the hero is again a two-fold case. It is represented either a terrible and cruel enemy as in "The golden land" (Zlatá krajina) and can be interpreted as a different form of dragon, or as a stupid figure that one can laugh at and make fool of as in "Fasting Matthew" (Koplaló Mátyás). The first story teaches that one should not trifle with unknown powers and live a godly life and the other that it is better to be clever than strong.

The human villains exemplify a wide variety of weak character from jealousy, selfishness and contempt to outright hatred and cruelty. Heartless stepmothers make a considerable part of the folk tale human villains. They are phenomena which is essentially identical in both Hungarian and Slovak folk tales. Tales with a stepmother's performance are almost always those with a young innocent girl as a protagonist. We found only one exception in the story of "Green Peter" (Zöld Péter) where the afflicted child and the main protagonist of the story was a boy. But in that story the cruelty of the stepmother serves only as a triggering power that makes him leave home in pursuit of better life.

In both Hungarian and Slovak tales stepmothers usually marry a widower who has a young and beautiful daughter. The stepmother often brings her own child to the marriage, mostly a daughter, who on the contrary, is ugly and stupid. As a rule, the stepmother hates the new daughter and envies her beauty and youth as e.g. in "The Rose-tree" (Ružový strom). She sets tasks impossible to fulfil which become a trap for the young girl, as in the Slovak tale "About Twelve Months" ("O dvanástich mesiacikoch") or the Hungarian one Cerceruska. The father is just a silent figure who does not interfere in the stepmother's decisions; "The Three Pigeons" ("Tri holúbky"). After the stepmother finds out that her stepdaughter managed the

task, got married to a prince and became rich, she sends her ugly daughter to take the same journey, but she always fails, as in “Bless you, Bench” (“Pamodaj š’astia, lavička”). Commonly, the stepmothers and stepdaughters are punished.

In many Slovak and Hungarian folk tales, there is a magical creature functioning as the main enemy or as a supporting character influencing the hero’s destiny both in a positive and negative way. What all these magical spirits have in common is that they practise witchcraft. In majority of contexts, ‘witchcraft’ means using magic to harm humans, farm animals, or property. The fear of it permeates both folk traditions. Magical spirits with negative status are widely spread in Slovak and Hungarian folk tales. Malicious wizards, witches and deceitful gnomes are characters which try to harm the protagonist, but finally, they are always defeated.

In the framework of wizards and witches, this is one of the few areas of folk tradition in which females approach or even defeat males in number. The reason can be found in the male-dominated society where the Christian faith placed all the blame for the damnation of humanity on Eve as she led Adam to sin against God. Old and ugly magic villainesses are therefore markedly prevalent in folk literature. They are present in almost every Slovak folk tale and frequent in Hungarian ones too. Male magicians appear less frequently than female ones, e.g. in “The Shepherd and the Serpent” (“Bača a šarkan”), “Berona” or “The petrified prince” (A kövé vált királyfi).

Magical spirits sometimes look like gnomes; we encounter little weird creatures with beards in folk tales such as “Panci Manci” or “Little Nicolas the king” (Király kis Miklós) in the Hungarian folk tradition or in the Slovak equivalent of Panci Manci “Martinko Klingáč” or in another Slovak tale “Laktibrada”. They are popular in Slovak texts and they are described as tricky and devious dwarves.

In some rare instances we can find other magical creatures or even elements of nature acting in the role of a villain, e.g. the wind as in “About the wind king” (O veternom kráľovi), a water fairy as in “The fairy of the waters” (A víz tündére) or clouds “Little Nicolas the king” (Király kis Miklós). Again, we can identify the respect and fear of the people feeling vulnerable and defenceless against the powers of nature.

Conclusion

We considered and compared the folk tales in the Hungarian and Slovak folk tradition with the aim of highlighting both the similarities and differences in their respective cultural histories. Folk tales, being a powerful tool in transmitting cultural values and preferred behaviour patterns, reflect the historical experience, the favoured solutions to various crises and facilitated characteristics of a member of the particular cultural community.

Many tales introduced the reoccurring topics of relationships in the family, behaviour towards strangers, gender roles, search for happiness and love. The contrast between the acts of the heroes or heroines and the villain/villainess exemplify the difference between good and evil, proper and improper, and commendable and damnable.

The comparison of the Hungarian and Slovak cultures based on the cultural dimensions of G. Hofstede combined with examples of folk tales in both traditions demonstrate those aspects of the two cultures where their solutions are very close such as the gender roles, relative long-term orientation and in a tendency towards restraint rather than indulgence, while other areas such as power distance, uncertainty avoidance and individuality display different approaches discoverable also in the folk tales. We can eventually express our persuasion that folk tales are still topical and should be actively presented to young children by their parents, relatives and educators.

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