

Once Upon a Modern Time

The Importance of Hungarian Folklore in Zadie Smith's "Two Men Arrive in a Village"

"In our village we do not serve borscht" —Zadie Smith

2 quarts of beef or chicken, 1 tablespoon of vegetable oil, 2 onions, diced, 2 garlic cloves, minced, 1 teaspoon dried marjoram, ½ head savoy cabbage, 2 beets, peeled and grated, salt and pepper, and ½ cup of sour cream. Heat a large pot over medium heat with the oil. Cook, stir frequently, until the onions are tender. Stir in the marjoram. Add the rest of the vegetables and cover and cook at a low temperature until they are slightly tender. Add the broth and the garlic. Season with salt and pepper. Bring the soup to a simmer and cook. Garnish soup with sour cream and serve. Voila, your very own borscht soup.

The recipe for borscht soup is very simple. Common vegetables, basic spices, a pot, and a stove is really all it takes to concoct this Hungarian staple dish. And yet, despite its seemingly simple nature, each family guards its borscht recipe fiercely. The common tradition is for each family to adapt the recipe into their own, adding secret ingredients and passing it down from generation to generation. Maybe cabbage was added during a time of famine, and the family couldn't afford a more suitable ingredient. Maybe the mysterious marjoram was added when the spice trade was just expanding in central Europe. The recipes themselves tell the history of the family and pass down the tradition to the younger generation. This characteristic is not limited to Hungarian food. It can also be found in the expansive Hungarian folk tradition. As established later in this paper, Hungarian folk tales are able to capture simultaneously the lessons of the

troubled past with the harsh realities of now. It is this idea that inspired Zadie Smith to write “Two Men Arrive in a Village,” a short story on the struggles of a rural village in West Africa. The story was featured in *The New Yorker* 2016 Summer Fiction Issue.

Before looking at the story itself, it is important to understand the exact inspirations Smith had prior to writing this story. In an interview with Cressida Leyshon, Smith is asked about the “universal narrative” style adopted in this short story. Smith answers that she was inspired by Hungarian folk tradition, a tradition she notes for its “allegory of the historical traumas of Hungary.”

Ever since the creation of the state, Hungary has been at the center of every struggle between the Eastern and Western world in history. As a result, within Hungarian culture there is a deep conscious understanding of this no-man’s land they are caught in, stuck between the major powers of the world. This sentiment is often described in their culture as “we are all alone,” a somber and lonely expression held by the people of Hungary. However, this expression is not without reason. After the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy collapse post World War I, Hungary saw a stream of dictators and autocratic communist regimes while losing two-thirds of its territory. In World War II, Hungary joined the Axis forces. They adopted anti-Semitic laws and carried out mass killings against the Jewish people. Hungary suffered heavy losses against neighboring Russia, who eventually occupied all of Hungary after their defeat. Another communist takeover required a revolution in 1956. This is only the last one hundred years of history for Hungary. After seeing events like these, it is understandable why Hungarian folk tales adopted bleaker tones and more pessimistic messages.

Once upon a time in the magical land of Csíksomlyó, an old man goes into the forest to cut some wood. While he is hacking away at a tree, a little boy named Pinko sneaks up to his knapsack and eats his lunch. Pinko's father learns what his son has done, and sends Pinko to confront the old man and apologize, and also offer three years of service while he's at it. The old man is startled by the boy, but accepts his apology and asks him to help him cut down trees in the forest. Pinko happily agrees and fells the entire forest in one second, much to the old man's surprise. The old man collects his payment for the logs and goes to the Baron for work, now knowing Pinko's capabilities. The Baron asks for his entire farmstead to be plowed, enough work to keep a hundred men busy for months. The old man buys a pair of cattle and gives them to Pinko with a plow. Within seconds Pinko has the entire field plowed, and the old man gets paid. After this, Pinko and the old man go to the King for work. The king asks them to thresh the entirety of the kingdom's crop yield, a job that would take thousands of men a year to accomplish. The old man agrees, but only as long as he is allowed to have one bagful of grain as a reward. The king agrees and Pinko goes to work, finishing the job in five minutes. Astonished, the king thanks them for their service and tells them to come back whenever they wish to collect their reward. The old man and Pinko go home and spend an entire week ripping bags apart and sewing them together, slowly making the largest bag anyone has ever seen. On the last day of Pinko's service, they go back to the palace and ask to collect their reward, emptying the entire storeroom of grain into their bag. The king looks on helplessly as they drain the kingdom of their food supply. The old man and his wife thank Pinko for his service, and they all live happily ever after.

This Hungarian fairy tale, called “Pinko,” highlights the pessimistic attitude of the Hungarian people. At first, you may look at this story and think it has a happy ending. Pinko gets to go back and live with his dad, and the old man and his wife are set for life with everything they could ever need, happily ever after. However, a deeper analysis of this fairy tale exposes the deeply embedded ideas of suffering and manipulation in both Hungarian culture and in the short story “Two Men Arrive in a Village.” First, Pinko is just a young boy who makes the small mistake of stealing a worker’s lunch. His punishment for this action is three years of indentured servitude. For comparison, in the state of Georgia petty theft is defined as less than \$500 of value and is punishable by no more than \$800 or 6 months in jail with no previous arrests. Pinko’s theft of the lunch does not deserve the punishment that was forced upon him, and yet he takes in stride and works his hardest for the old man. The old man, however, is another dark aspect of this fairy tale. At the end of the story, the old man constructs a gigantic bag and empties the entire store of grain into it and takes it home. This grain was meant for the entire kingdom. Farmers toiled in their fields for months under the beating sun for that grain to feed their families and their villages, but now it is gone. Their hard work was taken from them by a single man and his wife, who thought they needed it more than the rest of the kingdom. When winter comes and plants die, entire families will starve and die while the old man and his wife eat comfortably in their home. At a glance, this story seems like an underdog story, as a poor old man and his wife suddenly have their luck turned around. However, a deeper look at this story exposes the injustice and victimization Hungarian culture has at its core.

“Two Men Arrive in a Village” matches the story of Pinko. The beginning of the story begins as a classical narrative, telling of two individuals who arrive in a village. In most fairy

tales, the arrival of characters usually points to a hero beginning his journey in a new and unfamiliar place, ultimately saving or redeeming the people of the village. In this story, these men are not heroes. They did not come to save the princess or defend the town, “In the final analysis, fear is always the greater part of what they want.” It becomes clear that the men came to destroy everything village stands for, piece by piece. It begins small, as Smith points out. They ask for food, maybe water, maybe something stronger. They feel entitled to these basic necessities, and out of decency, the villagers obey. Then the escalation occurs. The meeting of the daughters, the minor theft or “contribution,” maybe more drinking. The sense of entitlement does not grow in the individuals; it was always there. It merely begins to rear its ugly head. Anger turns to words, words turn to blood, blood turns to chaos. The story ends in tragic apathy towards the situation, with the village elders no longer caring for words or details. In the end, it does not matter. This fairy tale is their reality, and life goes on.

In Cressida Leyshon’s interview with Zadie Smith, Smith says she draws inspiration for this story from a question she asked herself: “Is it possible to write a story that happens in many places at many times simultaneously? That implicates everybody?” The most fundamental and basic principle of the fairy tale is that it is versatile. Every person is able to read or hear the story and understand the message and the value of the tradition. Smith utilizes this idea by making her brutal short story extremely vague. She never specifies where this atrocity is occurring, she never names the victims or the culprits. This is not because the issue at hand is vague and ill-defined, but instead because it is a global message. This situation occurs on almost every continent on the planet in some form or another. In her quest to “implicate everybody” Smith utilizes the most basic literary tool available to mankind: the fairy tale. She highlights atrocities that happen in the

backyards of every person who reads it within the story. She incorporates elements from Hungarian folk tradition because it highlights the dark, self-deprecating mindset that highlights the history and current mindset of Hungarian society. It is this self-awareness that she hopes to plant in her readers around the world, hoping that someday that self-awareness will sprout empathy and anger and eventually blossom into protest and outreach.

Works Cited:

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