

Abstract

I was struck by the recurrence of rusalka figures in Russian literature in the first half of the nineteenth century and decided to see whether three of the most important poets of the period—Aleksandr Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, and Vasily Zhukovsky—did something distinctive in their treatment of the rusalka figure, or they were merely following a folkloric formula. Keeping in mind that previous scholars have tended not to pay too much attention to most of these works, this dissertation brings these works to the foreground, analyzes them from a new point of view, and offers fresh perspectives on the complex psychological framework that each writer brought to his work.

I discovered that there is a direct correlation between the three poets' personal lives and their experiences with women and the rusalka characters in their works. This led me to the conclusion that the three poets used the rusalka characters in their works as a means of expressing their innermost desires, hopes, and fears about females they may have encountered or thought about in their lives. The fact that the works in which they use the rusalka characters are not describing or addressing specific people gave the poets the opportunity to imagine and speculate on different scenarios about their own internal quest for understanding and finding an ideal partner and love. The fact that they used the rusalka figure—one of the oldest, most well-known and wide-spread characters in Russian folklore—as a specific device for the expression of their innermost fantasies can be explained by the powerful role and the strong presence of Russian folklore in Russians' lives and by the instinctive, natural, and unquestionable parallel between a rusalka and a woman in the Russian mind.

After the passing of these great poets, the changing role of women in Russian society and the emergence of the famous “woman question” in the middle of the nineteenth century led to a retreat from the poetic depiction of the rusalka figure among major Russian writers. New female figures came to the fore to command readers’ and writers’ attentions, thus closing a fascinating chapter in Russian literary history.