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**THE LITTLE RED HEN:
FROM CHILDREN'S LITERATURE TO CARTOONS,
POLITICS AND EDUCATION**

The significance of a tale in culture, politics and education

The Little Red Hen is a tale that was first published in an American children's magazine in 1874.¹ It soon proved to be very popular, and over the past one and a half centuries it has been published in various versions and adaptations, playing a prominent role among tales in American culture. On the occasion of the anniversary of its first publication, it is worth remembering and analyzing the original tale, and to examine how it has been used and altered since then. Therefore, some picture books of the tale will also be discussed in this paper, as well as the cartoon adaptations, including the 1934 Disney film that featured Donald Duck for the first time. Perhaps even more remarkable are the political adaptations by Ronald Reagan and Malvina Reynolds, respectively, who managed to turn the tale into a conservative fable and a socialist anthem alike.

The purpose of this paper is not only to examine the various manifestations of a rightly popular tale, but also to argue that it can be used in education in various ways and on various levels. In fact, this tale has already been used in English language teaching in elementary or lower primary school, applying the method of content and language integrated learning (CLIL). A recent Hungarian textbook, edited by Júlia Szarvas and Mária Bakti, offers suggestions for teachers and undergraduate students of English, kindergarten and elementary school teaching on how to use tales in teaching English as a foreign language to children under the age of ten.² This book contains detailed lesson plans, devised by Szilvia Pintér and Júlia Szarvas, and two versions of this tale: a shorter and a longer one, which are based on the original tale and the subsequent picture books. The shorter text is included in an appendix in this paper too, but the longer version will also be discussed, along with the differences from each other and from the original tale. Children can thus learn this tale in school or in kindergarten, they can role-play it, and can also learn English with its help. At the same time, teacher trainees can study the tale in methodology courses in college or university, so as to improve their teaching skills.

However, the tale is originally a literary work; therefore, it can be used not only as a teaching tool, but can also be appreciated in its own right, as a major work of children's literature, by children and adults alike. Therefore, it can be studied in college courses of children's literature too. The present paper focuses

¹ DODGE, Mary Mapes: *The Story of the Little Red Hen*. St. Nicholas Magazine, 1874/7. 680–681.
https://books.google.hu/books?id=_KRNAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA680&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false [30/1/2024]

² SZARVAS Júlia–BAKTI Mária (szerk.): *Mesevilág – mesék és történetek használata az idegen nyelvi fejlesztés során 10 év alatti nyelvtanulókkal*. Juhász Gyula Kiadó, Szeged, 2023.

primarily on the literary aspects: in an analysis of the various versions, the various genres of the tale are examined, along with the characteristic motifs, symbols and moral. The tale can be compared to other major and classic literary works, some of which will be briefly discussed in this paper too. As a fable, it can be compared to Aesop's *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, as well as to Orwell's *Animal Farm*, a political allegory that is also called a fairy story. As a folk tale or a fairy tale, it can be compared and contrasted to the *The Enormous Turnip*, a Russian or Ukrainian tale, which is also widely known in English and Hungarian. *The Little Red Hen* was written for children, but college or university students, and adult readers in general, may also benefit from studying the literary, cultural, historical or political aspects of the tale and its various adaptations.

The Story of the Little Red Hen and an adapted version used in English language teaching

The tale was collected by Mary Mapes Dodge, the editor of *St. Nicholas Magazine*, who notes in the journal that her mother would often tell it to her, decades ago, but as she has not heard it since then, she tells it from memory. Dodge's story is quite short, less than two pages including a number of black and white illustrations of all the animals; so the text is not much longer than the abridged version adapted for teaching and provided in the appendix below.

The plot of the story is that a hen finds some wheat seed and decides to sow it and make bread. She asks the other animals on the farm to help her plant it, but they refuse. The hen then harvests the wheat and takes it to the mill before baking the bread. At every step, she asks the animals for help, but they always refuse. Finally, she asks them, "Who will eat this bread?" At that point, all eagerly accept, but this time the hen refuses, because no one helped her with her work. Finally, she eats the bread herself.

The tale is basically a fable, but it has also been referred to as an old English folk tale, for instance, by Florence White Williams in her picture book of 1918, discussed below. Nevertheless, it is essentially an American tale, which may have been invented by Dodge or her mother, similarly to some of Andersen's literary fairy tales. The Comicolor cartoon of 1934 refers to it already as a "world famous fairy tale", even though it is not a typical fairy tale, since it does not feature magical creatures or elements.³ It can certainly be regarded as a kind of magic that the animals act like humans, however, that is a characteristic feature of fables, too. The various classifications of the genre can be explained by the fact that the dividing lines between the genres are not clear-cut, and there are different, overlapping definitions, but the tale itself can also be interpreted in various ways.

The tale is clearly a fable, since all the characters are animals that talk and behave like humans; similarly to Aesop's classic fables, they represent certain human characteristics. The moral is also clear, even though in the original version

³ Ub IWERKS: *The Little Red Hen*. ComiColor Cartoons, Los Angeles, 1934.
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0141559/> [30/1/2024]

by Dodge it is not explicitly formulated, therefore the tale is not as didactic as traditional fables. The characteristics of folk tales can also be noted: the story and the characters are simple, straightforward, representing country life. The outcome of the conflict between the good or positive title character and the bad or negative other characters is clear: the moral hero or heroine eventually wins the reward of persistent hard work, while the others, unwilling to help, are punished or at least left empty handed. The repetitions are also characteristic of folk tales: these underscore the trials and the persistence of the hero, heighten the tension; at the same time, they can also help children and adults alike to learn and remember the story. Nevertheless, in the different versions of folk tales, certain elements, episodes or characters can vary: in this case the animals, the steps of making the bread or, in certain adaptations, as we shall see, the type of grain or even the conclusion and the moral are altered.

The most important moral is the importance of hard work, personal initiative and perseverance, which is finally fruitful: the diligent hen can literally reap the reward by harvesting the wheat, and then she can eat the bread baked by herself, which is denied to the other, lazy animals, who are left hungry. In some adaptations, which we shall see shortly, the hen has chicks she has to take care of, therefore the importance of family is also featured: the chicks can see the good example of the hen, as children can also follow the parental example. In certain other adaptations, the other animals also change and improve their character, likewise learning from the lesson. This highlights the significance of learning, cooperation and helpfulness, which are major motifs in many tales, though in the original version by Dodge we can see mainly the lack of these, and hence the importance of autonomy, foresight and persistence is foregrounded.

In the original story, despite its brevity, there are five animals in addition to the hen: a rat, a cat, a dog, a duck and a pig. Although there are no explicitly religious motifs in the tale, nor can we find a pronounced moral lesson, the number five has important spiritual connotations as symbolic meanings. According to Claude de Saint-Martin, there is one truly characteristic feature of five: it represents the appearance of the principle of evil in the world. It is the demonic number of matter, the pride or arrogance of the Self, degradation itself.⁴ This interpretation fits the five animals repeatedly refusing to help the hen. As an animal symbol, the scratching hen represents primarily diligence and gathering, but it can also represent the Holy Church, divine providence, fertility, care and provision, and caritas.⁵

The numerous different animals represent not only the typical dwellers of a traditional farmyard, but the usual repetitions of folk tales are thus particularly underscored, as the hen receives five refusals to every single question, except one. "Who will plant this wheat?" – she first asks, and then from rat to pig, five animals answer, one after the other: "I won't." The same happens to the questions on reaping, grinding and baking, therefore the hen receives twenty refusals altogether to his four questions. Nevertheless, she always says, "I will, then." The

⁴ PÁL József–ÚJVÁRI Edit (szerk.): *Szimbólumtár: Jelképek, motívumok, témák az egyetemes és a magyar kultúrából*. Balassi, Budapest, 2001. 157.

⁵ VÍGH Éva (szerk.): *Állatszimbólumtár A-Z*. Balassi, Budapest, 2019. 160.

hen always does what she has to do by herself. She receives a favorable answer only to her last question, concerning eating, again five times: "I will" – say all animals on this occasion. But the little red hen then says: "No, you won't, for I am going to do it myself." She does not justify her decision in this first version, but that is not really necessary, as it follows from the above, since she has always done everything on her own. Thus she takes the bread and runs off with it. Although the little red hen does not explain her deeds here, the moral is clear, as the story speaks for itself.

In the later versions there tend to be fewer animals, but the events are often more detailed and colored, and the moral is usually also explained, according to the aims of the actual narrator or editor. In a shorter version, recently adapted for English language teaching, mentioned above and provided in the Appendix below, there is a cat, a dog and a mouse in addition to the hen. This can be changed, and the list of animals can be extended in teaching, which is also shown in the longer version in the textbook cited above. In a shorter version, the duck and the pig can be omitted from the original story: these farm animals, though also important, are perhaps less common now in everyday life, in the yard of an ordinary house, and the rat can be replaced by a mouse. This does not change the essence of the story: the three animals against the hen serve primarily a condensation, a relatively minor abridgement. The presence of three similar elements, which is common in tales, already means enough repetitions and trials for the hero. Number three usually carries positive connotations, for instance, in Hungarian folk tales or in the stories of the Bible, however, here such positivity refers certainly not to the three lazy animals, but rather to the fact that the Little Red Hen is not discouraged by the triple refusal or temptation either.

Although the language of Dodge's story is quite simple, the text adapted for teaching small children in a foreign language can be further simplified, both the vocabulary and the grammar. For instance, the hen asks for help *to cut* the wheat, rather than *to reap* it, or the passive form "to be ground into flour" is omitted. The dialogue is edited, so as to clearly indicate the repeated refusals of the various animals in separate lines, which mark the lines of the different characters in a possible role-play:

"Not I," said the cat.

"Not I," said the dog.

"Not I," said the mouse.

Finally, in this version, the hen does not ask, "Who will eat this bread?" The animals volunteer to help her eat it without that question too. At the same time, the Little Red Hen explains her refusal by briefly pointing out what the other animals failed to do, and therefore cannot eat the bread. "No, you didn't help me plant the wheat, cut the wheat, take the wheat to the miller or bake the bread. So, I will eat it by myself." It can be useful to highlight this point when teaching young children, or even older ones, so that they can fully grasp the moral. Otherwise, the Little Red Hen might seem selfish or greedy; as we shall see, in some modern adaptations she is indeed charged with that.

The Little Red Hen as a picture book

In the picture book by Florence White Williams, published over a century ago, there is a cat, a rat and a pig, so already fewer animals than in the original story, but the Little Red Hen has chicks, thus the caring character of the hen is highlighted, as she has to feed her brood.⁶ She scratches almost all day for worms, which are “absolutely necessary to the health of her children.” That is how she finds a wheat seed, which she first believes to be “some new and perhaps very delicious kind of meat.” At the same time, the laziness and selfishness of the other animals are also underscored: they are self-concerned and do not care about anything or anybody else. The cat usually naps “lazily in the barn door, not even bothering herself to scare the rat” who runs here and there as he pleases. The pig, living in the sty, does not care what happens so long as he can “eat and grow fat.” The Little Red Hen asks for help, because she is “so busy hunting food for herself and her family”, but the other animals refuse.

The many colorful illustrations guide the reader through all the stages of growing the wheat and making the bread. Although the text itself is quite clear, the illustrations are an integral part of the work, highlighting not only the characters, but every event of the plot. As in a truly useful picture book, the pictures vividly illuminate the text, and can also enhance the reading practice, which is already supported by the repetitions in the text.

A key moment, a real turning point of the tale is that the hen, after finding the strange wheat, does not eat it, but chooses to plant it, as humans do, so as to make bread. The original story does not provide any detail or explanation on this either, but in this book the hen carefully examines the seed and then decides to grow it, so that “when ripe it could be made into flour and then into bread.” This is presented as a discovery, and as the hen becomes conscious of her motivation and outlines her plan, so can the children reading the book become aware of some basic practices of agriculture and food preparation.

Some further details are also added, for instance, after cutting the ripe wheat, the Little Red Hen asks, “Who will thresh the Wheat?” Of course, the other animals again say, as usual, “Not I.” When the hen finally makes the bread, it is also described in detail: “she went and put on a fresh apron and spotless cook's cap. First of all she set the dough, as was proper.” Now she is called “Mrs. Hen.” Then she also “moulded the bread, divided it into loaves, and put them into the oven to bake.” Finally “the great moment arrived. A delicious odor was wafted upon the autumn breeze.” This naturally stirs interest and anticipation among all the animals, but the end of the tale is the same as in Dodge's story: only the hen will eat the bread. After all these details, making everyone hungry, the end of the tale is cut short. The Little Red Hen does not explain her decision to the other animals and, somewhat strangely, the chicks, who are around her in most of the tale, are not mentioned at the end either.

⁶ Florence White WILLIAMS: *The Little Red Hen: An Old English Folk Tale*. The Saalfield Publishing Company, Chicago, 1918.
<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/18735> [30/01/2024]

The continuous popularity of the tale is marked by the fact that a new picture book was made in the twenty-first century, with a text and illustrations by Jerry Pinkney. This work won several awards, and the story is already referred to as a “classic folk tale.”⁷ The illustrations are again important and useful: as in a typical modern picture book, the pages contain only a few lines, or occasionally none, so the pictures not only illustrate the text, but can truly engage the readers, who may discover some further details, which are not mentioned.

In this book, there are four animals in addition to the hen: “the short brown dog, the thin grey rat, the tall black goat, and the round, pink pig.” So the cat and the duck are omitted from the original story, but a goat is added, and the animals are described by some distinct adjectives. Some further details are added, for instance, the hen, while repeatedly asking for help from all the animals, always asks one particular animal again at every activity. First, when asking for help in planting, she says to the dog: “Surely you will” (...) “You are so fond of digging.” But the answer is, again: “Not I.”

After planting the wheat, the hen, while scratching for food for her chicks, “also found time to care for the seedlings. She and her chicks watched as the wheat grew strong and ripe.” This again reinforces the importance of the family, as well as of education, teaching responsibility. In this tale, Mr. Miller also appears as a character, who not only grinds the wheat and thus makes flour, but also gives the hen a jar of berry jam. Later, further details are provided when preparing the dough: she “mixed the water with yeast, salt, and water, and kneaded the dough.” The book thus in effect teaches children how to make bread.

In the conclusion, the Little Red Hen explains to the other animals why they cannot eat the bread, and says: “I and my chicks will eat it.” Then she “set the table for herself and her family, cut the warm, soft bread, then spread sweet berry jam on each slice. Oh, joy of joys!” The picture book thus ends in an idyllic family scene. This, however, is not surprising after the famous cartoon adaptations, which were made almost a century ago and are discussed below.

Finally, I would refer to the last part of the textbook *Mesevilág*, mentioned above. This also contains a picture book within the book that discusses the methodology of applying tales in teaching English as a foreign language to children. The picture book offers a longer, extended version of the tale, with twelve animals, so that more children can participate in the role-play when performing the tale as a drama, beyond, of course, learning the names and some characteristics of a large number of animals in English. A detailed review of this picture book, as of the textbook itself, would go beyond the scope of this paper. In short, the text and the illustrations by Viktória Habon-Peszeki are both carefully designed to serve not only reading but also language teaching and active language learning. Therefore, the pictures serve not only to illustrate the events of the story, but also to represent all the characters in separate pictures, which can be used for educational purposes. As for the text, the part of speech that is practiced is highlighted in boldface, so that it is easier to follow for teachers and pupils alike. Before this picture book, a wealth of theoretical insights and practical advice is provided on tales in general and *The Little Red Hen* in particular.

⁷ Jerry PINKNEY: *The Little Red Hen*. Dial Press, New York, 2006.

Two classic cartoons:
The Little Red Hen* and *The Wise Little Hen

The Comicolor cartoon of *The Little Red Hen*, mentioned above, also features the hen together with her chicks, who help her in the work: the film, which was very popular when it was released, apparently draws on the earlier picture book by Williams and serves as an inspiration of the later ones too. The pictures here are not only animated, but are also accompanied by lively music and songs, typical of the period. In this version, three animals are set against the hen: a pig, a duck and a mouse; the former two appear in the original story too, while the mouse replaces the rat. The cat and the dog are omitted, but the plot is largely based on Dodge's story, as well as on Williams's picture book, with some further additions.

The Little Red Hen does almost everything together with the chicks: from planting or sowing to eating; in the meantime, they even water the growing wheat, then reap, thresh and grind it, before making the dough and baking the bread. At the end, the animals chase the hen carrying the bread, but she escapes into her hut, together with her chicks, and shuts the door. Eating itself is not shown, but the hen reappears, telling the other three animals: "Not you, not you, not you, I'll eat it all by myself." However, it is suggested that she shares the bread with her chicks, as finally a chick appears with a notice "Do not disturb", and puts it on the door. In addition to the entertaining features of the comic cartoon, the educational elements are thus also underscored by the additional details of family life and particularly by the work of the chicks.

Even more remarkable, however, is the cartoon *The Wise Little Hen*, a Disney production released in the same year.⁸ In this adaptation, only two characters are featured in addition to the hen and her chicks: Peter Pig and Donald Duck, who has his debut in this film, which can therefore be regarded as historical already for this reason. The character soon gained international popularity as an icon of modern American culture, but the film has a topical relevance too, possibly reflecting the age of the Great Depression.⁹ The hen here grows corn or maize, rather than wheat, together with her chicks, and seeks help from the duck and the pig, who refuse to help repeatedly, as in the earlier versions. Eventually, the hen bakes an array of corn dishes, not only bread, but also pies and cakes, as well as cooking corn on the cob, and happily eats them in the company of her chicks, and teaches a lesson to the lazy animals by pranking them.

Donald Duck and Peter Pig are friends who try to avoid work by faking stomach aches several times, but the wise Mrs. Hen sees through their false excuses. The cartoon appeared in the series *Silly Symphony*, and Donald Duck and Peter Pig dance to the song *The Sailor's Hornpipe*. The music and the dance serve not only as an additional form of entertainment to the comic cartoon, but as an integral part of the plot, as the two friends regularly sing and dance, even when they fake illness. Moreover, they do that in a club, called the *Idle Hour Club*,

⁸ Wilfred JACKSON: *The Wise Little Hen*. Walt Disney Productions, Los Angeles, 1934.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5dowCyaP7I&ab_channel=Earthdisk [30/01/2024]

⁹ Tracey MOLLET: *Cartoons in Hard Times: The Animated Shorts of Disney and Warner Brothers in Depression and War 1932–1945*. Bloomsbury Academic, New York, 2017. 27–30.

whose president is Peter, and the vice-president is Donald, but the hen sees them dancing, rather loudly and noticeably.

It is noteworthy that the animals apart from the hen tend to be idle in the earlier versions too, not only for an hour or two, but all day long; however, this is the first time that their idleness is in an organized form, and the idle ones are named too. In fact, it is only the idle Peter and Donald who are given proper names, whereas the little hen is not, but the adjective “Red” is notably replaced for “Wise”. The hen, revealing the trick of the faking friends, is rightly called so, even though she certainly acts remarkably wisely already in the original story, when deciding to grow wheat and bake bread. The little hen is also wise in finally tricking the pig and the duck: she offers them a basket that is covered, therefore Peter and Donald hope to find some delicious corn dishes in it, but their actual present is castor oil instead, so as to cure their stomach.

However, the hen can be regarded as wise particularly in the given historical context. According to Tracey Mollet, in the Great Depression, when President Roosevelt tried to boost the agricultural sector, Peter Pig and Donald Duck may have represented those who rejected the New Deal policy, in particular the promotion of self-sufficiency in farming. They are therefore given castor oil, whereas the little hen and her chicks happily grow, harvest and eat their own crops. Self-sufficiency is thus reinforced, while laziness is punished. Therefore, this comic cartoon may have had some quite serious political implications in a very difficult period.

The song of the Red Hen: a political adaptation by Malvina Reynolds

Even if the famous Disney cartoon has political concerns, such connotations are mostly implicit. However, in some more recent adaptations or revisions, we can find quite explicit political concerns or even propaganda. It is remarkable that the story that was originally intended for children has been used both by the left and the right in politics, suggesting opposite conclusions and morals, primarily for adults.

In 1965, the singer and political activist Malvina Reynolds wrote a socialist anthem from the tale, thus the original story underwent further generic changes: from a prose fiction it became a poem and a song, performed by the author with a guitar. In this song, similarly to the tale, no one helps the Little Red Hen, and they repeatedly sing so in the chorus:

Chorus:

"Not I!" said the dog and the cat.

"Not I!" said the mouse and the rat.

"I will then," said the Little Red Hen,

And she did.¹⁰

¹⁰ Malvina REYNOLDS: *Song Lyrics and Poems: The Little Red Hen*. Schroeder Music Company, Berkeley, 1965. <https://people.wku.edu/charles.smith/MALVINA/mro99.htm> [30/01/2024]

In this version, there are four animals set against the hen: a dog, a cat, a mouse and a rat; none of them are farm animals raised for their meat, but animals that can be found almost anywhere, even in big cities. They are referred to as “the other guys down the street”, then “a dog gone no-good mob” and “the gang”. As in the other versions, they would help only in eating: the song is quite faithful to the original story, except for the last stanza with its conclusion, offering a remarkable moral:

“I planted and hoed this grain of wheat,
Them that works not, shall not eat,
That’s my credo,” the little bird said,
And that’s why they called her Red.

“Them that works not, shall not eat,” explains the Little Red Hen her decision, and the last line of the song adds: “And that’s why they called her Red.” It is well-known that the communists, who were referred to as the Reds, did say that: it was indeed the credo of Bolsheviks, including Lenin himself. In the Soviet Union and other socialist or communist countries, in addition to emphasizing the importance of labor and promoting the proletariat, or the working class, this slogan was also used to justify the radical anti-capitalist measures, including the persecution of the bourgeoisie, the appropriation of their possessions, or of virtually any private property.

However, this idea was not actually a new or unique principle invented by the communists, as it can be found already in the Bible. The Apostle Paul warned the members of the early Church in an epistle:

10 For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: “*The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.*” 11 We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. 12 Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat.¹¹

Reynolds apparently has a very witty conclusion: while retaining the conclusion of the tale, she adds a remarkably funny twist by incorporating a famous political concept of communism. However, such a radical revision is arguable: as we have seen, the hen apparently labeled as a communist in Reynold’s socialist anthem may as well draw on other principles, which are much older. The hen does not actually reveal the source of her credo or beliefs, but as these ideas can also be found in Christianity, she is not necessarily a communist, she might even be a conservative.

But Reynold’s revision is arguable not only for this reason. In Dodge’s tale, and in all other adaptations discussed above, red is the original, natural color of the hen. Therefore, Reynold’s solution, however funny, is somewhat like picking a woman with naturally red hair, or perhaps a man with red beard, and calling

¹¹ *Holy Bible, New International Version*, 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12.
<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2%20Thessalonians%203%3A10-12&version=NIV> [30/01/2024]

them Red, suggesting they are communists, when they work hard and are unwilling to share the products they produce with their idle peers. In fact, Reynolds makes fun of the hen's appearance, and such a practice may actually be regarded as politically incorrect now.

Moreover, as we have seen, the tale is originally about personal initiative and individual efforts, and the major differences that are resulted by such an approach, rather than about the socialist or communist type of economy, which is actually based on sharing. The latter is characterized by an egalitarian approach, particularly under the communist, truly Red regimes, which tended to enforce equality and collectivism in agriculture.

The Modern Little Red Hen: a conservative fable by Ronald Reagan

On the other side of the political spectrum, Ronald Reagan told the tale of *The Modern Little Red Hen* in a radio broadcast in 1976. Reagan also alludes to socialist ideas and practices in his modern adaptation of the already classic tale, amounting to a political fable that he calls "a little treatise on basic economics."¹² However, Reagan offers a conservative critique of socialism or communism.

In Reagan's version, the little red hen calls her neighbors to help and plant the wheat, so that they can have bread to eat. The four neighbors are a cow, a duck, a pig and a goose, suggesting a country life of farms with various animals. It is perhaps noteworthy that Reagan changes the list of animals in the original story, so that all of them are not only potentially useful, but are commonly raised for their meat. Thus, in addition to the hen, he keeps only the duck and the pig, like the Disney cartoon, produced four decades before, at the time of another economic crisis. The dog, the cat and the rat are similarly omitted, but a cow and the goose are added. Reynolds, on the other hand, as we have seen, removes the duck and the pig, but retains the dog, the cat and the rat, and adds a mouse.

Nevertheless, as in all other versions, the animals are unwilling to help. First, they give the usual answer: "Not I." Later on, however, when asked to help and reap, they already provide explanations or excuses for refusing to work:

"Not I," said the duck.

"Out of my classification," said the pig.

"I'd lose my seniority," said the cow.

"I'd lose my unemployment compensation," said the goose.

"Then I will," said the little red hen, and she did.

Finally, when asked to help and bake the bread, they say:

"That would be overtime for me," said the cow.

"I'd lose my welfare benefits," said the duck.

"I'm a dropout and never learned how," said the pig.

"If I'm to be the only helper, that's discrimination," said the goose.

"Then I will," said the little red hen.

¹² Ronald REAGAN: *The Modern Little Red Hen: A Radio Commentary*, 1976.

<https://es.redskins.com/topic/149415-ronald-reagan-on-economics-1976-the-modern-little-red-hen> [30/01/2024]

When the little red hen is unwilling to share the bread, the other animals protest:

“Excess profits,” cried the cow.

“Capitalist leech,” screamed the duck.

“I demand equal rights,” yelled the goose.

The animals accuse the hen of being “unfair,” and a government agent comes, who tells the hen that she “must not be greedy.” The hen must share the bread: she baked five loaves, but she can keep only one. As the agent explains: “under our modern government regulations the productive workers must divide their product with the idle.” The hen finally accepts that, even if reluctantly. “And they lived happily ever after.” The little red hen even claims to be grateful. However, there is a remarkable concluding sentence: “But her neighbors wondered why she never again baked any more bread.”

The moral of Reagan’s fable is clear: the excessive government regulations remove the incentive to work, it discourages personal initiative and has a negative effect on the economy as a whole. This highlights the dark side and the injustices of a leftist, socialist or communist type of economy: the egalitarian system, if based on an enforced equality, is only an apparent equality. If the work is not done equally, if most of the products that are produced are taken away, the system is not productive, but demoralizing and ultimately undemocratic.

As for the historical context, Reagan told this modern tale on November 16, 1976, shortly after the American presidential election, when Democrat Jimmy Carter, former Governor of Georgia, defeated incumbent Republican president Gerald Ford in a narrow victory. The Republican Reagan, former Governor of California, was also aspiring for the presidency, and in this radio broadcast he announced his economic and political views through a fable, as part of a long but eventually successful political campaign. Four years later, Reagan won the Republican nomination for the presidency and then a landslide victory over President Carter, becoming the 40th President of the United States from 1981 to 1989. Although he was often criticized for his conservatism by his opponents, in 1984 he was reelected in another landslide victory.

But let us return to *The Modern Little Red Hen*, whose message or moral can be dual. On the one hand, Reagan here outlines his neoliberal economic policies called “Reaganomics”: economic deregulation and cuts in taxes and government spending in a period of stagflation, or recession-inflation, when the economy is in decline and both the inflation rate and unemployment are high. Indeed, in Reagan’s fable, the government agent represents extreme regulations, involving extremely high taxes: the four loaves of bread taken away from the hen amount to an 80 per cent tax rate. The four idle animals represent equally high unemployment, whose compensation and the other welfare benefits must require an enormous amount of government spending. At the same time, the hen, the only active and resourceful animal, is eventually discouraged from work too.

The tale is certainly exaggerating, if we consider the American context: therefore, it may represent not only the actual economic problems of the United States, or certain economic policies that may remind one of a kind of socialism. These extreme measures may remind one of communism too. Reagan was openly anti-communist: he referred to the Soviet Union as the Empire of the Evil. Thus,

in this fable, Reagan may also outline his anti-communist sentiments and political plans. During his presidency, Reagan was successful not only in his domestic policies, overcoming the economic crisis of the 1970s and achieving a major economic expansion, but also in his foreign affairs, contributing to the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe. From such a perspective, it can be noted that in 1976, when Reagan told his fable, it could represent the repressed economic and political situation in Eastern and Central Europe more than in the United States. Then, the eventual decline of European communism coincided with Reagan's presidency, and it ended soon afterwards, under the presidency of George Bush, who was the vice-president in the Reagan administration.

In such a political reading, Reagan's fable, as a political allegory, can be compared to Orwell's *Animal Farm*, a satire of communism in the Soviet Union, which is also called a "fairy story" in its subtitle.¹³ Although the historical context is different, both works offer a sound critique of a false equality based on repression. Nevertheless, Reagan's political adaptation may also be arguable from the point that this short fable certainly simplifies the problem of unemployment in a capitalist economy, as well as the issues of welfare benefits.

However, there is a further remarkable point of this fable, pertaining to its conclusion. As we have seen, at the end of the tale, the little red hen "never again baked any bread." In the earlier versions, this is not mentioned, the original tale and the above adaptations tell only the curious story of a hen starting to grow wheat and bake bread. Reagan's version, on the other hand, also suggests why these practices, which are truly unusual by a hen, were discontinued. "Once upon a time," Reagan starts his tale with the usual formula, it happened in a tale, or in "a little treatise on basic economics," but never again.

American culture and traditions tend to value individualism, personal initiative and freedom. Therefore, if we compare the above two political adaptations, Reagan's fable, though modern, may better grasp the moral of Dodge's story than Reynold's song, which arguably highlights the color of the hen. However, every interpretation and adaptation can be debated, and so can the use of literature or art in general for political purposes. Nevertheless, the analysis of the tale and its adaptations can offer an opportunity to discuss various moral, religious, historical, social, economic or political issues, particularly for adult readers or older students. At the same time, young readers can also appreciate the fable of the talking animals, and may also grasp its moral. Finally, let us see two other classic tales, which are parallel works of children's literature, with similar generic features and motifs. These can be discussed here only briefly, but a number of such works can be related to this tale, similarly to Orwell's fable, not only within children's literature, but also in other fields of literature, art or education.

¹³ George ORWELL: *Animal Farm: A Fairy Story*. Secker and Warburg, London, 1945.

**Parallel Tales: *The Ant and the Grasshopper* and
*The Enormous Turnip***

The Ant and the Grasshopper is one the most famous fables by Aesop. The busy ant can be compared to the hen in *The Little Red Hen*, while the idle grasshopper to the other animals. The classic fable formulates the moral at the end: “it is best to prepare for the times of necessity.”¹⁴ This could be the moral of our tale too, even though in Dodge’s story, as we have seen, the moral is not explicitly given, while some modern adaptations offer different conclusions too. Of course, further differences can be noted, beyond the fact that in the two tales the main characters are different, and the modern fable features more animals than Aesop’s. The ant does not ask the grasshopper to help in the work in summer, either in growing, reaping or storing the wheat: it does not even occur to the ant, choosing to work alone throughout.

At the same time, the grasshopper is in quite a dramatic situation in winter, almost dying of hunger and extremely suffering from the very cold weather. Although the animals refusing to help the hen also miss the delicious bread, they are not necessarily shaken in their position. This is not explicit at the end of the modern fable either: all we can see is that the animals are punished for their laziness on a remarkable occasion, when the little hen can enjoy the reward of her hard work, but they cannot. This is certainly an unpleasant experience for them; however, they may not starve to death, even if they fail to learn the lesson and continue their idle way of life in the barnyard. Incidentally, in Dodge’s story, as in a true fable, there are only animals: the farmer does not appear as a character, so the animals may seem to be abandoned in the farmyard. However, if one considers this issue, one may suppose that the farmer must be in the background all along, and he must be feeding the idle animals that are raised there, hence probably contributing to their laziness.

The Enormous Turnip is a famous Russian or Ukrainian folk tale, highlighting the importance of helping others and working together.¹⁵ An old man or a grandpa plants a turnip, but when it grows, it becomes enormous, so he cannot pull it out, and therefore asks for help. This tale thus also takes place in the country, and is concerned with agriculture, growing and harvesting a plant, and it has also various versions. The tale usually has six or seven characters: in addition to the old man, there is an old woman or grandma, a grandchild, a dog, a cat and a mouse (in some versions, there are two grandchildren, a boy and a girl). The repetitions characteristic of folk tales can be noted in this tale too, however, here everyone is willing to help. Even so, further help is needed at every step: everybody says yes, one after the other, and in an ever growing chain, they make common efforts. For a fairly long time, they cannot manage even together, only when there are enough helpers, but eventually they succeed in pulling out the turnip with the help of the mouse.

¹⁴ AESOP: *The Ant and the Grasshopper*.

<https://www.umass.edu/aesop/content.php?n=0&i=1> [30/01/2024]

¹⁵ Aleksey TOLSTOY: *The Enormous Turnip*. Walker Books, London, 2001.

Hard work and perseverance are thus rewarded in this tale too: these are important motifs, but not as the result of individual work or personal initiative, as in *The Little Red Hen*. The basic version of the tale ends by pulling out the turnip, while in the somewhat extended versions the turnip is eaten after it is cooked or prepared otherwise, making various delicious dishes, for instance, baking a turnip pie or cake. This can remind us of the little red hen, baking and eating the bread, at times with her chicks, as in the picture books or the cartoon adaptations. Although the genre of *The Enormous Turnip* is a folk tale, sometimes it is also referred to as a fairy tale, similarly to *The Little Red Hen*, even though there are no particularly magical characters or events in it, apart from the fact that the turnip becomes truly enormous, and the animals gladly help and pull it; even the cat and the mouse, in peace with each other and the dog, as well as the people. However, despite all these animals, the tale is not a fable, as the main characters are humans.

In conclusion, *The Little Red Hen*, although not so old as some other famous tales, has also become a classic over the past one and a half centuries, and is worth not only reading but also studying for a number of reasons by children and adults alike; either the original story, or any of the various adaptations. In this paper, I attempted to highlight some remarkable points of this tale and its reception, which can be further analyzed and used in education in various ways.

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Abstract

A VÖRÖS TYÚKOSKA: GYERMEKIRODALOMTÓL A RAJZFILMEKIG, A POLITIKÁIG ÉS AZ OKTATÁSIG

A vörös tyúkocsk (The Little Red Hen) egy amerikai mese, amely először 1874-ben jelent meg egy gyermekmagazinban, és azóta számos adaptációja készült. A tanulmány a mese irodalmi elemzésén túl áttekinti az elmúlt százötven év különböző átiratait, és arra is kitér, hogyan lehet felhasználni az angol nyelvoktatásban, illetve a felsőoktatásban. A meséből több képeskönyv és két klasszikus rajzfilm is készült, köztük A bölcs tyúkocsk (The Little Wise Hen), amelyben Donald kacsa először szerepelt. Különösen figyelemre méltóak a politikai átiratok: Malvina Reynolds baloldali éneke, illetve Ronald Reagan konzervatív tanmeséje, A modern vörös tyúkocsk (The Modern Little Red Hen). Az irodalmi elemzés kitér a műfaji sajátosságokra, a tanulságokra és néhány hasonló mesére is: állatmeseként A tücsök és a hangya, míg népmeseként, illetve tündérmeseként Az óriásrépa állítható vele párhuzamba.

Appendix

The Little Red Hen

Once upon a time, there was a Little Red Hen.

The Little Red Hen found some wheat seeds.

She asked her animal friends, "Who will help me plant the wheat seeds?"

"Not I," said the cat.

"Not I," said the dog.

"Not I," said the mouse.

So the Little Red Hen planted the wheat seeds by herself.

The wheat grew tall and strong.

The Little Red Hen asked her animal friends, "Who will help me cut the wheat?"

"Not I," said the cat.

"Not I," said the dog.

"Not I," said the mouse.

So the Little Red Hen cut the wheat by herself.

The Little Red Hen asked her animal friends, "Who will help me take the wheat to the miller?"

"Not I," said the cat.

"Not I," said the dog.

"Not I," said the mouse.

So, the Little Red Hen took the wheat to the miller by herself. The miller ground the wheat and gave her the flour.

The Little Red Hen asked her animal friends, "Who will help me bake the bread?"

"Not I," said the cat.

"Not I," said the dog.

"Not I," said the mouse.

So, the Little Red Hen baked the bread by herself.

The bread smelled delicious and her animal friends wanted to help her eat it.

But the Little Red Hen said, "No, you didn't help me plant the wheat, cut the wheat, take the wheat to the miller or bake the bread. So, I will eat it by myself."

And she did.