

Questions for Discussion on the Kosovo Poems

“The Fall of Serbia”

1. The Serbian forces, led by Tsar Lazar, are gathered on the field of Kosovo preparing to do battle with the Ottoman army. In the first paragraph/stanza, who sends him a message? Why is the “author” of the message important?
2. What difficult choice does the tsar get? Why is it a terrible choice? Which option does he choose?
3. What is a medieval battle like? How is it different from warfare today?
4. Why was Tsar Lazar ultimately defeated?
5. What is the implication of the last line of the poem?
6. How might this literary interpretation of the historical event affect later history?

“The Maiden of Kossovo”

1. Who is the main character, and what happens as she watches soldiers gather for the Battle of Kosovo?
2. What does she learn after the battle?
3. How does she see her future after the battle?

“The Death of the Yugovichi’s Mother”

1. Who is the main character and what does she ask God?
2. What does she learn about her family?
3. How does she act, and why do you think she reacts this way?
4. What effect does it have on her when her daughters-in-law, her grandchildren, and even her son’s horse are mourning their losses?
5. What happens at the end to make the mother face her grief?
6. What occurs in the very last line of the poem?

Answers to Discussion Questions on the Kosovo Poems

“The Fall of Serbia”

1. The message comes from God himself. The Serbs are Orthodox Christian (while the Ottoman Turks are Muslims), so they see the coming battle as a case of Christianity versus Islam.
2. He is asked if he wants a heavenly kingdom or an earthly one. If he chooses the heavenly kingdom, then Serbia will lose the battle, the tsar and most of the leaders will die, and Serbia come under Ottoman rule. However, they will gain eternal glory for their sacrifice because they will save Europe from the Muslims (and Serbia itself will rise again one day). On the other hand, if he chooses the earthly one, then the Serbs will win, but the will of God will not be fulfilled. Naturally, he chooses the former, builds the church at Kosovo, and prepares for martyrdom.
3. The forces are organized by individual noblemen, not according to some central command. Unlike modern warfare, earlier warfare is much more a series of individual and smaller group actions. During the battle, we see unit after unit fall to the Ottomans. Note the names – since these people appear in the other poems.
4. Tsar Lazar was so brave and competent that he would have won anyway except that he was betrayed by one of his own people, a member of his family.
5. The Serbs believe that their defeat was in fulfillment of God’s will, that they had sacrificed themselves to save all of Europe from an Ottoman invasion, and that they deserve glory and acclaim for this act. In other words, Serbian literature has transformed history by turning a military defeat into a moral victory. (Footnote: There is a special kind of red poppy that grows on the fields of Kosovo. Serbs believe that these were put there by God as a memorial to the blood of their martyred soldiers that died there.)
6. It would give the Serbs a sense of identity when nationalism develops in the early 19th century. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, it would lead them to fight against foreign rule (and even help to start a world war). And in the late 20th century, it would lead them to believe that Kosovo should belong to the Serbs despite the fact that population changes (from centuries of warfare) had occurred and over 80% of the population was Albanian. Regardless of the current reality, Serbs believe that Kosovo is historically theirs, a “holy land” upon which they had made great sacrifices. (Therein lie the root of the violence of the late 1990s.)

***Note: The previous poem was a fairly typical (though rather messianic) medieval battle poem. The next two poems, however, are rather unusual because they talk about the effect of a battle on civilians, the women and children left behind.

“The Maiden of Kossovo”

1. She is a young woman who is proposed to by three different Serbian officers. She tells them that she will decide which one to marry according to how bravely they fight in the battle.
2. As she wanders the battlefield after the battle, she finds the bodies of each of her suitors.
3. In the end, she doesn't speak of the implications of the defeat on her country; she sees how it will affect her personally. She believes that she will never marry, have children, or have a normal life because of the Serbian losses at Kosovo.

“The Death of the Yugovichi's Mother”

1. She is the wife of Yug Bogdan and the mother of nine sons (the Yugovichi), who are all fighting in the battle. She asks God to let her see what has happened on the battlefield.
2. She learns that all ten of them have been killed.
3. She won't let herself cry, probably because she is afraid that if she opens her heart to the enormity of her losses, then she won't be able to handle it.
4. She still buries her pain inside her.
5. A carrion bird drops the arm of one of her sons in her lap, so she can't escape the reality any longer.
6. Her heart breaks, and she dies (which is why the title of the poem is “The *Death* of the Yugovichi's Mother”).