

# THE UNIVERSALITY OF LEGENDS ?

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## 1.1 Introduction

The possibility of combining literary theory and anthropological linguistics is an intriguing concept which presents somewhat of a challenge. It is not a novel idea as scholars such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Alan Dundes have done some interesting work in this area. Intuitively, we recognize a fairytale or a legend regardless of apparent cultural differences. Clearly, there must be some common denominator between a Salish legend and a German legend for us to be able to categorize them both as legends. Knowledge and an account of this phenomenon could prove to benefit our understanding of man's thought processes and his cultural heritage.

I intend to explore the possibility that similarities can be found between legends from two distinct cultures, Salish and German. My method is the morphology of Vladimir Propp's Morphology of the Folktale, a work of considerable impact whose influence on the work of both Lévi-Strauss and Dundes (Propp,1968:xi) is well known. I have chosen this method for it attempts to account for a common denominator and has been applied to the literatures of indigenous cultures (Dundes,1964).

Propp, inspired by Goethe's search for the "Urpflanze", believed that "all fairytales are structurally homogeneous" (Erlich,1955:249). However, previous attempts to describe the fairytale had failed because they had based the nature of the tale on the attributes of the characters and, these attributes are infinitely variable. Instead, Propp proposed that the nature of the fairytale is based on what the characters actually do in the tale.[1]

## 1.2 Methodology

I will provide a brief description of Propp's method of analysis. Propp believed that the first step to a correct historical study is a morphological analysis to discover the prototype of the fairytale (in contrast to Lévi-Strauss who concentrated on discovering the pattern in the text), and this analysis remains separate from social and cultural context. The morphological analysis captures the structure of the text completely independent of content and describes it in terms of functional morphemes which are associative and interdependent. One morpheme develops out of the previous one, and none excludes the others. Therefore, there is a chronologically ordered linear system of morphemes. In addition, Propp proposes that this system will always be identical, based on the belief that any sequence of events is governed by its own laws.

The morpheme is essentially the function of a character in the text (fairytale) which is dependent on two premises. The first is that a function must be defined independent of its actor, and the second is that it cannot be defined removed from the linear context of the text. Apparently, these functions are limited: 31 functions are evident in any given text, although it is not necessary that all be present. To assist in the schematic comparison of structures each function is assigned a symbol and a one-word definition of that particular function, ie. absentation, interdiction, etc.[2] All texts will not contain all

functions, but in order for the text to be regarded as a fairytale, it must contain the function of *villainy/lack*.

Assimilation of morphemes appears to present a complication for Propp's analysis. One function can become more like another in terms of its consequences. For example, one function, *donor test*, can result in two different consequences. Therefore, these functions must each be defined according to their consequences.

The functions of different characters are connected by means of auxiliary elements which are based on the conveyance of information. This information transfer can take various forms. The character can be all-knowing or can be given the information by means of direct notification, finding it out from another character, or by means of the arrival of a character or object. Assimilation and auxiliary elements are minor factors in the analysis, and therefore, I will avoid them in my application of the method.

Characters are introduced in a formalized manner. The donor is always encountered accidentally, the helper is received as a gift, etc. While Propp insists that characters cannot be defined in terms of function, he proposes that they can be defined according to sphere of action. The functions of a tale can be divided into seven spheres of action which correspond to their respective performers, ie. villain, donor, helper, princess or sought for person, dispatcher, hero, and false hero. A character can be involved in only one or several spheres of action and his/her feelings and intentions do not affect the form of a fairytale, although Propp does acknowledge them as a variable element.

The fairytale is divided into various combinations of moves. However the term move is not defined in Propp's morphology.[3] A move seems to be any development of a tale containing a villainy or a lack, but I am not sure what is intended by his reference to development. For the purposes of my analysis, I have assumed that a move is a linear representation of one character's involvement in the storyline. A character can be involved in the story while another character is involved. Therefore, a type of tiering of moves is established. A move or essentially any element of a tale can generate another tale in its own image, and in Propp's morphology a text can consist of one or more tales, however whether or not these multiple tales can be distinct is not addressed.

### 1.3 The Nature of a Legend

Having summarized Propp's method of textual analysis, I will attempt to apply it to two culturally distinct legends. Both the fairytale and the legend combine the natural world with the mystical. However, the legend tends to be somewhat more historical and perhaps less colourful than the fairytale. Assuming there is a relationship between the two genres, it is plausible to consider that Propp's morphology could be applied to a legend. The first legend is a classic of folklore and can be found in Grimms' collection of German legends, Deutsche Sagen. It is entitled "The Fortresses of Schwarzkopf and Seeburg at Lake Mummel". The legend is an account of a vision which is said to appear around the area of Lake Mummel in the Murg valley on Fridays at midnight.

#### 1.3.1 The Morphology of "The Fortresses of Schwarzkopf and Seeburg at Lake Mummel"

In this legend twelve knights of Seeburg abduct the twelve sisters of Schwarzkopf, and in turn the knight of Schwarzkopf kidnaps the sister of the knights of Seeburg who becomes his beloved. A battle ensues, and the knight is taken prisoner and is stabbed by each of the twelve brothers. The abducted sisters escape and flee with their brother, having removed the daggers and slain their captors, only to be murdered by the brothers'

servant. During a fire that destroys the castle, twelve female figures, each carrying a child, emerge from its walls and jump into Lake Mummel.

An act of villainy is apparent in the abduction of the knight's twelve sisters. Therefore, the function of *villainy 1 - the villain abducts a person* is fulfilled. There is no apparent preparatory part of the legend, for it begins with the actual movement of the tale, the complication.

A counteraction develops from this complication; the knight retaliates against the brothers and takes their sister. I can only consider this action to be a counteraction if the hero, the knight, is a *seeker* in search of his sisters. However, a complication could arise if I do not consider that the act of retaliation is a sign of the knight's *intention* to save his sisters, for the criteria for this function are not exact.

At this point I feel it necessary to take the motivations of the hero into account. The knight could feasibly want to provoke a battle with the brothers in order to overthrow them and free his sisters. But this type of rationale directly opposes the basic tenant of Propp's analysis; content cannot be considered. Regardless of this violation, I will consider the function of *consent to counteraction* to be fulfilled by the act of retaliation.

Both the hero and the villain leave their castles and meet elsewhere to engage in battle. The hero leaves home. Therefore, the function of *departure* is fulfilled. Although there is not, in my opinion, any evidence of the *mediation* function in this legend, I will consider the combination of villainy and departure to be the completion of the complication. The battle constitutes the function of *struggle 1 - they fight in an open field* which begins the course of action.

Following the battle, the hero is wounded by the villain; he survives twelve knifings. The function of *branding 1 - a brand is applied to the body* can be described as the wounding of the hero during the struggle. While the knight does not receive these wounds in the course of battle, I believe it is safe to assume that this function is fulfilled because the cause of the brand does not appear to be a determining factor in the analysis.

According to Propp, the narrative reaches its climax in the function of *liquidation 10 - a captive is freed*. In this legend the climax occurs when the sisters escape from their captors. They are freed by their own devices. Therefore, the function of *liquidation* is fulfilled. Propp proposes that this function and that of villainy constitute a pair. Obviously, there is a semantic dependency between these two acts; an escape can not occur without an abduction. However, I am not sure that I agree with Propp's suggestion that the climax occurs at this point. This function signals the resolution to the complication and, unless we consider the resolution to be the highest peak of dramatic tension, the climax cannot occur at this point but before it.[4]

The slaying of the brothers could be considered a form of punishment and thus fulfills this function. But if this is the case, there is a disruption in the linear order of the functions, for the following function is the *return* which should occur long before the punishment of the villain. And in addition, the morphology stipulates that the first villain (in this legend there is only one) is punished only when a battle or pursuit is absent from the story (Propp, 1968:63). Although this action can be considered a function it cannot be included in this analysis because it does not occur where it belongs in the linear order set out in the Morphology.

"Sometimes return has the nature of fleeing" (Propp,1968:56). And this is the case in the fulfillment of this function; the hero along with his sisters flee from the villain's castle.

Determining the function of pursuit poses a difficulty. The hero is pursued in the text by an agent of the villain and is killed by him. However the only appropriate category, *pursuit 6 - the pursuer attempts to kill the hero*, specifies that an *attempt* is made on his life, not the taking of it. Despite this problem, I will consider this function fulfilled.

Essentially, the functions of this legend are then: *villainy, counteraction, departure, struggle, branding, liquidation, return*, and *pursuit* unless of course the child in each of the sister's arms is a *transfiguration* of the hero. *Transfiguration* must then be included as a function (although the occurrence does not meet the criteria).

There are only three spheres of action according to the morphology: the hero, the villain, and the princess or sought-for person - here, it is the sisters. The sphere of action of the villain includes *villainy, struggle, and pursuit*, and the hero's includes only *counteraction and departure*. *Branding* is the only function that can be linked to the character of the sought-for person. This association of functions with the three main characters must suffice as any form of comment on the content of the legend.

The moves of this legend work on three tiers; each tier represents the involvement of one character which will be simultaneous with that of another character when they are both involved in the same function. The sisters and the villain represent two moves operating concurrently during the function of *villainy*. The hero is involved with a move that incorporates *counteraction, departure, struggle, branding, liquidation, and return* while, during this move, the villain's tier occurs simultaneously during *departure, struggle, and branding*. The final function of *pursuit* involves all three tiers. These tiers of moves combine to form a single tale. Only one tale is apparent in this legend, for there appears to be only one incident of *villainy* that is required to determine a tale.

### 1.3.2 The Morphology of "Basket Ogress"

The Salish legend, "Basket Ogress" is a tale which was told by Martin J. Sampson in Swinomish-Skagit in 1977. A group of children went on a picnic and were entrusted to a young boy named Hunchback. Having arrived at Swinomish, they settled to sleep. But while sleeping, they were snatched by the Basket Ogress and taken to her house. On the way there, Hunchback escaped from her basket and ran to the canoe. The Basket Ogress tried to stop him by throwing rocks, but he eluded her and paddled back to Utsallady to tell the parents of the kidnapping. Meanwhile, the children had managed to escape from their captress, having pushed her into the fire. The children found their way back to Swinomish where they were found by Hunchback and the parents.

Being much more complex than the German legend, consisting of one tale, this one combines two tales with a common function of *villainy*, the snatching of the children. Each tale has a preparatory part before this start of the action. The first tale involves a function of *absentation 3 - members of the younger generation absent themselves* fulfilled by the children setting out on a picnic while the second involves an *interdiction* and its paired *violation*. Hunchback is given responsibility for the children and fails to prevent them from being kidnapped. These functions were not evident in the German legend as it did not include this preparatory part.

The action of both tales begins with the villainy and proceeds to the function of *counteraction*. In this tale, this function is fulfilled by Hunchback realizing that he must escape and tell the parents of the Ogress kidnapping the children.

The following function is extremely difficult to determine. Intuitively, the action of Hunchback grabbing at the branch in an attempt to save himself is important to the narrative. However, is this the fulfillment of the function of *the hero's reaction* or of *provision of a magical agent*? The action fails to meet any of the criteria set out by these two functions, but for my purposes, I will consider the branch to have magical properties and *falls into the hands of the hero by chance*, thereby enabling me to categorize this action.

The magical agent enables the hero to escape and reach the canoe, which fulfills the function of *guidance 2 - he travels on the ground or water*. Neither *provision of a magical agent* nor *guidance 2* are found in the German legend. The complication is developed further by means of the functions of *struggle* and *victory*. The Ogress spots Hunchback trying to escape and throws rocks at him, which he manages to dodge. While this action does not involve a fight where both participants take both offensive and defensive actions, there is the element of offense and defense in the actions, 'throwing' and 'dodging'. This struggle and victory do occur in a field-like area by the river, and therefore these function in the same sub-group as those in the German legend.

The complication of this tale is resolved when Hunchback makes his way back to Utsallady, thereby fulfilling the function of *liquidation*. Both this and the German tale have resolved complications. The final function of this tale is the *return*, differing from the German legend, in that there is no corresponding departure, unless I consider Hunchback's escape from the Ogress to be a departure from home. Hunchback returns to Swinomish with the parents, and in this morphology, there is no specification given for this function, saying whether or not the return must be a return home. Therefore, it can be considered a fulfillment of this function.

During the action of Hunchback's tale, the children's tale is taking place. After the act of villainy, the function of *mediation* is fulfilled by the opportunity of freedom presented to the children by the fire. This function can be categorized as such because the children are victimized-heroes as opposed to a seeker-hero like Hunchback.

Similar to the Hunchback's tale, there are actions which may fulfill the functions of *struggle* and *victory* but only if we consider pushing the Ogress into the fire and her resulting death to meet the criteria of these functions. Using the same argument that I used for the struggle in the case of the Hunchback tale, I can assume this function to be fulfilled. The Ogress's death is a victory for the children.

Her death enables them to escape and return to Swinomish and thus, the tale reaches its climax and the complication is resolved. The *liquidation* function is fulfilled, and with this the tale comes to an end.

The Salish legend incorporates the same spheres of action as in the German legend, except that they are distributed among two tales. In the Hunchback tale, the characters that can be associated with the functions are the hero, Hunchback, the villain, Basket Ogress, and the sought-for person, the parents. The spheres of action in the children's tale are the hero, the children, and the same villain.

With regard to moves, this legend appears to be somewhat less complicated than that of the German one. There are two tiers of moves for each of the tales occurring simultaneously. The Hunchback tale incorporates the hero's move, which begins with the interdiction and continues uninterrupted through to the return. At the time of the villainy, the villain's move begins and continues until the provision of a magical agent where it stops to begin again with the struggle and victory. The moves of the villain are the same for the children's tale whose hero's move begins with absentation and becomes simultaneous with the villain's at the point of villainy and stops at mediation. It begins again with the struggle through to the return, which are not concurrent with other moves in the tales.

In comparing the two legends, a few similarities can be found. Both utilize the same spheres of action and some of the associated functions, namely, counteraction, struggle, liquidation, return, and villainy. However, they are organized differently in terms of moves and the number of inherent tales. The function of villainy is common to the legends and thus qualifies them both as a tale.

#### 1.4 Discussion

Using Propp's morphology, I have been able to find a common denominator between these two culturally distinct legends, but I would hesitate to say that all legends have a common element due to limited data. It is then possible to utilize such a method of analysis for cross-cultural study, for with these commonalities of form between legends one could speculate on the reasons for them. One possibility is that, in keeping with Propp's philosophy of fairytales, there is a universal form for all legends or that this common form is an archetype of the collective unconscious (Jung, 1959).

While the method is useful for describing why we call a legend a legend, I cannot help but feel that the amount of tedious analysis required in the application of this method far outweighs its usefulness. In addition, there appears to be several problems with this method.

Anatoly Liberman criticizes the assumption that form is constant while the content is variable and notes that Lévi-Strauss questioned the realization of form independent of the performer. The content is an important aspect of the fairytale; if the content were replaced with something else, it would not remain a fairytale (Liberman, 1984:xxx). There does appear to be an interdependence between form and content. Considering that the only required function of a fairytale is an act of villainy, there are many genres of literature which can be considered a fairytale, if content is irrelevant. For example, newspaper articles are often based on acts of villainy. Are we then to consider these as fairytales? I could not consider a news-story about a hostage-taking a fairytale.

Even before the interdependence between form and content can be addressed, the existence of such a distinction in a text should be questioned. The metaphysics of Formalism is based on this distinction between poetic language and non-poetic language. The choice between the two can only be made, affirmed, or registered within language (Adams and Searle, 1986:868). Form is then dependent both on language to determine the existence of such a concept and on language for content.

The functions of a tale constitute this form. However, Propp's justification for the concept of function appears to be questionable according to V.N. Toporov. Function is opposed to the concept of motif proposed by Veselovsky in the Poetics of Plot where it is considered to be the simple narrative unit. An assumption is made by Propp that this

thesis is correct, enabling him to contrast his function with Veselovsky's minimal unit of a tale, but this assumption may not be accurate (Jackson and Rudy,1985:257-258).

In consideration of the linear sequencing of the functions, it became apparent in the analysis of the German legend that a function could occur out of the proposed order. The punishment of the villain appeared before its place in the morphology. Liberman commented that a function cannot always be definable according to its consequences and its position in the text (Liberman,1984:xxx). Clearly, an example of this is evident in my analysis.

In addition, the purpose of organizing functions into moves is questionable, and Propp not only fails to define the move, but he also fails to evaluate it. It appears to be an arbitrary process of little value.

Wilfred Cude has stated that the scientific methods of empirical investigation could be adapted to criticism and prove to be of benefit (Cude,1984:16). Propp's method is analytic and assumes that there is an absolute truth, namely the universal form of the fairytale, and it is clearly an example of a scientific method applied to literature. By this method, the functions of the tale can apparently be absolutely determined. However, there have been many cases throughout my analysis of the legends where the determination of the functions is not an absolute process, but rather an extremely arbitrary one. For example, in the Salish legend, the branch could be a donor, a helper or neither. A case that directly affects the determination of a tale would be the function of villainy. If I were of the opinion that the kidnapping of the twelve sisters represented a good act for whatever reason, then this action would fulfill a different function from villainy, therefore eliminating the one element required to determine a tale. The arbitrariness of this method appears to be a serious problem.

Being analytic in nature, this method fails to provide any evaluation of its object of study. In addition, it does not take into consideration the reader's or the author's contributions to the text. Propp's method "brackets off the human subject" (Eagleton,1983:112). To acknowledge the reader's contribution is a realization of arbitrariness.

According to Peter Steiner, literary theory was independent and prior to its history for the Formalists (Steiner,1984:97). For Propp, the synchronic determination of the fairytale's prototype was primary. After it was determined, its history could perhaps be examined. However, content is variable and is sensitive to both synchronic and diachronic change. And as I have previously mentioned, form and content are interdependent. Indirectly, then, form is affected by historical change. For example, if you take two historically distinct fairytales of the same form (assuming for the moment that this could occur) and add the variable of content to each of them, the sum would be two distinct fairytales. Therefore, Propp's assumption that such a universal could exist is called into question.

As I have mentioned earlier, Propp's method is useful for expressing the obvious. However, it is plagued with problems. The arbitrary nature of the analysis and isolation of form from context, text from the human subject and also from history are only a few and far outweigh the benefits of the morphology.

## NOTES

- [1] Propp was considered an early Russian Formalist. This movement was a response to the historical, sociological and philological approaches current in Russian literary criticism in the first decade of the 1900's. The Formalist's methods attempted to reveal the human content of art by studying its formal properties not assuming form and content to be separable (this concentration on form distinguished them from the Structuralists). By being made aware of the form of art, the reader becomes 'defamiliarized' to it and thus, his/her perceptions become renewed. This was the key device of the Formalists.
- [2] An elaboration of each of the 31 functions can be found in Propp's Morphology of the Folktale, pp.26-64.
- [3] Descriptions of these various move combinations can be found in Propp's Morphology of the Folktale, pp.92-96.
- [4] I must mention here that the version of Propp's morphology that I am using is a translation and considering that translations can never equal the original, some definitions and proposals like that of the placement of the narrative's climax may not be accurate.

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