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REVISITING A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF FOLKTALES: A MEANS TO AN END?

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ABSTRACT

Folktales have been regarded as the simplest form of narrative and tales from various cultures have been analyzed in terms of their structure. The structural analysis of tales can be claimed to begin with Propp's (1958/1968) *Morphology of the Folktale*. Following Propp's ground-breaking morphological classification of Russian tales, studies of structural typology of folktales from different cultures have given rise to story-grammars and led to the heyday of narratology. However, with the growing interest in narrative as a social and psychological phenomenon, structural analyses of stories have come under attack. It is contended that although the explorations of story structures have resulted in interesting descriptions of different models, what is lacking is an explanation of how formal patterns are related to the story's content. Therefore, more recent works in narratological research have called for a narrative analysis to go beyond structures. This article revisits a structure analysis of folktales. Using a Myanmar (Burmese) folktale as a tutor text, it advocates an investigation of the relationship between form, function and field of a tale, and suggests a structural analysis as a means to gain insights into the cultural determination of the narrative motif and the social purpose of storytelling.

INTRODUCTION

Folktales in general are part of folk literature, which is more widely referred to as folklore. They can be classified as one of the categories of folk storytelling. Many folklorists have labelled myths, legends and folktales, as major narrative genres in folklore, 'according to how the narrative is received by the community' (Swales 1990: 35). Myths are stories that are considered sacred, legends are more secular recounting of actual events, and folktales are narrative regarded as fiction (Eugenio 1995). Simply put, a folktale is a traditional story that has been passed on by word of mouth. Folktales of a culture are usually preserved as part of a long folk tradition reflecting the humour, romance and wisdom of the people in the culture.

Scholars have studied folktales in terms of their structure, their purpose and their content. Given that *form*, *function* and *field* are the three major criteria in the classification of a genre (Swales 1990), the narrative structure of a tale can be regarded as the form, its social purpose the function, and its

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content the field. Tracing back the literature on the studies of tales, it is found that classifications of tales in a collection are mostly based on the narrative motif or content of the stories – e.g. Animal tales, Fairy tales, Trickster tales, Phenomenon tales, Wonder tales etc. However, as pointed out by Martin (1986), such thematic categorization, on the basis of a tale's subject matter or content, can lead to some problems due to the inconsistency in the choice of criterion. For example, it can be argued that the theme of an Animal tale can be the same as those of a Wonder tale, and that animals can be taking the narrative roles in a Wonder tale.

On the other hand, classifications of tales based on a structural analysis are not exempted from critical comments as well. The structural analysis of tales can be claimed to begin with Propp's (1958, 1968) ground-breaking morphological classification of Russian fairy tales. According to Propp, a tale can be described according to its component parts and the relationship of these components to each other and to the whole. He claims that an event as an act of a character defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action can be extracted as basic components of the tale. He then identifies thirty-one functional events, or "*what* a tale's dramatis personae do" (Propp 1968: 20), in his study of 115 Russian fairy tales. These thirty-one events are claimed to occur in an identical sequence as the basic components of a tale.

Following Propp, scholars such as Dundes (1965, 1971) and Bremond (1977) study the structures of folktales from various cultures. Dundes (1965: 206) claims that 'there can be no rigorous typology without prior morphology', and studies the structural typology of North American Indian folktales. Proposing a formal analysis of tales as a means to gain an understanding of concrete human behaviour and thought, his study on African folktales (Dundes 1971) illuminates how the making and breaking of friendship serves as a structural frame within which a variety of tale types occur in that culture.

Similarly, Bremond (1977) attempts to construct a formal model for analyzing and classifying the episodes of the fairy tale, and proposes the morphology of French fairy tales. These studies suggest the significance and use of structural analyses not only for making typological statements, but also for understanding the cultural determination of contents within possibly transcultural forms.

In fact, the foregrounding of a sequence of events in these studies has given rise to many interesting story-grammars (de Beaugrande 1982), and has also led to the heyday of narrative structure studies, under the term narratology (Genette 1980). However, with the growing interest in narrative as a social and psychological phenomenon, rather than solely as a formal literary or historical genre, the theories and practices in the structural analyses of stories came under attack (Rimmon-Kenan 2002), and are often accused of disregarding the content in the search for the form.

It is contended that although the explorations of story structures using different methods have resulted in various descriptions of different models, what is lacking in most of the models is an explanation of how formal patterns are related to the story's content (Martin 1986). Thus poststructuralist studies of stories have tried to include the other two aspects of the genre – the function and the field – in specifying and explaining the nature of stories.

In understanding a story on the basis of its function, Brewer and Lichtenstein (1982: 478) take a narrower view and claim that '*stories are a subclass of narratives which have entertainment as their primary discourse force*' (original italics). However, as pointed out by Stein (1982: 490), such claims overlook the multifaceted nature of a story since the social purposes of different types of stories vary. There should be no doubt about a large number of stories which carry other functions beyond entertainment. Other functions of stories can be to resolve personal social problems and to recapitulate and reorganize personal experience (Labov and Waletzky 1967); to establish social identity and social relationship, social hierarchies, and emotional bonds (Bloome 2003); to educate, persuade, warn, reassure, justify, explain, and console among members of an organization (Gabriel 2000).

In the case of folktales, it can be generally accepted that the function or the social purpose of storytelling is to preserve the culture of a civilization, to explain natural phenomena, to transmit historical and important social information, or to teach important moral and ethical issues (Taylor 2000). With the culturally determined setting for such folkloristic storytelling, it can also be argued that there is the thematic restriction of the subject matters in folktales (Fludernik 1996). In terms of structure, investigations and descriptions of different structural patterns for tales from different cultures have highlighted one striking pattern – the reward/punishment model – among others (Drory 1977, Grayson 2002, Lwin 2003).

As discussed earlier, what is at issue in a study of folktales in particular, and stories in general, is how the structural features of a story can be related to its contents and functions. Therefore, among the different structural patterns of tales identified in earlier folktale studies, this study will focus on the most common and striking one – the reward/ punishment model – and highlight how such a contrastive narrative structure is in complement with its educational social function of instilling psychologically significant themes or contents. Through an illustration of the relationship between the narrative structure (form), the social purpose (function) and the story content (filed), this study aims to suggest a structural analysis as a means, rather than an end, to understand the nature of stories in general. For this purpose, the study takes a tale with didactic moral as a tutor text from a collection of folktales of Myanmar (Burma), where folktales have been preserved for generations not only as a reflection of a particular culture, but also as a means of instilling certain concepts in the society.

First, the notion of contrastive narrative structure needs to be explained.

CONTRASTIVE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

For an analysis of narrative structure in the tutor text, this study will adapt Propp's concepts of the event and distribution of narrative roles to the characters in a tale. In the selected tale *The Golden Crow* (Maung 1976), there are two protagonists, one of whom behaves according to certain specific rules, and is rewarded. The other breaks these rules and is punished. The four narrative roles in the tale are distributed as follows.

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------|
| (1) Good-natured girl: | Protagonist A |
| (2) Bad-tempered girl: | Protagonist B |
| (3) Golden Crow: | Donor |
| (4) Tray of paddy: | Guide |

Protagonist A is the main character in the first part of the story, and Protagonist B in the second part. They are comparable and stand in contrast to each other. The donor role is distributed among several characters who set a test for the protagonists. The narrative structure in this type of tales can be said to be made up of 'two symmetrically opposed moves which are formally identical' (Drory 1977: 32). The structure of the sequence of events can be summarized as

Tasks → Success → Reward
Tasks → Failure → Punishment

In other words, such story structure can be understood as the contrastive narrative structure or Reward/ punishment model.

Moreover, a tale may be made up of more than one elementary sequence of events. Hence in order to explain the linkage between events, the notions of *move* by Propp (1968) and *connectives* by Jason (1977) have to be considered. *Move* is a label introduced by Propp for a series of events. Based on Propp's notion of move, Jason (1977) introduces an additional unit – *connective* – for the analysis of narrative structures in oral literature. A connective is a 'unit which connects parts of the narrative' (Jason, 1977: 104). A connective may be of two varieties:

- a. An information connective: information is given
 1. by one character in the tale to another,
 2. by the narrator to the audience.

- b. A transfer connective in (1) state, (2) time, (3) space:
 1. transition in state (transformation from one state of being into another),
 2. transition in time (lapses of time without action),
 3. transition in space (transportations in space)

Such connectives should be regarded as another type of fundamental constituents like events which serves as a device through which tales are arranged into a well-organized storyline.

With events, moves and connective as the units of analysis, the elementary sequence of events or the basic story structure of *The Golden Crow* can be outlined as in Table 1.

Table 1 The elementary sequence of events in the tale *The Golden Crow*

<i>The Golden Crow</i>	<i>Events</i>
Long ago there lived an old widow who was very poor. She had a daughter who was pretty and good-natured.	<u>Move 1</u> Information connective - Protagonist A is introduced.
One day the mother asked the daughter to scare away the birds from the tray of paddy which was being dried in the sun. So the daughter sat down near the tray and scared away the birds. When the paddy was nearly dried, however, a strange bird came flying towards the tray. It was a crow with gold feathers. The Golden Crow laughed at the little girl's efforts to scare him away and quickly ate up every bit of the rice, chaff and all. The girl started to cry, saying, "Oh, my mother is so poor! My mother is so poor! The rice is so valuable to her." The Golden Crow gave her a kindly look and said, "Little girl, I will pay for it. Come to the big tamarind tree outside the village at sunset, and I will give you something." Then the crow flew away.	Guide leads Protagonist A to Donor.
At sunset, the little girl went to the big tamarind tree and looked up at the branches. To her surprise, she saw a little house of gold at the top.	Transfer connective - Protagonist A meets Donor.
The crow looked out of a window of the little golden house, and said, "Oh, there you are! Do come up. But, of course, I must drop the ladder first. Do you want the golden ladder, the silver ladder, or the brass ladder?"	Donor sets Protagonist A the first task/ test.
"I am only a poor little girl," replied the girl, "and I can only ask for the brass	Protagonist A performs successfully.

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<i>The Golden Crow</i>	<i>Events</i>
ladder." To her surprise, the crow put down the golden ladder, and the little girl climbed up on it to the little gold house.	
"You must have dinner with me," invited the crow. "But let me see, do you want the gold dish, the silver dish, or the brass dish to eat your food from?"	Donor sets Protagonist A the second task/ test.
"I am only a poor little girl," she replied, "and I can only ask for the brass dish." To her surprise, the crow brought out the gold dish, and the food in it was delicious.	Protagonist A performs successfully.
"You are a good little girl," said the crow, when the little girl had finished eating, "and I would like you to stay here with me forever. But your mother needs you more, so I must send you back before it gets too dark." Then he went into the bed room and brought out a big box, a medium-sized box, and a small box. "Choose one of these boxes," said the crow, "and give it to your mother."	Donor sets Protagonist A the third task/ test.
"The paddy you ate was not much," replied the girl, "and the little box would be more than enough." She then accepted the little box and, after thanking the Golden Crow, climbed down the golden ladder and went home.	Protagonist A performs successfully.
When she reached there, she gave the little box to her mother. Together they opened it, and they were surprised and delighted to find in the box a hundred priceless rubies. The mother and daughter became very rich and lived in luxury.	Protagonist A is rewarded.
There was another old widow in the village, but she was not poor. She also had a daughter who, however, was	<u>Move 2</u> Information connective - Protagonist B is introduced. Protagonist B learns about Donor.

<i>The Golden Crow</i>	<i>Events</i>
<p>greedy and bad-tempered. This widow and her daughter heard about the gift of the Golden Crow, and became very jealous of the other widow and her daughter.</p>	
<p>They decided to try to get a similar gift for themselves. So they put out a tray of paddy in the sun, and the greedy girl kept watch. But as she was lazy, she did not try to scare away the birds that came to eat up the paddy. When the Golden crow at last turned up, there were very few grains left.</p> <p>However, the Golden Crow ate what remained, and the greedy girl shouted rudely, "Hey, crow, give me and my mother some wealth for the paddy you have eaten."</p> <p>The crow looked at her with a frown, but he replied politely enough, "Little girl, I will pay for the rice. Come to the big tamarind tree outside the village at sunset, and I will give you something." Then the crow flew away.</p>	<p>Guide leads Protagonist B to Donor.</p>
<p>At sunset, the greedy girl went to the big tamarind tree, and without waiting for the crow to come out, she shouted, "Hey, crow, keep your promise."</p>	<p>Transfer connective- Protagonist B meets Donor.</p>
<p>The crow put his head out of the window and asked, "On which ladder do you want to climb up here? The golden ladder, the silver ladder or the brass ladder?"</p>	<p>Donor sets Protagonist B the first task/ test.</p>
<p>"The golden ladder, of course," replied the greedy girl. But, to her disappointment, the crow lowered the brass ladder.</p>	<p>Protagonist B fails.</p>
<p>When the girl entered the little gold house, the crow said, "You must dine with me. Do you want to eat your food from the gold dish, the silver dish or the brass dish?"</p>	<p>Donor sets Protagonist B the second task/ test.</p>
<p>"The gold dish, of course," replied the greedy girl. But to her disappointment,</p>	<p>Protagonist B fails.</p>

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<i>The Golden Crow</i>	<i>Events</i>
it was the brass dish she was served. The food was delicious but it was no more than a tiny morsel, and the greedy girl was annoyed.	
Then the crow went into the bedroom and brought out a big box, a medium-sized box, and a small box, and said, "Choose one of these boxes and give it to your mother."	Donor sets Protagonist B the third task/ test.
The greedy girl, of course, chose the big box, and without remembering to thank the crow, she struggled down the ladder with her burden.	Protagonist B fails.
When she reached home, she and her mother joyfully pulled open the big box. But to their surprise and terror, a big snake lay coiled inside. The snake hissed at them angrily, and then glided out of the box and out of their house.	Protagonist B is punished.

Following the above structural analysis, the use of reward/punishment model for the didactic purpose can be discussed.

REWARD/PUNISHMENT MODEL AND DIDACTIC MORAL

The parallel sets of contrasting narratives in the above analysis show how good actions are rewarded and evil actions are punished. It outlines one of the primary functions of this particular type of tale, which is moral teaching. Despite the outwardly simple appearance, the tale addresses themes and issues that are profound for all humanity. It touches on such psychologically significant themes as honesty, kindness, generosity, jealousy, arrogance, greed, etc. The morally significant issues on what is right and its consequences are foregrounded when it is placed in parallel against what is wrong and its consequences. Thus the contrastive narrative structure of the tale can be said to be complementing and reinforcing the moral and ethical messages that lie behind the content of the tale.

Folktales are typically considered as children's stories in the modern world. Certainly they do appeal to children and help them develop critical, social, cognitive, and linguistic skills. In the same way, it should not be overlooked that the themes and issues raised in these tales can be significant for all ages, all humanity. While folktales from different cultures may display many differences, some elements can be justifiably claimed to be common to

many or all cultures. Different cultures may offer different tasks or tests for the protagonists, nevertheless, the underlying message of what is morally or ethically right, what is wrong and what can be their consequences are proved to be the same.

Interestingly, aside from the common social and moral themes that lie behind the stories, the reward/ punishment model or the contrastive narrative structure is also found to be common for rendering such messages of moral concerns in tales from different cultures. In other words, the relationship of narrative form, function and field in tales with the didactic moral seems to appear in folktales from many lands. Just as such moral concerns of honesty, kindness and generosity, as opposed to jealousy, greed and pride, are issues in any culture, the contrastive structural form of presenting those issues are also found to be transcultural, if not universal.

To look at other tales with a similar didactic moral from a different culture, one can quote the study by Drory (1977), who has attempted to formulate a model for the narrative structure of the reward/ punishment fairy tale such as *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*. Drory contends that the reward-and-punishment fairy tale, with its story structure made up of two symmetrically opposed moves which are formally identical, features two symmetrically opposed protagonists who are tested by the ethical norms. In other words, the actions of the narrative roles are evaluated to some extent in the framework of the socioreligious system of general values and specific norms.

More recently, the study by Grayson (2002) on Korean folktales has also proved that there is a large set of Korean folktales which are composed of parallel sets of contrasting narratives showing how good actions are rewarded and evil actions punished. It is claimed that the contrastive narrative structure can be found in tales throughout East Asia and the world. However, Grayson distinguishes Korean tales from similar tales in China and Japan as an illustration of the Confucian concept of moral suasion, in addition to the common theme of rewards and punishments. For example, Grayson outlines the narrative of a Korean reward/ punishment folktale, *The Story of Hungbu and Nolbu*, in the following pattern.

Act 1:	The younger brother
Scene 1:	The good actions of the younger brother
Scene 2:	The younger brother's reward
Act 2:	The older brother
Scene 1:	The evil actions of the older brother
Scene 2:	The Punishment of the older brother

Grayson (2002: 52)

Similar to the Myanmar folktale, the tutor text of this article, it is also composed of two equal narrative sections or acts (c.f. moves in the Myanmar

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tale), each consisting of two scenes which balance each other with parallel narrative content but come to a different conclusion, or dénouement. The first act or Move 1 gives a didactic moral point by showing the good motives and their consequences, while the second act or Move 2, which is formally identical to the first, contrasts the narrative content of the previous act to emphasis on the punishment which arises from bad motives.

The uniqueness of the Korean tale is its characteristic Confucian subtext, i.e. the emphasis on the moral power of the younger brother to influence his older brother to reform his behaviour (Grayson 2002). With the role inversion of the protagonist and antagonist, the importance of the value of moral suasion is claimed to be stressed in Korean folktales. Regardless of such uniqueness, it can still be argued that these tales with a didactic moral show the relationship of the contrastive narrative structure, the narrative content of moral issues, and the social function of moral teaching. In other words, it can be deduce that through the use of a contrastive narrative structure, the virtues of good ethics are emphasized for the purpose of moral teaching in folktales.

CONCLUSION

The analysis and discussion in the article put forward an investigation of the relationship between the narrative form, function and field of a story as a method to recognize the cultural determination of narrative motif and social purpose of storytelling. It claims that in the case of stories with the didactic moral, the contrastive narrative structure serves as reinforcement in instilling the concepts of good morals, which are profound and significant for all humanity across various cultures. The feasibility to examine the relationship of narrative form, function and field in other types of stories is left open for further explorations. For a better understanding of the nature and the power of stories, it can be useful to probe the relationship among the underlying story structures, the narrative contents presented, and the social functions of storytelling in various types of stories. In a post-structural, post-modern world, the structural analysis of stories, with its focus on the relationship of forms to contents and functions, can still be a means for a better understanding of the nature and the power of stories.

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