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## **Folktales and their Cultural relevance**

### **Folktale, Narrative, Morality**

This essay will be discussing the connection between, Folktales, narrative and morality and what themes intertwine between them. There is a reason why Walt Disney chose Snow white as his first motion length animation, and it's because folk tales stick. Why is it that they do, what makes folk tales so compelling? Everyone has heard some form of Snow white and the seven dwarves, or Little red riding hood. Why is this? What makes these stories so captivating, that they transcend time? This essay will be exploring why Folktales are so prevalent in both historical context and in modern day cinema.

Folktales are the earliest form of entertainment. Told to both children and adults alike, there is not a soul alive who has not heard of some form of folk tale. Be it the Baba Yaga in Russia, the Mabinogi in Wales, or even King Arthur and the knights of the round table. Folktales have inspired the likes of legendary of Terry Pratchett and J.R.R.Tolkien, both of which created their own worlds that abide by the rules of folk tales. Then, why are they so popular?

Fairytales, in their purest form are ways for children to cope with the world around them. As Sheldon Cashdan says in his book *The witch must die*, "Ultimately, the impact that fairy tales have on us as adults stems from the influence they had on us when we were young..." Growing in to adulthood is confusing, and often fear inducing in young children, especially of the time these fables and stories were originated. Children had to deal with complex emotions, learn how to handle them and mature in to functioning adults. These stories would help them navigate these struggles in simple, understandable terms. They would feel fear when the stepmother would send a hunter out in search of Snow white to kill, and thus learn that her actions were negative. We are taught from a young age the moral lessons behind each story. In a Christian context, these lessons are, as Cashdan recapitulates, "...fairy tales help children combat sloth, envy, greed and other troublesome tendencies." Not only were they tools for children's understanding of the world around them, they also helped their parents in life lessons. Jack and the beanstalk teaches children of greed, and not to trust strangers who would easily dupe you.

There is a sense that folklore and tales are incredibly culturally unique. For those who go to welsh speaking schools, the Mabinogion is taught in class and is just as important as English or mathematics. We're taught about Bendigeidfran, about the sleeping giant in the Brecon Beacons, about Bedd Gelert and how he protected his charge. Jack zipes, in his book *why fairy tales stick*, says "There is no such thing as a 'pure' national folk tale." That is to say, Folktales are simply not singular to a nation, they in fact share many common themes. He goes on to say, "...that they 'contaminated' each other historically through cross-cultural and intercultural..." From this it could be theorised that, the Mabinogion, a very welsh grouping of folk tales and lore, are in fact not purely welsh. They were shaped and formed from years of invasions, from viking to the French occupation of Britain. This is also reaffirmed with how similar Welsh and Irish mythos is. Particularly that of Manannan and Manawydan.

Vladimir Propp further proves this point in his book *morphology of the folktale*. In it he goes on to say that though the characters names may change, there are seven archetypes. "1. The Villain, 2. The Donor, 3. The Helper, 4. Sought for person/their father, 5. The Dispatcher, 6. The Hero, 7. The false Hero." Regardless of origin, Propp found that the key components of folktale comes down to the characters and their struggles. Looking towards a more widely known example, in little red riding hood this pattern is illustrated clearly. The mother is the dispatcher and the donor (giving little red the basket as well as the task to send them to grandma.) Little red is the hero, set with a task who goes through dangers to fulfill them. The villain is clearly the wolf, who antagonises little red and eats the grandmother. The sought for person is the grandmother, and finally the woodsman is the false hero/helper. False hero because though he helps the grandmother by slicing the wolf in twain to free her, he ultimately still slaughters the wolf. Helper because he free's the grandmother and stops the hero from death. Propp reaffirms this theory to say again, "Functions of character serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale."



Gustave Dore, Little Red Riding Hood

Narrative is a key component to fairytales, without it, where would the story be? What would happen to engage the audience? It's difficult to visualise a story without plot, or narrative, it is the base for most entertainment. Tzvetan Todorov proposed the following structures for fairytale narratives, simplified, "1. Equilibrium, 2. Disruption, 3. Recognition, 4. Attempt to repair, 5. New Equilibrium."

But what does equilibrium mean? As Todorov says in his essay *structural analysis of narrative*:

"This term "equilibrium," which I am borrowing from genetic psychology, means the existence of a stable but not static relation between the members of a society; it is a social law, a rule of the game, a particular system of exchange. The two moments of equilibrium, similar and different, are separated by a period of imbalance, which is composed of a process of degeneration and a process of improvement."

Then, how does this work with works that begin in medias res? Non linear structures? Todorov's work focused primarily on traditional folklore, works that remained simple for the use of children and the common man. When folktales first began, they were primarily oral, handed down from parent to child. A confusing story, full of twists and turns with non linear storytelling would only confuse and likely lead to misrepresented storytelling as people forgot the more complex details.



An example of fairytale that conforms perfectly to Todorov's theory, Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*. The Equilibrium is the mermaid's everyday life as a mermaid. The disequilibrium or disruption is her first journey to the human world, which sets in motion the rest of the story. The recognition of the disruption is her realisation of her feelings for the humans when she questions her grandmother on whether humans live forever. Attempt at repair is the little mermaid's attempts to be with the human world, to create a new world for herself. The New equilibrium is the little mermaid's death.

The little mermaid by Edmund Dulac

Though it is not a happy ending, it is still a calming of the disruption her feelings caused.

In comparison to Todorov's structural analysis of folklore, Propp created an in depth study of the structure of folktales also in his *Morphology of folktale*. Propp goes into detail about what he calls narratemes. He lists thirty one in total, which are then divided into four spheres. These spheres tie in with his character archetypes, and follow the story of the hero in a very linear structure similar to that of Todorov's.

Though Propp's essay goes in to deep detail about the use of his spheres, I will paraphrase and simplify for the purposes of this essay:

**"Sphere one - Introduction:** 1. Absentation, 2. Interdiction, 3. Violation of Interdiction, 4. Reconnaissance, 5. Delivery, 6. Trickery, 7. Complicity.

**Sphere two - The body of the story:** 8. Villainy and lack, 9. Mediation, 10. Counteraction, 11. Departure

**Sphere three - The donor sequence:** 12. Testing, 13. Reaction, 14. Acquisition, 15. Guidance, 16. Struggle, 17. Branding, 18. Victory, 19. Resolution

**Sphere four - The heroes return:** 20. Return, 21. Pursuit, 22. Rescue, 23. Arrival, 24. Calm, 25. Task, 26. Solution, 27. Recognition, 28. Exposure, 29. Transfiguration, 30. Punishment, 31. Wedding."

In a modern version, these spheres could be referred to as *acts*. Worded like this, it's clear to see the distinct influence folktales have had on our modern day narrative driven entertainment. It's seen in everything from Avengers: Endgame, Tolkien's collective works, and Terry Pratchett etc. Though Propp's essay goes into such detail that it would be nigh impossible to discuss it completely.

An example of a fairytale that follows this structure, is Cinderella. Without going through each narratemes and spheres, Cinderella's story begins with the absentation of her mother, forcing her father to marry another woman. Trickery, Villainy and lack are the stepmothers wishes for her daughters to marry the prince, whilst also confining and abusing Cinderella. Acquisition relates to the fairy godmothers gifts to Cinderella. Victory in her leaving her confines to attend the ball and fall in love with the prince. Exposure, that Cinderella was the mysterious beauty at the ball and finally wedding, her happily ever after.

Where Todorov seemed to simplify fairytales to their most base structures, where nearly every narrative driven entertainment can be said to follow this structure, Propp is the opposite. It's doubtful that the originators of these tales were thinking of these story beats as they orally shared their stories with their children. Yet, both men observed similar structures in folklore from across the world.



Snow White - Arthur Rockham

Fairy tales have, in a way, always been a part of child upbringing. They are stories that guide children, teach them the meanings of their feelings, how to navigate tough life circumstances and above all, instill a moral compass.

Jack Zipes goes into detail in his book *Why fairy tales stick*, "This moral component ... does not mean that the proposed morals or norms are good." Which is why we see such gruesome depictions of women and abuse in many of the early versions of fairy tales we love today. Though, for modern audiences, the more unpalatable aspects have been removed for more contemporary views. He goes on to say, "What a fairy tale does...is represent basic human dilemmas in tangible metaphorical forms that reflect how difficult it is for us to curb basic instincts."

In modern retellings, we begin to see the views and doctrines of christianity seep in to the moral coding of the tales. The stories changed to fit their adapting context and discourse around sins such as greed, lust, and gluttony took over the more baser aspects that were previously seen. In some aspects even going so far as to try and censor the tales, as they were believed to be deprived. Zipes states, "What else is Snow White about but a stepmother's basic inclination to eliminate a daughter who is not hers and a father's lack of investment in his daughter..." Snow white was a tale about

They partly succeeded. Children in the most recent times were raised not on the Brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Andersen, but on Disney. Zipes states, "What else is Snow White about but a stepmother's basic inclination to eliminate a daughter who is not hers and a father's lack of investment in his daughter..." Snow white was a tale about the unnatural situation of having to suddenly share your home with strangers. Though today's audiences

are far more adapted to this situation, with it being far more commonplace and accepted, past audiences may have viewed it as unnatural. Was it not natural then for conflict to arise between the stepmother and Snow white? What purpose did Snow white bring to the stepmothers life? Zipes goes on to say;

“Snow White has developed separate discursive strains within the fairy tale genre. The tale touches on a number of basic issues that reflect universal instinctual struggles among women and gave moral predicaments that originated thousands of years ago.”

Disney was far less interested in the baser instincts of women, about the competitiveness and power imbalances that would have been dominant during the era these stories originated. Then why does this story stick in the minds of children?

As previously stated, though perhaps modern audiences might not have to contend to continue the human species quite so aggressively, power imbalances still exist in modern households. Children create these fantastical worlds to cope with the struggles of everyday life, and though their struggles might not be so harsh, growing up is confusing. Having a stranger enter that environment adds chaos to an already chaotic period of life. Though Disney removed the more gruesome and frankly traumatising elements, Disney adapted Snow White for, at the time, modern audiences. Children were lost in the magical world of dwarves and crones, and for a moment could understand and relate to Snow Whites struggles in their own way.

This can be seen for the majority of the adaptations of fairy tales. Snow white, Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast etc. Perhaps Disney has removed the punishment aspect of these stories, or at least the gruesomeness of the punishments, but has adapted these stories for modern children with modern concerns and worries. Disney's renditions of Brothers Grimm and co. resonates with all generations because they are stories we instinctively know, adapted for us, specifically.

In conclusion, Fairytales have become incredibly important parts of everyday life for modern societies. We see it in everything. The structures Propp and Todorov discussed in their essays are used for the basis of most narrative entertainment such as hollywood blockbusters. Why do we still love Disney movies years after? What is it about the structure and framing of folktales that have us, as a civilisation, returning to adapt and readapt? *‘What*

*makes folktales and their moral coding so compelling to a modern day audience who are disenfranchised with the world around them?’*

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