
VLADIMIR PROPP & THE FAIRY TALE

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JANUARY 24TH, 2023



VLADIMIR PROPP

- Russian structuralist and early fairy-tale scholar
- Wrote a book of his theories on the folk and fairy tale called *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928)
 - The first English edition appeared in 1958
- Lack / Lack Liquidated
 - Many traditional fairy tales end with a reinstatement of the status quo.
- Propp argues that we should study fairy tales according to the functions of its dramatis personae. In other words, we should make sense of fairy tales by thinking about action and situations rather than character specifics.
 - (Characters in traditional fairy tales are notoriously flat and one-dimensional.)
- The number of functions is actually really small but the number of characters is extremely large... so this strategy helps cut through a lot of noise.
- However! Identical functions can have different meanings in different tales
- But we can boil all this down to 4 main points...



PROPP'S THEORIES OF THE FAIRY TALE

Point One:

- "Functions of characters 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" (more on these later.)
- Put simply, what characters do and represent ("functions") are the building blocks that make up fairy tales. Once you know how to recognize them, you can rearrange them to build your own.

Point Two:

- "The number of functions known to the fairy tale is limited."
- In other words, according to Propp, there are only a certain number of things that can happen in a fairy tale.

Point Three:

- "The sequence of functions is always identical." They have to occur in a specific order.
- This does NOT mean, however, that every tale contains every function! You can skip one (or ten) but you can't go backwards on the list, only forward.

Point Four:

- "All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure"
- I.e. Propp believes all fairy tales follow these structural rules.
- They don't absolutely have to though! Propp was working with traditional Russian fairy tales, so that's where his theory and data comes from. But it's definitely true of many of the best-known tales in the Western world.





PROPP'S DRAMATIS PERSONAE

(AKA the characters in a fairy tale)

- The Hero
- The Villain
- The Donor or Provider
- The Helper
- The Princess/"Sought-for-Person"
and Her/His Father
- The Dispatcher
- The False Hero

PROPP'S 31 FUNCTIONS

- Remember those “functions” we mentioned early on?
- They’re basically the things that happen in a fairy tale.
- Propp believed that there were 31 Functions (or possible things that happen in the fairy tale)
- So what are they? Here’s the list -

1st Sphere: Introduction

Steps 1 to 7 introduce the situation and most of the main characters, setting the scene

- 1. Absentation: Someone goes missing/leaves home
- 2. Interdiction: Hero is warned
- 3. Violation of interdiction
- 4. Reconnaissance: Villain seeks something
- 5. Delivery: The villain gains information
- 6. Trickery: Villain attempts to deceive victim
- 7. Complicity: Unwitting helping of the enemy

2nd Sphere: The Body of the Story

The main story starts here and extends to the departure of the hero on the main quest

- 8. Villainy/Lack: The need is identified
- 9. Mediation: Hero discovers the lack
- 10. Counteraction: Hero chooses positive action
- 11. Departure: Hero leaves on mission

3rd Sphere: The Donor Sequence

In the third sphere, the hero goes in search of a method by which the solution may be reached, gaining the magical agent from the Donor

- 12. Testing: Hero is challenged to prove heroic qualities
- 13. Reaction: Hero respond to test

- 14. Acquisition: Hero gains magical item
- 15. Guidance: Hero reaches destination
- 16. Struggle: Hero and villain do battle
- 17. Branding: Hero is branded
- 18. Victory: Villain is defeated
- 19. Resolution: Initial misfortune or lack is resolved

4th Sphere: The Hero’s Return

In the final (and often optional) phase of the storyline, the hero returns home, hopefully to a hero’s welcome, although this may not always be the case

- 20. Return: Hero sets out for home
- 21. Pursuit: Hero is chased
- 22. Rescue: Pursuit ends
- 23. Arrival: Hero arrives unrecognized
- 24. Claim: False hero makes unfounded claims
- 25. Task: Difficult task is proposed to the hero
- 26. Solution: Task is resolved
- 27. Recognition: Hero is recognized
- 28. Exposure: False hero is exposed
- 29. Transfiguration: Hero is given a new appearance
- 30. Punishment: Villain is punished
- 31. Wedding: Hero marries and ascends the throne

From Morphology of the Folktale (1928), wording simplified by ChangingMinds.org

MAKE YOUR OWN PROPPIAN FAIRY TALE

Working with Propp is a great way to begin when you want to write your own fairy tale. We've identified three steps that we recommend:

Step One: Identify Your *Dramatis Personae*

- The Villain
- The Donor or Provider
- The Helper
- The Princess/"Sought-for-Person" and Her/His Father
- The Dispatcher
- The Hero
- The False Hero

Step Two: Read Through the 31 Functions and Pick the Building Blocks You Want to Use

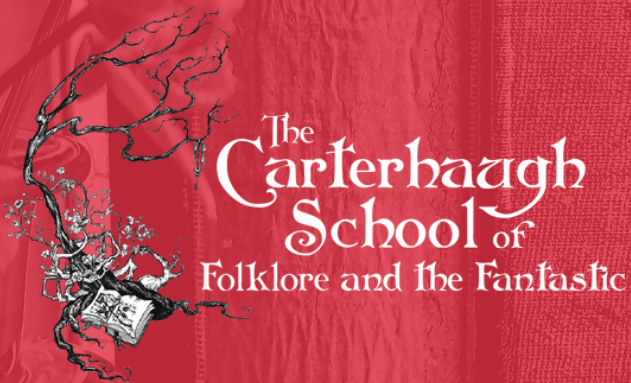
- When writing your own fairy tale, you can pick all the blocks first (outlining)
- Or you can pick them one at a time, write and develop that building block, and pick a new one when you come to the end of that arc or when you get stuck
- (And if you want to use the blocks out of order? Go nuts, we won't tell Propp!)

Step Three: Experiment and Swap

- Propp's theories are pretty rigid, but you don't have to use them that way yourself
- Feel free to experiment or swap things around! Make an antagonist your hero or start your story with a wedding.
- Propp is most useful for simply seeing and understanding these most common fairy-tale building blocks. As a creator, you get to play with them in whatever way serves your story!



THANK YOU!



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