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Vladimir Propp and Structuralism

In this course, we learned many ways to analyze and break down a fairy tale to better describe just exactly what was going in the text. A man named Vladimir Propp in his work *Morphology of the Folktale* introduced one such way. His method of breaking down fairy tales is entitled Structuralism. This method is a very scientific way to break down the tales to better understand just exactly what is occurring at a certain instant. It also serves as a primer in the fact that the way it is introduced by Propp, most tales fit these scientific descriptions. First, the driving force of this structuralism, the idea of functions, will be discussed in detail and how that applies to tales. Next, the idea of the *dramatis personae* will also be discussed and how that fits in to the structuralist ideals.

The beginnings of Propp's structuralist ideas start from his explanation of how fairy tales will be described in the first place, "We are undertaking

a comparison of the themes of these tales. For the sake of comparison we shall separate the component parts of fairy tales by special methods; and then, we shall make a comparison of tales according to their components" (Propp 19). This method differs from other interpretations of fairy tales. Other than looking at tales as a whole to describe, for example, Freudian Psychoanalysis or Self-Theory, this structuralist approach breaks down the tale into components and takes an almost scientific methodology look at what exactly consists inside of a fairy tale. These components are what Propp called functions.

Functions, according to Propp, were the constants in all fairy tales that appeared no matter what the actual story consisted of, "Functions are the stable, constant features of tales, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. Functions are the fundamental features of tales" (Birnbaum Lecture). Propp further explains this idea of functions:

1. A tsar gives an eagle to a hero. The eagle carries the hero away to another kingdom.

2. An old man gives Suceuko a horse. The horse carries Suceuko away to another kingdom...

Both constants and variables are present in the preceding instances. The names of the dramatis personae change (as well as the attributes of each), but neither their actions nor functions change. From this we can draw the inference that a tale often attributes identical actions to various personages. This makes possible the study of the tale according to the functions of its dramatis personae. (Propp 20)

Here, Propp explains just how important the study of the function is in fairy tales. You need only know what functions are present in the tale, regardless of the details of who is performing in the functions themselves. Using this definition of functions, Propp can now analyze all fairy tales with basically a set of functions, making it easier to understand how the tales themselves operate. Now, the problem that faces Propp is just how many functions occur in a tale that one could make a definitive set of them to use as a primer to study

all tales? Propp then uses four rules that he developed to be able to extract all functions from a tale:

1. Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale; independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled.
2. The number of functions known to the fairy tale is limited.
3. The sequence of functions is always identical.
4. All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure. (Propp 21-22).

Probably the most interesting of these four developments by Propp is the 3rd rule that he came to. The fact that sequence is important to a tale shows that you can scientifically deduce a tale in order of events, which in turn makes it easier to break apart and analyze. A further explanation of this is provided by Propp, "...If we designate with the letter A a function encountered everywhere in first position, and similarly designate with the letter B the function which (if it is at all present) always follows A, then all functions known to the tale will arrange themselves within a single

tale, and none will fall out of order, nor will any one exclude or contradict any other" (Propp 22). Of course, they could possibly be different subsections under A, such as different courses that would follow, but the same idea is behind that certain function. This is how Propp first started to derive his set of functions known as Proppian functions for all fairy tales. These exact functions and how they are determined will be discussed, but first, a further word about the idea of the dramatis personae.

Before, Propp determined that the functions themselves in structuralism never change, no matter whom they are performed by.

For each function there is a given: (1) a brief summary of its essence, (2) an abbreviated definition in one word, and (3) its conventional sign (Propp 25).

Propp here gives specific letters to functions and then dices them up into little groups in order to account for actions that occur in all fairy tales. This allows for all functions to occur in one single story, "The series of functions given below represents the morphological foundation of

fairy tales in general" (Propp 25). This means that, no matter who or what the specific action is in a certain function in a fairy tale, there is a general form that they can all fit into, hence the abbreviated one word definition. These explanations of functions can then be ordered to fit the primer for all fairy tales.

The first of these functions Propp names is A, which he calls villainy. In all fairy tales, there must first be some sort of villainy that occurs at the beginning of the tale, because it is the very first function that is named. This villainy, as described above, gives the Proppian raw generalization of the first function. Propp then gives many different subsections of villainy, which include:

A^1 : kidnapping of a person, A^{13} : an order to kill, etc. (Propp Appendix IV)

There are 19 different subscripts that include this first function of villainy. This shows that the function A is consistent in being the first occurrence in a tale, no matter what type of villainy occurs. The next function that Propp describes is Meditation, function B. These are then

broken down into 7 subsections including B⁵ :
transportation of banished hero. These, as Propp
describes, are the "connective incident" of
villainy. Propp then continues to define functions
all the way up to W (wedding of the hero) and
subscripts thereafter. These are very precise ways
to define a fairy tale. Because of Propp's very
distinct definitions of subscripts, one can now
define every set of functions in a fairy tale and
then analyze those functions in order. Again, the
fact that these functions occur in order is
important. For example, you cannot have K
(liquidation of villainy) if there is no villainy
(A) to begin with!

The second part of Propp's development is that
the number of functions is limited. This also makes
sense when you think of functions that must remain
in a logical, sensible order. For instance, say you
have a fairy tale where there is villainy, but there
is no instance of the first function of the donor
(D). Because of this, there cannot be a function E
or F that would complete a donor sequence. That is,
the functions E and F are dependent on the function
D. If D does not exist, then there cannot be

functions present that depend on D. This again follows a very mathematical and scientific structure with regard to the ideas of functions.

The Proppian idea of structuralism is a very interesting way to analyze fairy tales. The use of functions and ideas of dramatis personae follow a very clear and distinct path for which to understand how the structure of the fairy tale exists. These sets of functions and the rules that Propp apply to them make for a very scientific look at how the age-old fairy tales read out.

Works Cited

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