

Vladimir Propp was born in 1895 and died in 1970. A Professor of folklore at St. Petersburg University, Propp's experience with fairy tales led him to conclude that all fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure (Everand). He was able to devise an outline of events or actions that are typical in a fairy tale and that always occur in sequence. These occurrences are called functions. A function is an act of a character that moves the plot forward. The sequence of functions is always identical. Propp also concluded that functions are limited, stable, constant features of tales. Functions are independent of how and who fulfills them. Not all functions occur in every tale; however, the number of functions known to the fairy tale is limited. Because of the previous statement, Propp concluded that all tales are similar with respect to their structure (Everand). Some functions are more common than others and occur in more fairy tales, while others are rare and show up only occasionally in fairy tales. Among the most common sets of functions are, Villainy (A), which occurs after the Preparatory section and represents a complication that needs to be liquidated (K); weddings (W). These are just three of the many functions that Vladimir Propp uses. The following Russian Fairy tales can be explained using Proppian analysis.

“The Merchant's Daughter and the Maidservant” can be analyzed by using Propp's model. According to Propp, a tale typically begins with a Preparatory Section. In this story, the initial situation (which is represented with the Greek symbol α) is the fact that there is a wealthy merchant who had a beautiful daughter. Every fairy tale has an initial situation. The story than does not say explicitly that there is an act of villainy, but in this case it is implied. The fact that he isn't married is the lack of villainy (a). The king complained that he didn't have a wife. The next function is mediation (B) or a

connective incident, which is when the king hears of the merchant's wife. The king hears of the merchant's beautiful wife that can read people's minds and decides to write her a letter. This is the consent to counteraction (C) because the king is trying to find a way to fix his problem. He is not married and he is trying to fix this lack of villainy by writing a letter to the merchant's daughter saying she will marry him. When the merchant's daughter receives the letter, she prepares to go. When she leaves can be distinguished as the departure (noted by a ↑). After the departure of the maiden and the maidservant, there is, what Propp might call, an inter move.

Propp would explain this tale as a multiple move tale. There are two moves in this fairy tale and one move is embedded in the other. Because there is another act of villainy without solving the first act of villainy, this would be explained as a move within a move. In order to go back to addressing the first problem (A), the second act of villainy must be solved. The second act of villainy occurs when on their way to see the king, the maidservant is filled with spite and cuts out the maiden's eyes. This act of villainy is followed by its own mediation (B). The maiden recovers from her illness and decides to fight back and pursue the king even though the maidservant cut out her eyes. In Proppian terms, this is the consent to counteraction (C) when the maiden tries to resolve the inner act of villainy, the blinding. She goes to an old man and asks him to get velvet and silk. The old man departs (indicated by a ↑), and finds the velvet and silk. Next is the donor sequence. Donor is Propp's term for magic helper. In this scene, the maiden sends the old man to sell the king a golden crown for an eye. The maiden tests the king. This is the first test in the donor sequence (D which is the test part of the sequence) that the king passes. He responds to the test (E) by giving the man the eye. The eye is brought back to

the maiden and she is rewarded with an eye to see with (F). The letters D,E, and F represent the donor sequence and occur twice more. The maiden makes another crown and tells the old man to sell it to the king for another eye. This can be explained as before (D,E, and F). The third donor sequence (D,E, and F) happens once again, this time with the maiden receiving her heart as a reward (F). The maiden receives her heart from the boy who tricks the queen into giving him the maiden's heart. The next function is (G), which is a transfer of the hero to a different place. The king goes to see the maiden, however, can not find her or her house. He goes a second time to see the garden that was in place of the house, and brings back a boy. The boy cons the queen into getting the maidens' heart. When the maiden is back to normal and is alive, this is liquidation (K) of the inter move. Next, going back to the first act of villainy, there is liquidation of the first act of villainy when the maiden meets the king (K). When the king finds out about the queen and her actions, she is punished (U). Finally, the king and the maiden live happily ever after. The fairy tale does not tell of a wedding, but it is implied (W). This fairy tale was different in that there was no distinctive hero. Because the functions are typically actions done by the hero, the merchant's daughter and the king can both be thought of as a hero. They both contributed to the positive outcome of the ending (in both moves); therefore both of their actions were noted and considered throughout the story.

“The Merchant's Daughter and the Slanderer” is another tale that can be explained through Proppian analysis. This fairy tale, also begins with an initial situation in the Preparatory Section. “The Merchant's Daughter and the Slanderer” begins with a merchant who has two children, a son and a daughter. The children are lacking a mother;

according to Propp this would be called absentation (represented by the Greek letter β). Like every fairy tale, this one also has an act of villainy (A). In the beginning of the story, the father of the two children dies, having told his children to live well with each other when he leaves. The next function would be (B) mediation; in this tale the son takes charge of his family and realizes that he needs to make some money so that he and his sister can live well together. Consent to counteraction (C) is next and can be described as the merchant's son taking charge deciding to go out and trade. He must leave his sister to fix the problem. The merchant's son then departs (\uparrow) and tells his sister not to engage in evil things or consort with strangers. Because he told her not to do something when he leaves, this would bring the story back to the preparatory stage. This is called Interdiction and is represented by a δ , just like the other functions in the preparatory stage. Because the Preparatory Stage is supposed to be before the act of villainy, this would be considered out of order from Proppian analysis. The next paragraph explains how the merchant's son becomes friends with the king, who allows him to trade with the first place on the market. This can be explained as liquidation (K) because the merchant's son solves his problem of needing to support. With the king's approval and support, he can make enough money to live a happy life with his sister. The next paragraph cannot be explained by using Proppian analysis. The paragraph simply explains how the king falls in love with the merchant's daughter. The paragraph is there to develop the story. A general overheard their conversation and became enraged of the thought of anyone's happiness. He lies to the king saying he knows the merchant's daughter and tells the king that she is not quiet and chaste as the merchant claims. He also says that he has laid on the bed and played amorous games with her. Although there

was no original argument between the hero and the villain, this would be described as the Pursuit of the hero by the villain (Pr). The general (villain) is trying to make the merchant look bad by telling the king that he lies. In response to this accusation, the general is told to prove his words and go to the merchant's daughter and get her ring and find her secret mark. He goes to the town of the merchant's wife and finds an old lady who will get her ring and find her secret mark. He pays her with gold and the old lady completes her task. When the old lady comes to the merchant's sister's door, the sister disobeyed her brother and spoke with a stranger. According to Proppian analysis, this is called a violation (also represented by a δ). Being the nice girl that she is, she slipped and told the old lady her secret mark and didn't notice when the old lady stole her ring from the table. Not only is this preparatory stage out of order but also the transference of a ring (J^2). Propp usually denotes J as branding of the hero. However, in his list of functions, he considers this a type of branding because it is property of the hero in which the hero can be identified. Normally, the transference of a ring (a variation of branding) is done before the liquidation (K), which happened already. The general then returned back to the king to prove that his accusations were true. The king believed the general and ordered the merchant to be hanged. This can be explained as the claim of a false hero (L). Because the general is the villain and not the hero, Proppian would explain this scene as the claims of a false hero. Fortunately, the merchant is allowed to write his sister. He writes her and explains the situation. Being the clever girl that she is, she tricks the general into admitting that he was lying. The merchant's daughter helps the story develop by exposing the false hero (Ex). By exposing the general for the wretch that he is, she rescues her brother (Rs). If it had not been for her cleverness, her brother

would have been hanged. Instead, the villain is punished (U) by taking the penalty that the merchant was about to receive. The general was hanged and the merchant's daughter and the king drove to the church. The function that ends the story is the wedding (W) of the merchant's sister and the king.

In "Elena the Wise", Proppian analysis can be used to tell the story. This story, like all of the others, begins with an initial situation (symbolized with the Greek alpha symbol). This initial situation in "Elena the Wise" is a guard in the stone tower. An evil spirit is locked up in the tower, when he tries to convince the guard that he needs to be set free. Not only is there one preparatory section function, but also the hero reacts to the persuasions of a villain (θ^1). When the guard lets the evil spirit go, he is following the orders of the evil spirit. Next, there is a lack of villainy (a), which in this case is that the guard is not married. However, because he let the evil spirit go, he decides to depart from the kingdom and wander about. This would be considered Mediation (B^3). He then calls upon the evil spirit for help because he has no shelter, food, or water. This would be consent to counteraction (C) because he is trying to fix his problem. He then departs from his current home (\uparrow) and agrees to live with the evil spirit and look after his daughters. The story then skips to the transference to a designated place (G). The guard wants to know where the daughters fly to at night. They will not tell the guard so he follows them by turning into a hedge sparrow and follows them. This is the transference to a designated place. He follows them where they meet Elena the Wise. He falls in love with her beauty and wishes for a wife like Elena. When they (the daughters and the guard) return to the house, the daughters tell him not to go back there. They warn him that if Elena looks into her book and finds out that he isn't supposed to be there, she will

have him killed. The guard does not listen to the girls and another act of villainy (A) occurs. This is an embedded move beginning with an act of villainy. The guard decides to go back to Elena and try to win her heart. This is an act of villainy because he knows that he is not supposed to go and see Elena, for if she catches him, he will be killed. He turns into a hedge sparrow and follows Elena back to find out where she lives. The guard picks a beautiful tree to sit under and sings to Elena. Propp would explain this as mediation (B⁷) because he is trying to win her heart by song. When Elena finds the bird, she took him in her room and kept him in a cage. At night the hedge sparrow turns into a fly and kissed Elena on the cheek. This is a donor sequence (D,E, and F) that occurs two times. This is unusual for Proppian analysis because usually the Donor Sequence occurs three times. The first round is to test Elena and see if she will wake up (D). She responds by not seeing the guard when she opens her eyes (E). The guard is rewarded by being allowed to stay in her room (F). The donor sequence is then repeated again. Elena awakes and doesn't find anyone there again. On the third night the agent (fly) is transferred into a young soldier (G). At this time, liquidation (K) would take place because he solved the problem of wanting to meet Elena. Because the second move embedded within the first move is solved, the first problem (the guard has no wife) must be solved. Elena threatens to take the guard's life by decapitating him. She allows him to leave and if she can't find him in ten hours, they will be married. The guard calls upon the evil spirit for help and helps him by turning him into a needle. The needle is then inserted into Elena's book. Elena cannot find the guard, and after ten hours the guard turns into himself again. They are married (W) and live together happily ever after.

The three tales, “The Merchant’s Daughter and the Maidservant”, “The Merchant’s Daughter and the Slanderer”, and “Elena the Wise” are similar in many ways. In all of these fairy tales, there is no distinctive hero. For example, in the Merchant’s Daughter and the Maidservant, the king and the maid are both working as a hero. In The Merchant’s Daughter and the Slanderer, the same was true regarding the hero, which was both the daughter and the son. And in Elena the Wise, the hero points to the guard but also could be argued to be Elena. Because all of these characters perform tasks that the hero would perform, it was hard to deduce a single hero per fairy tale. Another example of how these fairy tales were similar is that they all begin with an initial situation. The preparatory scene precedes the villainy that serves as the main motivation for the tale. The initial situation is also there to emphasize the first statement of importance which usually provides clues to what the act of (or lack) of villainy is. For example, in “The Merchant’s Daughter and the Slanderer”, the first two sentences set up the reader for the rest of the story. The first sentence gives the initial situation that there is a merchant who has a daughter and a son. The next sentence gives the act of villainy (A), which would be the death of the father. These two functions in the three fairy tales analyzed, seem to work together. Another similarity between the fairy tales analyzed is that they are all multiple move tales. In “The Merchant’s Daughter and the Maidservant” and in “Elena the Wise”, there is an inner move within the fairy tale. This occurs in fairy tales when the functions are interrupted and then resume with the original path. In order to continue with the original path, the second move must be liquidated or ended with a wedding. In the two fairy tales analyzed with two moves embedded, the second move was liquidated before the resumption of the original move. From the three fairy tales analyzed, “The

Merchant’s Daughter and the Maidservant”, “The Merchant’s Daughter and the Slanderer”, and “Elena the Wise”, it can be shown that function that are present occur in the same order.

Propp often used a chart to show that fairy tales often use the same functions. The following is a table that shows the functions between the three stories analyzed according to Proppian analysis.

Functions	α	β	ε	θ	δ	A/a	B	C	\uparrow	D	E	F	G	J	K	L	Pr	Ex	U	W
“The Merchant’s Daughter and the Maidservant”	*					a	*	*		*	*	*	*		*					*
“The Merchant’s Daughter and The Slanderer”	*	*			*	A	*	*	*					*	*	*	*	*	*	*
“Elena The Wise”	*		*	*		A	*	*	*	*	*	*	*		*					*

It can be seen from the table above that there are many similarities between the fairy tales. A fairy tale must contain the following functions α , (A or a), K, and W. The table shows that all of the fairy tales contain these functions that Propp created. Vladimir Propp was successful by breaking down a large number of Russian fairy tales into smaller units and relating them in sequence (Everand). It is proved in this essay that no matter how different fairy tales are in their plot, they are all similar.

Works Cited

Everard, Jerry. [Introduction to Vladimir Propp.](#) 11 April. 2003

<http://mural.uv.es/vifresal/Propp.htm>