

## Structuralism

Vladimir Propp

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## Outline

- Vladimir Propp
- Aarne and Thompson
- The Problem
- Methods and Materials
- Features of Functions
- Conclusions
- Key Functions
- Sample Tale: "The Magic Swan Geese"



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## Propp: Background

- Vladimir Propp, 1895–1970
- Professor (folklore), St. Petersburg University
- Russian Formalism
  - Scientific study of literature, akin to the natural sciences
  - Moscow Linguistics Circle, Moscow, 1915
  - Oporozh (Society for the Study of Poetic Language), St. Petersburg, 1916–23
- *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928)

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## Motifs: Aarne and Thompson

- Antti Aarne, Stith Thompson
- Aarne's basic typology (excerpt)
  - Supernatural adversary
  - Supernatural husband or wife
  - Supernatural task
  - Supernatural helper
  - Magic object
  - Supernatural power or knowledge
  - Other supernatural motif

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## The Problem

- Morphology
- Classification systems
- Identification of primitive compositional elements.
- Specific actors change; their actions (functions) are constant.
- Number of specific actors is infinite, number of functions is limited.

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## Examples from Tales

- A tsar gives an eagle to a hero. The eagle carries the hero away to another kingdom.
- An old man gives Suchenko a horse. The horse carries Suchenko away to another kingdom.
- A sorcerer gives Ivan a little boat. The boat takes Ivan to another kingdom.
- A princess gives Ivan a ring. Young men appearing from out of the ring carry Ivan away into another kingdom.

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## Features of Functions

- A function is an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action.
- Functions are the stable, constant features of tales, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. Functions are the fundamental features of tales.
- Sequence of functions is always identical.

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## Tales and Functions

- All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure:
  - Sequence of functions is always identical.
  - No function excludes the possibility of any other function.

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## Multiple-Move Tales

- One move
  - I. A \_\_\_\_\_ W\*
- Two moves (serial)
  - I. A \_\_\_\_\_ W\*
  - II. A \_\_\_\_\_ W\*
- Two moves (embedded)
  - I. A \_\_\_\_\_ G ..... K \_\_\_\_\_ W\*
  - II. a \_\_\_\_\_ K

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### Propp's Conclusions

- Number of function is limited.
- Functions need not all be present in all tales, but those functions that are present always occur in the same order.
- Because of the preceding two facts, all tales are similar.
- Functional classification gives a better measure of similarity among tales than motif-based classification.

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### Tale Components

- Sets of Functions
- Modifications of Functions

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### Sets of Functions

- Preparatory section
- Villainy (A), Liquidation (K), and Wedding (W)
- Departure or dispatch (↑) and Return (↓) of hero
- Donor Sequence (D, E, and F)
- Struggle (H), Victory (I), and Branding (J)
- Pursuit (Pr) and Rescue (Rs) of hero
- Claims of false hero (L), Recognition of hero (Q), Exposure of false hero (Ex), and Punishment of false hero (U)

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## Modifications of Functions

- Positive or Negative Results
- Trebling

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## What to Learn From Propp 1

- Know principal types
  - A: Villainy, B: Mediation
- Know that these have subtypes, but you do not need to memorize the lists of specific subtypes
  - A<sup>1</sup>: Kidnapping, A<sup>2</sup>: Seizure, etc.

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## What to Learn from Propp 2

- Concentrate on most common functions
  - As you read tales and think about them from a Proppian perspective, you will notice that some functions occur in almost every tale, while others are rarer
- Know what the common specific functions are, but you do not need to memorize the letters
  - You may have to identify “acquisition or receipt of magic agent” in a tale, but you do not have to remember that Propp labeled it “F”

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### Preparatory Section

- Represented by Greek letters in Propp's notation
- Precedes the Villainy (A) or lack (a) that serves as the main motivation for the tale
- Initial Situation ( $\alpha$ )
- Absentation ( $\beta$ )
- Interdiction ( $\gamma$ ) and Violation ( $\delta$ )
- Reconnaissance ( $\epsilon$ ) and Information ( $\zeta$ )

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### Villainy, Liquidation, and Wedding

- Villainy (A) or Lack (a)
  - Lack may be implicit (young man lacks a wife)
  - Motivation for subsequent action
- Liquidation (K)
  - Villainy or Lack is remedied after adventures
- Wedding (W)
  - May be implemented by acquisition of wealth or power, rather than explicitly a wife

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### Departure or dispatch and Return

- Departure or dispatch ( $\uparrow$ ) of the hero
  - Villainy (A) or Lack (a) has occurred
  - Mediation or connective incident (B)
    - The hero knows about the misfortune
  - The hero consents to counteraction (C)
  - The hero departs ( $\uparrow$ )
- Return ( $\downarrow$ ) of hero
  - After liquidation of misfortune or lack (K)
  - Hero still may be pursued (Pr) or have other problems

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## Donor Sequence

- “Donor” is Propp’s term for “magic helper”
- First function of the donor (D)
  - Donor makes contact with and tests the hero (test may be implicit)
- Reaction of the hero (E)
  - Hero may or may not pass the test
  - This function is *only* the hero’s reaction to the donor’s test. When a hero reacts to anything else, it is a different function.
- Acquisition or receipt of magical agent (F)
  - Hero is rewarded or not, depending on response to test

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## Struggle, Victory, and Branding

- The hero struggles with the villain (H)
- Victory over the villain (I)
- May be followed by branding of the hero (J)
  - Branding may result from injury in battle
  - If the hero is marked physically, the mark will prove significant later, e.g., to recognize the hero (Q) and expose a false hero (Ex)

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## Pursuit and Rescue

- Pursuit of the hero by the villain (Pr)
  - This is pursuit *after* the liquidation of misfortune (K)
  - E.g., the hero defeats the villain (I) and rescues the princess (K), but the villain then chases the hero
  - Other times when the villain chases the hero are not the same function
- Rescue of the hero (Rs)

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**Claims, Recognition,  
Exposure, and Punishment**

- Claims of a false hero (L)
- Recognition of the hero (Q)
- Exposure of the false hero (Ex)
- Punishment of the false hero or villain (U)

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**Modifications**

- Positive or negative results
  - When the donor tests the hero (D), the hero may pass or fail (E) and receive or not receive a magic agent (F)
- Trebling
  - Trebled H-I (Struggle-Victory) sequence
  - Hero may battle three dragons, each with more heads than the last

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