

Propp's Theory

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I decided to write my analytical paper on Propp, and his theory on fairy tales. Propp's theory was that all fairy tales followed the same basic structure. However all fairy tales didn't have to include every step, but they did contain some of them. Also some of the details would change such as a name of a character or the setting of the fairy tale. I wanted to write my paper on Propp because I found him to be very interesting. I thought that his idea about fairy tales and how they follow a pattern was different. Propp lists a bunch of different functions that a character may or may not perform in a certain fairy tale. "For each function there is given: (1) a brief summary of its essence, (2) an abbreviated definition in one word, and (3) its conventional sign. (The introduction of signs will alter permit a schematic comparison of the structure of various tales.)" (*Morphology of the Folktale* 19) I took three fairy tales from the collection by Aleksandr Afanasev, and used them to prove that Propp's idea was right. The three fairy tales I used were *Prince Danila Govorila*, *The Man Who Didn't Know Fear*, and *The Footless Champion and the Handless Champion*. All of the letters, numbers or symbols were taken from *Morphology of the Folktale* pages 19-24, and 149-55, which are from the course pack

The first fairy tale that I used the Proppian Theory to analyze was *Prince Danila Govorila*. In the beginning of this fairy tale the initial situation (α) is the mother gets this ring which is a magic agent from an old woman (f1). The mother doesn't know that the old woman was a witch. The mother then gives the ring to her son (F1) and the son will then use the ring to find his wife. The son can only marry the woman whose finger the ring fits on. Then the mother dies (β 2). The son is now on his way to look for his bride

(β3). He leaves his house because he doesn't have a wife (a1). The son looked and looked, but still couldn't find a woman that the ring would fit her finger. So he goes home without a wife, and he is sad. His sister goes and talks with him, and he tells her what is wrong. She takes the ring (F1) and puts it on her finger, and it fits perfectly. Her brother is so happy that he finally found his bride, but the sister is grossed out by the thought of marrying her brother (Axvi). She is upset and is crying, and some old women came by and asked her what was wrong. The girl tells then what was wrong, and the old women told her to, "Make four little dolls, seat them in the four corners; when your brother calls you to your wedding, go; when he asks you to come to the bridal chamber, do not hurry. Put your hope in God. Farewell!"(Afanasev 352) There was a wedding (W*). The girl made the four little dolls, and put them in the corners (F3). The brother calls for his sister, and she said: "I will come in a minute, only let me remove my earrings."(Afanasev 352) Then the dolls in the corners cried: "Cuckoo, Prince Danila, Cuckoo, Govorila, Cuckoo, he takes his sister, Cuckoo, for a wife, Cuckoo, earth open wide, Cuckoo, sister, fall inside!" (Afanasev 352) The earth opened, and the girls started to fall in, but she didn't fall the whole way in. The brother yells for his sister a second time, but this time she said, "Just a minute, my brother, let me unclasp my girdle."(Afanasev 352) The dolls cried the same thing again, "Cuckoo, Prince Danila, Cuckoo, Govorila, Cuckoo, he takes his sister, Cuckoo, for a wife, Cuckoo, earth open wide, Cuckoo, sister, fall inside!" (Afanasev 353) Now only her head was showing. Then for the third time her brother yelled to her, "Sister Catherine, come to the featherbed!" (Afanasev 353) As you can see this happens three times (∴). Once again the sister said she had to do something. The dolls cuckooed, and the sister was gone. She had fallen

into the earth, and was now underground walking by herself. The brother called her again and then again, but the sister didn't answer. He ran to her room, and saw that she wasn't there, but only the dolls were still there crying in the corners, "Earth, open wide! Sister, fall inside!" (Afanasev 353) The brother got an ax and cut the doll's heads off, and then threw them into the stove. Now at this point of the fairy tale another fairy tale begins. Now the sister is underground just walking (B3). She comes to a hut, which is on chicken legs. Which we know means that it is Baba Yaga's house. She went inside and saw a beautiful maiden embroidering a towel using silver and gold thread. The sister is welcomed (D2), and she goes in. They start talking and the maiden tells her that her mother should be coming home soon, and just to let her know that her mother was a witch. So the witch's daughter turns the girl into a needle, and puts the needle into a birch broom, and then stuck the broom in the corner. The mother came back and said, "I smell a Russian bone!" (Afanasev 353) The daughter told her mom that they were just old women stopping by for a drink of water. The mother told her daughter that anytime that anyone stops she should try and make them stay there. So the mother left, and then came back a little later. Baba Yaga said the same thing to her daughter, but this time the daughter told her mother that the smell was just from some old men. The mother asked her why she didn't make them stay and she told her that she tried, but they left anyway. Once again the witch left, and came back a little later (∴). However, this time the daughter didn't have enough time to change the girl into the needle, and the mother saw her. Baba Yaga told her to sit on the shovel, so she did. The witch started to push her in, but the girl put one leg up and one leg into the fire. Baba Yaga told her that that wasn't the right way to do it, and told her to sit right. So the girl sat on it again, but this time she

put one leg in the fire and one leg under the fire. Baba Yaga told her that she was still sitting on the shovel wrong. The witch was made by this time, and told the girl to move and she would show her how it was done (∴). She sat on the shovel, and the girls pushed her into the fire. They locked and sealed the door. Before running out of the house they grabbed a comb, a brush, and the towel. Then they ran out of the house, and the witch somehow got out of the stove, and was catching up to them quickly. They were running very fast (Rs1), but Baba Yaga was getting closer. So the daughter threw the brush down, and when she did this, a thick marsh with overgrown reeds appeared (Rs2). This slowed the witch down a little, but not much because she used her claws, and made herself a path. She was still getting closer to the girls, so they threw down the comb (Rs2), and a thick, dark forest showed up. Once again this slowed the witch down but for just a bit because the witch used her teeth to get through the forest. Baba Yaga was getting closer and closer. The girls threw the embroidered towel down (Rs2), and a sea of fire appeared. This was the third time that the girls threw something on the ground (∴). Baba Yaga tried to fly over the sea of fire but couldn't. She fell in, and burned to death. The girls were now alone, and a servant came up to them, and he asked them who they were and what they were doing. The servant went and told his master who was the girl's brother about the girls. The brother knew one of them had to be his sister, but he didn't know which one it was because they looked just like each other. The brother and the servant came up with a plan so that they would be able to tell which of the girls was his sister, and which of the girls wasn't. The brother pretended to get stabbed because he knew his sister would think he was dying and come to him, and see if he was ok. Their plan worked well. The brother ended up marrying the other girl, and he married his sister

to a very good man (W*). He was able to marry the other girl because the ring fit her finger perfectly (F1). They all lived happily ever after.

The second fairy tale I did was *The Man Who Didn't Know Fear*. In this fairy tale the (α) initial situation is that there is a merchant's son who isn't afraid of anything. He is very strong, and brave. The son leaves home so he can find fear (\uparrow). The thing he is lacking is fear (a6). He goes on the journey to find fear, and a laborer goes with him. As you could probably figure the laborer is scared of almost everything. The merchant's son tells the laborer to, "Drive into the forest." (Afanasev 325) The laborer was scared, scared that they might run into robbers or be attacked by beasts. The laborer does what the merchant's son said to do, and as they were driving along there was a dead corpse just hanging there from a tree. The merchant's son cut the body down, and they kept on driving. Then they came to a house with lights on, but once again the laborer was scared that they might get robbed, but not the merchant's son. He went right into the robber's house. They were at the table eating fish and drinking. The merchant's son said, "Invite me to your table to eat and drink with you." (Afanasev 325) The robbers didn't answer him. So he and the laborer went to the table anyway. The merchant's son ate a piece of fish and told the robbers that it wasn't good. Then he told the laborer to go to their wagon and get the thing from it. The laborer did, and he brought back the corpse. The merchant's son put the corpse onto the table and cut a piece off, and then he smelled the piece he cut off (A17). The merchant's son said that the corpse wasn't good either, and then told the laborer to go get some live fish. The robbers started to scatter because the merchant's son was pointing at them. They hide all over the place. Then the laborer and the merchant's son sat down and ate and drank, and then they left. They drove along

(G2), and the merchant's son told the laborer to stop at the graveyard. Of course the laborer was against stopping because he was afraid, but they stopped anyway. They stopped so that they could rest. The merchant's son fell asleep, but the laborer stayed up because he couldn't fall asleep because he was too scared. After a little while a large man dressed in white came up from a grave, and started to strangle the merchant's son. The merchant's son woke up, and started beating the dead man. The man begged him to stop, but the only way he would stop was if the dead man would bring the daughter of a certain king, from a certain land back to him within an hour. The man agreed and within an hour he brought back the princess that the merchant's son was talking about. The merchant's son and the princess got married (w*). As you can see there were three things that could have scared the merchant's son, but didn't (∴). So they were still on a search to find fear. They all drove for a long time, and still the merchant's son didn't experience fear so they went back home (↓). The merchant's son loved to fish and when he went he would sometimes stay away for a long time. His mother hated that he stayed away for weeks at a time. The mother decided to play a little trick on her son. One day the son went out on his boat to fish, and fell asleep. A fisherman came up to the son's boat and saw that he was sleeping. So the fisherman put some perches in his bosom. "The perches began to wiggle; the merchant's son awoke, was frightened, and fell into the water, but managed to save himself. Then for the first time he learned what it meant to be afraid." (Afanasev 327)

The last fairy tale that I used Propp's Theory to analyze was *The Footless Champion and the Handless Champion*. The (α) initial situation of this fairy tale was there was a prince who wanted to marry a certain beautiful princess (a1). He wasn't sure

how to go about getting her to be his wife because many kings and princes had wooed her, but achieved nothing. The only thing they got were their heads cut off, and put on the fence poles, which went around the palace. The prince was very sad, and then Ivan the Naked appeared (F6). Ivan the Naked goes up to the prince and said: “You cannot win the maiden by yourself, and if you go to woo her alone you will lose your rash head.” (Afanasev 269) Ivan told him they could go together, and he would protect the prince from any danger. The prince only had to promise Ivan the Naked that he would obey him. They left the next day (↑). The prince and Ivan the Naked got to the palace, and started to woo the princess. The princess said: “First, the bridegroom must prove his strength.” (Afanasev 270) After dinner the princess told her men to go and get her gun, and all forty of them brought it back, but it wasn’t a gun it was a cannon. The princess ordered the prince to shoot her gun (γ2). The prince told Ivan the Naked to check out the gun and make sure it was ok. So he did, and when he came back he told the prince that it wasn’t good. Then the princess ordered her men to go and get her bow and arrow so that the prince could shoot it. Once again the forty men brought in the huge bow and arrow, and the princess ordered the prince to shoot it (γ2). The prince told Ivan to check it out, and make sure it was ok. Ivan did, and he shot the arrow, but when he did this the arrow hit Marko the Runner, and cut off both of his hands. The princess then told her men to go and get her steed, and the forty men came back with this large horse. The princess told him to ride her horse (γ2). Once again he told Ivan the Naked to make sure it was ok, and he did, but when Ivan went up to the horse and he pulled on the tale, and pulled it and the horse’s skin off. Once again there was an event that happened three times (∴). In this case it was the princess telling her men to go and get her things, and then her telling the

prince to do what she said also, and then it was the prince telling Ivan the Naked to make sure that it was ok for him to do. Ivan came back, and told the prince that the horse wasn't good. The next day the prince and princess got married (W*). One night the princess put her hand on the prince, and the prince could hardly breathe, and the princess said, "So that is the kind of champion you are!" (Afanasev 271) A month later the three of them rode for three days because they were on their way to the prince's palace (:.). They stopped to rest, and to give the horses a rest. The princess saw that Ivan the Naked was sleeping and she cut his feet off. The princess ordered the prince to leave Ivan there, and he did. Now here comes another tale within a tale. Marko the Runner was going through a field and saw Ivan the Naked there. They talked, and ended up going into the forest, and they made themselves a hut, a wagon, and a gun. Marko would drag the wagon, as Ivan would shoot at the birds. They ended up getting tired of this so they decided to steal the priest's daughter, and they did (A1). She became their sister, and she did all of the cooking and cleaning. One day Ivan and Marko left to do a little bird hunting, and a little later they returned to see that their sister was very skinny (T1). She told them that a dragon had been coming to her and he would turn into a youth and that is how she became so skinny. Ivan and Marko hid from the dragon, and when it came they beat him badly. The dragon told them if they would stop that he would show them where the water of life and the water of death was. And the dragon did, but he tried tricking them by telling them that the first river they came to was the water of life and to jump in, but it really wasn't. Instead they threw a twig in and it turned into nothing. So then the dragon took them to the water of life and they threw a tree trunk in and it became a tree. They went in and Marko the Runner grew hands and Ivan the Naked, feet. They took the

dragon back to the first river and threw him in. Now he was a little puff of smoke. They returned back to their sister, and Marko the Runner went with her back to her palace and lived there. Ivan the Naked went to find the prince, and he did. The prince was tending swine. The prince told Ivan what was going on and they exchanged clothes, and went back to the palace. The princess started yelling, and Ivan put her in her place by dragging her around the yard by her braid (K1). She promised from then on that she would obey her husband, and she did (K5). Ivan the naked stayed with them, and he served them.

As you can see through out these three fairy tales there were a few things that were the same, but a few things different. Most of all you saw that they followed the same basic pattern in which they all had an initial situation; they all had a character leaving home because they were lacking something. Like in the first tale it was lacking a wife, the second tale it was lacking fear, and the third one was lacking a wife. They also all had the character returning home, and a big thing that sticks out from all three of theses fairy tales is the use of '3.' There were many more similarities and differences through the fairy tales that I discussed. You could also notice the letters, numbers, or symbols that represented different functions that the characters did. Propp has a different way of looking at fairy tales and breaking them down into different parts. I found that to be interesting and that is why I chose to do my paper on him.

* I know that the symbol for something happening three times is three dots one above the other, but I couldn't find a symbol that was like that so I used the three doted triangle instead. (∴)

Afanasev, Aleksandr. *Russian Fairy Tales*. United States. Pantheon Books, Inc., 1975

Propp, Vladimir. *Morphology of the Folktale*, 1928