

Propp and His Science of the Folk Fairy Tale

By Alana O'Connell

Russian Fairy Tales, Russian 0090

April 15, 2003

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It wouldn't be too unusual to say that Vladimir Propp (1875-1970) can be compared to a scientist—he in fact, did analyze the fairy tale how a scientist would analyze an experiment. Propp analyzed the folk fairy tale genre, and came up with his own set of rules for classifying each of the characters acts, in what sequence they occur, and names of the actions of the characters. This system of classification became known as “structuralism.”

Propp's guidelines for reading folk fairy tales are that each tale attributes identical actions to various characters, but the identical acts can have different meanings. The term “function” was the term he used to refer to the “act” of the character. The functions of each of the characters are constant stable elements independent of how or by whom they are fulfilled, thus becoming the fundamental components of a tale. The functions of each tale are limited and always sequentially identical, even if some of the functions are absent. Propp has come up over two dozen different functions for tales, but the most common functions are the most important ones to remember (Propp, 1968 pp. 19-36).

To illustrate how and when each of the functions are used in the folk fairy tale, here is a summarized tale from Afanasev's “Russian Fairy Tales.”

The Three Kingdoms, Copper, Silver, And Golden

A king and his wife lived with their three sons. One day the queen walked out into her garden and was swept away by a mighty whirlwind. The distressed and grieving king sent his sons out to find their mother when they grew up. The youngest, Prince Ivan, went on the search and came across an old man in front of the splendid castle. The old man

gave Ivan a ball, which would lead him into a cave where he could find his mother. He eventually made his way there, while his two brothers waited for him below the mountain. Ivan became acquainted with the Queen of the Copper Kingdom, who gave him a copper ring and ball and it would lead him to her sister the Queen of the Silver Kingdom. Ivan had to promise that after he defeated the whirlwind he would rescue the Queen. He was lead to the Queen of the Silver Kingdom who said the same thing, to save her from the whirlwind. The silver ring and ball she gave Ivan led him to Elena the Fair, Queen of the Gold Kingdom. Elena, also with instructions to rescue her after the defeat of the whirlwind, gave him a golden ball that would finally lead to his mother who was in a magnificent kingdom that was ruled by the Mighty Whirlwind. Ivan's mother instructed her son to drink from a tub that contained water of strength. Another tub was present beside it, but it made a man lose his strength. Ivan switched the tubs so the Mighty Whirlwind would drink the water to make himself weak. The Whirlwind and Ivan battled, and Whirlwind lost his strength. He drank to revive himself but was fooled, and was defeated. Unfortunately his brothers tricked him and left Ivan behind. Ivan however had the service of two former servants of the Mighty Whirlwind. They used their powers to transport Ivan back to his kingdom. Ivan requested to work with a shoemaker, who gladly obliged. Mighty Whirlwind's two servants secretly helped Ivan to make magnificent shoes, which were adored by Elena the Fair, who was getting ready to marry one of Ivan's brothers. She demanded that the shoemaker make bejeweled shoes or else. The shoemaker was concerned, but Ivan was able to help along with his two trusty servants to make a beautiful set of shoes. But, Elena the Fair wanted a magnificent dress made. Ivan was able to help too. Eventually Elena requested a golden castle with the

works which was impossible for the poor shoemaker, but Ivan's helpers made it possible. Ivan wrote his father everything about how his brothers deceived him. The king was angry and wanted to punish the brothers, but Ivan obtained a pardon for them. Ivan married Elena the Fair, Prince Piotr married the Silver Queen, and Prince Vasily married the Copper Queen. (Afanasev 1945 pp.375-87).

We can do a step by step Proppian analysis of the fairy tale. The functions that will be discussed will be in bold print for all the tales to be discussed in the paper. First we have our **Initial Situation**. There is a family with a king, queen and three sons. We have next a **Violation**. The mighty whirlwind swoops the queen away. Because of the **violation**, we have motivation for the tale to progress forward. A **Lack** has been established, for the family is without the queen. Ivan, our hero, travels endlessly to find any answer to the whereabouts of his mother. Propp calls this **Reconnaissance**. After the inquiry of an old man and three queens, he **Receives Information**. Now that he is in the diamond kingdom, his mother lets him in on a magical agent, the water of strength to help him defeat the Might Whirlwind. This is known as the **Donor Sequence**. Finally, Ivan and the Mighty Whirlwind engage in a **Struggle**. Ivan our hero defeats the Mighty Whirlwind, and the situation is **liquefied**, because the enslaved queen is free. However, problems arise with his deceitful brothers and he is prevented from returning to the kingdom. (**Another act of Villainy**). Propp would classify this tale as multiple-move. With the help of two former servants of the Mighty Whirlwind, Ivan **Returns**. His brothers meanwhile are the **False heroes**, and are planning to marry the Queens. Ivan requests to work for the shoemaker, and the shoemaker is presented with **Difficult Tasks**. Ivan has help and is able to **Resolve the Tasks**. Eventually, the King receives note of

what really happened and how the brothers deceived Ivan. Ivan gains **Recognition of heroism**, and the brother's **False Heroism is exposed**. The brothers are nearly punished (**punishment of the villain**). The end of course ends in the final function, a **Wedding**. (Propp, 1968 pp. 19-65).

From analyzing this tale Proppian style, the functions are in exact sequential order as he said they would be. He mentioned of course that not all the functions would be present, and indeed the tale did not include all of them. But no matter which ones were absent, the proper sequence of the functions was not disturbed. Let's take a look at a summary of another tale.

The Merchant's Daughter And The Maidservant

A wealthy merchant had a beautiful daughter. The merchant carried goods all around the province, and one day brought a gift to the king. The king heard of this merchant's daughter so he sent a letter to her saying she had to be ready to marry. The daughter was upset, but went anyways taking her maidservant along. The maidservant was full of spite and cut out the daughters' eyes and gave her a sleeping potion. The king married the maidservant but realized there was something strange about her-she was ignorant. Meanwhile the daughter recovered from her illness and met an old man who got her silk and velvet. She embroidered a crown for the old man to take to the palace. As for payment, he would receive one eye. The residing queen gave the man the daughters eye for payment of the crown. The merchant's daughter embroidered a second crown and again the little man went to the palace and asked for the same thing-another eye. The merchant's daughter got both her eyes back and was now able to see. The next day the maiden found herself in a glass house. The king went to see this and feasted there. He

invited the maiden back to the palace. She told the old man she would be dead the next day and instructed him to bury her remains. The king came back to visit but all he found was a garden where the maiden was buried. One day he found a handsome little boy standing there, so he took him back to the palace. The queen gave the little boy an egg (which was the maiden's heart in disguise) and he was overjoyed. The little boy led the king back to the place where the glass house was. The maiden was standing there, and told the king she was his true bride, and the maidservant cut her into pieces and tore her eyes out. When they returned to the palace, the king ordered the queen's eyes be cut out and her body dragged over the fields. The king and maiden lived happily ever after (Afanasev 1945 pp 327-31).

Again, this tale can be analyzed with the Proppian approach. The story begins with the initial situation with the merchant having a beautiful daughter and his gift to the king. The king is suffering from a **Lack** of a wife. The merchant's daughter now is on her way to marry the king and brings her maidservant along. The maidservant **violates** the maiden, by harming her and cutting out her eyes and marrying the king herself. She deceives the kingdom and pretends to be the maiden (**Trickery**). **Villainy** is bestowed upon our maiden, when she regains sight. Her body his cut up into several pieces and her heart is in the queen's possession. The king does not know what happened to the fair maiden who lived in a glass house. With the help of a little boy (who received an egg from the queen which was the maiden's heart) the king **is led to the whereabouts of her**. The egg served as a **magical agent**. The king learns the truth about his wife and orders that her eyes be cut out and dragged across the field. The queen's **punishment** is just for

her actions. It is implied at the end that the maiden and the king have a **wedding** of course (Propp, 1968 pp 19-65).

In order to practice and become stronger with the Proppian analysis, let's look at a summary from one last tale.

Dawn, Evening, and Midnight

A king had three incredibly beautiful daughters. However, he valued them more than anything in the world, so he locked them up. The princesses read in a book about a marvelous world that was out there. They pleaded their father to let them go out and explore. Finally, he agreed. While they were exploring the garden, a whirlwind seized them. No one was brave enough to help the poor king! A widow in town had three sons named Evening, Midnight, and Dawn. They heard of the king's tragedy and set off to help him. The king promised to feed and clothe their mother while they were on their journey. Evening, Dawn, and Midnight each had an unfortunate encounter with a little man who accused them of stealing his rams and invading his home. Dawn tied the little man up against the tree. The little man escaped eventually and his bloody footprints led the three boys down a hole, where Dawn ventured into. Inside the hole, Dawn found the three princesses, the youngest being in a copper castle, the middle one being in a silver kingdom and the eldest dwelled in a golden kingdom. Dawn battled multiple-headed dragons in each kingdom, (with the help of a magic potion for strength given by the youngest daughter) each dragon having 3x more heads than the last one. The princesses were finally rescued, and rolled their three kingdoms into eggs. The king was overjoyed and married his daughters to the men. At his death Dawn took the throne (Afanasev, 1945 pp 457-63).

This tale is similar in structure to the last two. Trebling occurs again as Dawn battles each of the dragons to save the princesses. We have the initial situation; the princesses want to see the world. **Absentation** is the resulting function- the princesses are away from their father. An act of **Villainy** has been committed; the princesses were transported away by a whirlwind. The three boys (**Mediation**) hear of the incident and tell the king that they will help him. The little man will eventually serve as an important role later on, even though he doesn't want to (**Donor Sequence**). After Dawn tied him to a tree, he escaped, but his bloody tracks led him to where the princesses were enslaved. The youngest princess gives Dawn a phial which will give him strength. (**Use of a Magical Object**). Dawn **struggles** with the villain, and the princesses are finally freed and roll their kingdoms up into eggs. (**Liquidation**) The three brothers arrive home again (**Return**) and the brothers are **Recognized**. The **Wedding** occurs and Dawn **ascends the throne** (Propp, 1968 pp 19-65).

Propp has named over thirty possible functions that exist in folk fairy tales, but some are more common than others, and some are very rare. **Branding** is one of those functions you don't find in every tale, but it is important too. **Branding** are either cuts, scars or bruises on the hero. They represent bravery in battle. Functions such as Villainy are imperative for the tale to proceed. We are always presented with an initial situation, and each tale usually has a quest that the future hero must go on to resolve the situation. Just like in the real world, there are certain things that we can't live without, like food, water, and air. The most important functions such as Villainy, Struggle, etc. are what feed the fairy tale; they are what give it life. They are present in every fairy tale, without them it wouldn't be a tale at all. These functions are what fuel the tale to grow and progress.

Just how Propp acted like a scientist and devised a theory for analyzing them, people learning about Propp and his ideas are scientists themselves. Just like in a laboratory experiment, we perform it multiple times, getting more precise and accurate each time we do it. In each tale that was analyzed, it became easier each time to point out specific functions. It's as if Propp's structuralism approach should have been obvious to others before him, since it was so easy to prove based on the guidelines he has presented. Just as every experiment has a final evaluation and conclusion, my conclusion is that the Proppian analysis of the fairy tales was very successful and was flawless. The sequence of the functions were never disrupted; just like if you were performing a surgery, you can't start operating on someone without putting them under anesthesia first-it just doesn't work. Also, when one function occurs, the other one has to occur. For example, if a donor comes into place and gives the future hero a magical object, which foreshadows the next function, that the hero will use the magical object to their benefit. Again, the laws of science come into play. The Law of Physics say whatever comes up, must go down. When speaking of the functions, if a certain function happens then another certain function will definitely happen.

Like nature, the folk fairy tale flows in a certain direction and certain events happen at specific times, and Vladimir Propp has made it possible for the literary world to realize this.

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