Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities (ISSN 0975-2935), Vol. IX, No. 2, 2017
DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v9n2.41
Full Text: http://rupkatha.com/V9/n2/v9n241.pdf

Review Article

The Thirty-One Functions in Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*: An Outline and Recent Trends in the Applicability of the Proppian Taxonomic Model

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Abstract
Vladimir Propp (1895–1970) was a Russian folklorist who analysed the basic plot components of selected Russian fairy tales in order to identify their simplest irreducible narrative elements. His *Morphology of the Folktale* was published in Russian in 1928. It was only after thirty-years that most European and American scholars read it in English translation in 1958. It not only represented a breakthrough in both folkloristics and morphology by influencing folklorists, linguists, anthropologists, and literary critics, but also his analysis was applied to all types of narratives be it folklore, literature, film, television series, theatre, games, mimes, cartoon strips, advertisements, dance forms, sports commentaries, film theory, news reports, story generation and interactive drama systems etc. Many attempts at structural analyses of various folklore genres have been made throughout the world since its appearance in English translation. In this paper we look at *Morphology of the Folktale,* by outlining the thirty-one functions that he proposed for the structural analysis of folktales and recent trends in the applicability of Proppian taxonomic model. It is also emphasised that Propp's taxonomic model disregards and excludes the reader and is unable to look beyond the surface structure thereby missing upon essential historical and contextual features.

Keywords: Folktales, functions, designation, symbol, morphology, fairy tales, folkloristics, structuralism.

Vladimir Propp (1895-1970) analysed many of Russian fairy tales in order to identify common themes within them. He broke down the fairy tales into thirty-one "functions" that comprised the structure of many of the fairy tales. His study was published as *Morphology of the Folktale* in 1928. First of all, the word "folktale" in the title of text is misleading. He basically analysed "fairy tales" and since fairy tales are considered to be a sub category of folktales in general, the word "folktales" stuck. Nonetheless, his work is applicable to not just folklore genres but all types of narratives. After the publication of *Morphology,* folklorists around the world realised that there is a unique element to all stories in the sense that they can be replicated. Same or similar stories, with identifiable plots, characters and situation can be found in many parts of the world. Propp's *Morphology* is therefore useful not only in understanding folktales but narratology in general.

He begins his work by shedding light on the word "morphology". He says that this term has been lifted from Botany which basically means study of various parts of a plant, their relationship to each other and to the whole. He says that he will attempt to do something similar with the study of fairy tales by studying their deep structures. He based his study on Aleksandr N. Afanás'ev collection of Russian Folktales (1957). This collection includes more than six

hundred folktales, of which Propp used only 102 tales (Number 50-Number 151. He also sheds light on the fact that most scholarly literature on the study of folktales is of informational rather than of an investigatory nature. He laments the lack of scientific research in this area where lots of folktales are available for investigation but most folklorists lack the scientific basis of analysis. He feels that the enigma of the similarity of tales throughout the world can be resolved by "correct morphological study. . . If we are incapable of breaking the tale into its components, we will not be able to make a correct comparison. And if we do not know how to compare, then how can we throw light upon, for instance, Indo-Egyptian relationships, or upon the relationships of the Greek fable to the Indian, etc.?" (Propp, 1968, p. 15).

Propp states that for the sake of comparison the component parts of fairy tales shall be separated by special methods; and then, the tales will be compared according to their components. He says, "The result will be a morphology (i.e., a description of the tale according to its component parts and the relationship of these components to each other and to the whole)" (Propp, 1968, p. 19). Propp begins his morphological method by comparing four events in folktales:

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

II. An old man gives a horse to Súcenko. The horse carries Súcenko away to another kingdom.

III. A Sorcerer gives a boat to Iván. The boat takes Iván away to another kingdom.

IV. A princess gives Iván a ring. The ring takes Iván away to another kingdom.

Thus, 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, 1968, p. 20).

He defines functions as, "Function is understood as an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action" (Propp, 1968, p. 21). Propp's structural model is based on the following criteria:

I. Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale.

II. The number of functions known to the fairy tale is limited.

III. The sequence of functions is always identical.

IV. All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure.

He enumerates the functions of the dramatis personae in the order dictated by the tale itself. For each function (presentation is number in Roman numerals) there is given: a brief summary of its essence, an abbreviated definition in one word and its conventional sign (a Greek letter for the first seven functions and Roman capitals for the rest, two functions also receive signs in place of a letter.) Propp's complete set of 'functions' is summarised below.

INITIAL SITUATION, (α) ("The Initial Situation" is no 'function' and accordingly receives no number).

I. One of the members of a family absents himself from home. (Definition: absentation. Designation: β.)

II. An interdiction is addressed to the hero. (Definition: interdiction. Designation: γ.)

III. The interdiction is violated. (Definition: violation. Designation: δ.)

IV. The hero is married and ascends the throne. (Definition: wedding. Designation: W.)

V. And so on

To put it in tabular form the thirty-function are:

Number	Designation	Definition	Example
1	β	Absentation	One of the members of a family absents himself from home.
2	γ	Interdiction	An interdiction is addressed to the hero.
3	δ	Violation	The interdiction is violated.
4	ε	Reconnaissance	The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance.
5	ζ	Delivery	The villain receives information about his victim
6	η	Trickery	The villain attempts to deceive his victim in order to take possession of him or of is belongings
7	θ	Complicity	Victim submits to deception and thereby unwittingly helps his enemy.
8	A	villainy	The villain causes harm or injury to a member of a family
8A	*a*	Lack	A member of a family lacks something or desires to have something.
9	B	Meditation	Misfortune or lack is made known; the hero is approached with a request or command; he is allowed to go or he is dispatched.
10	C	Beginning counteraction	The hero agrees to or decides upon counteraction.
11	↑	Departure	The hero leaves home.
12	D	First function of the Donor	The hero is tested, interrogated, attacked etc., which prepares the way for his receiving either a magical agent or a helper.

13	E	The hero's reaction	The hero reacts to the actions of the future Donor.
14	F	Provision of a magical agent	The hero acquires the use of a magical agent.
15	G	Guidance	Hero is led to the whereabouts of an object of search
16	H	Struggle	The hero and the villain join in direct combat
17	I	Branding	The hero is branded
18	J	Victory	The villain is defeated
19	K	Liquidation of Lack	The initial misfortune or lack is liquidated
20	↓	Return	The hero returns.
21	Pr	Pursuit	The hero is pursued
22	Rs	Rescue	Rescue of the hero from pursuit
23	o	Unrecognized arrival	Unrecognized, he arrives home or in another country
24	L	Unfounded claims	A false hero presents unfounded claims
25	M	Difficult task	A difficult task is proposed to the hero
26	N	Solution	The task is resolved
27	Q	Recognised	The hero is recognised.
28	Ex	Exposure	The false hero or villain is exposed
29	T	Transfiguration	The hero is given a new appearance
30	U	Punishment	The villain is punished
31	W	Wedding	The hero is married and ascends the throne

Propp (1968) also observes that there are several actions of tale heroes in individual cases which do not conform to any of the functions already mentioned. He says "Such cases are rare. They are either forms which cannot be understood without comparative material, or they are forms transferred from tales of other classes (anecdotes, legends, etc.). We define these as unclear elements and designate them with the sign X" (p. 64).

We notice that the signs assigned to each function are arbitrary. Apart from some signs that match their definitions like C = Counteraction, D = Donor and Pr = Pursuit, not all designations match their definition. This method of nomenclature is visually appealing but doing a morphological analysis of any folktale becomes tedious and cumbersome. Using the Proppian nomenclature, the structure of various folktales could be reduced to simple mathematical formulas, such as the following:

1. $\gamma^{1}\beta^{1}\delta^{1}A^{1}B^{4}C\uparrow I^{6}K^{1}\downarrow$
2. ABC↑DEFGHJIK↓PrRs^{o}LQ ExTUW

The inferences that Propp drew from observing the workings of the thirty-one functions are:

- The number of functions is limited. Only thirty-one functions are noted.
- The action of all tales included in the material develops within the limits of these functions.
- One function develops out of another with logical and artistic necessity.
- Not a single function excludes another.
- They all belong to a single axis and not to a number of axes.
- A large number of functions are arranged in pairs (prohibition-violation, reconnaissance-delivery, struggle-victory, pursuit-deliverance, etc.).
- Other functions may be arranged according to groups. Thus villainy, dispatch, decision for counteraction, and departure from home constitute the complication. Elements DEF also form something of a whole. Alongside these combinations there are individual functions (absentations, punishment, marriage, etc.).

In the fourth chapter Propp (1968) discusses the possibility of "double morphological meaning of a single function" (p. 66). Propp (1968) gives an example:

> "Iván asks a witch for a horse. She proposes that he select the best from a herd of identical colts. He chooses accurately and takes the horse. The action at the witch's house is a test of the hero by the donor, followed by the receipt of a magical agent. But in another tale (219), we see that the hero desires to wed the daughter of the water spirit who requires the hero to choose his bride from among twelve identical maidens. Can this case, as well, be defined as a donor's test? It is clear that in spite of the identical quality of the actions, we are confronted with a completely different element, namely, a difficult task connected with matchmaking. Assimilation of one form with another has taken place" (p. 66). Hence, he suggests that any morphological analysis should be governed by the principle of defining a "function *according to its consequences*" (Propp, 1968, p. 66).

It follows this taxonomic scheme that each folktale is a selection and combination of a limited stock of functions. This resulted in his formulation of the hypothesis that there is a fixed progressive and linear sequentiality of the functions. A tale always follows the same order of functions. Even if one or more functions are omitted, the order of the appearance of the functions remains the same. Thus, in the series 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 ,16 ,17 . . . 31 the same order is always followed. Some functions can be omitted but the order of the

functions remains the same. He makes an exception for tales in two or more moves (or parts), in which, each move constitutes a complete morphological unit.

Propp also proposed that functions can logically join together into certain spheres. These spheres correspond to their respective performers.

The following spheres of action are present in the tales:

I. The sphere of action of the villain. (The evil antagonist)

II. The sphere of action of the donor. (The provider of magical agent).

III. The sphere of action of the helper. The helpers are further divided into three sub categories:

   a. universal helpers capable of fulfilling (in certain ways) all five functions of the helper.

   b. partial helpers capable of fulfilling several functions. For example, various animals (other than the horse), spirits appearing out of rings, various tempters, etc.

   c. specific helpers, fulfilling only a single function. For example, the magic sword which serves to defeat the enemy.

IV. The sphere of action of a princess (a sought-for person) and of her father.

V. The sphere of action of the dispatcher.

VI. The sphere of action of the hero.

VII. The sphere of action of the false hero.

Propp claimed that the problem of the distribution of functions may be resolved on the plane of the problem concerning the distribution of the spheres of action among the characters. There are three possibilities: (a) the sphere of action corresponds to the character; (b) one character can be involved in several spheres of action (e.g. a character that acts in double roles such as donor and helper); (c) a single sphere of action is divided among several characters.

Vladimir Propp's *Morphology* became a reference point for Russian Formalism, Structuralism and the New Critics in the earlier twentieth century. Since its appearance in 1968 the Morphology has been analysed by: film scholars such as Wollen (1969); folklorists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963), Dundes (1964), Günay (1994); narratologists such as Barthes (1977), semioticians such as Greimas (1987), Todorov (1977), and so on.

Propp's assertion that hundreds of fairy tales can be reduced to a single structure has made many theorists to accept his hypothesis. However, several theorists have revised his work in the light of their own findings. For instance, Emma Kafalenos (1997) proposes an eleven function (selected from the thirty-one functions of prop) model that posits, "the fundamental stages of the narrative sequence, from the disruption of an equilibrium to the establishment of a new equilibrium" (Kafalenos, 1997, p. 472).

Propp's *Morphology* has been simultaneously celebrated as a classic text for his morphological approach and criticized for his disregard for the deep structures of the narratives. Nevertheless, his analysis provides a useful reference point in understanding narratology. Italian

semiotician Umberto Eco (1979) introduced the concept of open and closed texts into semiotics and literary theory. To put it simply, a closed text is one that leads to limited range of interpretation. An open text invites a diversity of readings. Eco (1979) argues that:

> Those texts that obsessively aim at arousing a precise response on the part of more or less precise empirical readers (be they children, soap-opera addicts, doctors, law-abiding citizens. Swingers, Presbyterians, farmers, middle-class women. scuba divers. effete snobs, or any other imaginable sociopsychological category) are in fact open to any possible 'aberrant' decoding, A text so immediately 'open' to every possible interpretation will be called a *closed* one (p. 8).

Propp's work influenced Eco whose work on Ian Fleming's (1908-1964) James Bond novels is now a classic. Eco showed how Fleming worked with similar set of "units" with his spy novels. Eco (1979) says,

> In *Casino Royale* there are already all the elements for the building of a machine that functions basically on a set of precise units governed by rigorous combinational rules. The presence of those rules explains and determines the success of the '007 saga'-a success which, singularly, has been due both to the mass consensus and to the appreciation of more sophisticated readers (p. 146).

A similar distinction was also implied by Roland Barthes in his essay From *Work to Text* (1971), where he makes a distinction between 'work', which is more or less passively consumed, and 'text', which requires practical collaboration on the part of the reader, thereby rendering the process of reading active and productive. Barthes's works were heavily influenced by Propp. In agreement with Levi-Strauss and Propp he says,

> Keeping simply to modern times, the Russian Formalists, Propp and Levi-Strauss have taught us to recognize the following dilemma: either a narrative is merely a rambling collection of events, in which case nothing can be said about it other than by referring back to the storyteller's (the author's) art, talent or genius - all mythical forms of chance1 - or else it shares with other narratives a common structure which is open to analysis, no matter how much patience its formulation requires. There is a world of difference between the most complex randomness and the most elementary combinatory scheme, and it is impossible to combine (to produce) a narrative without reference to an implicit system of units and rules (Barthes, 1971, p. 80-81).

Propp's work comes close to Eco's ideas of closed text, where the reader is faced with fixities of structures. One of the major criticisms of Propp's *Morphology* is the marginalised role of the reader in the interpretation of the text and the complete side-lining of the cultural and ideological ramifications that has led to the formation of the text in the first place.

In the introduction to the second edition to Morphology Alan Dundes, an eminent folklorist, comments on the limitations of Proppian approach:

> In this sense, pure formalistic structural analysis is probably every bit as sterile as motif-hunting and word-counting. . . However, the emphasis upon context is rather one of application of the results of structural analysis than one inherent in the paradigmatic approach. The problem is that Propp made no attempt to relate his extraordinary morphology to Russian (or Indo-European) culture as a whole. Clearly, structural analysis is not an end in itself! Rather it is a beginning, not an end. It is a powerful technique of descriptive ethnography inasmuch as it lays bare the essential form of the folkloristic text.

> But the form must ultimately be related to the culture or cultures in which it is found. In this sense, Propp's study is only a first step, albeit a giant one (Propp, 1968, pp. xii-xiii).

Dunde's words appear to be prophetic in the wake of the recent developments of the computational models in the study of folklore. On the one hand, the increase in the availability of digital archives of folklore genres, such as The Danish Folklore Archives, a significant amount of machine-readable material is available. On the other hand, a simultaneous growth in social media makes the traditional cultural forms accessible in a very large scale. This speaks for the need for "computational folkloristics" (Abello et al., 2012, p. 60).

As Abello et al. (2012) says,

> On the other hand, many of the research questions scholars want to address—generally inconceivable prior to wide-scale availability of large digital corpora—demand more targeted approaches than those developed for the biological and physical sciences, scientific co-citation networks, and e-commerce. Availability of substantial digital folklore corpora ultimately speaks of the need for computational folkloristics. . . Algorithmic methods for corpus study, including visually rich approaches that fuse statistical representations of the data with appropriate historical maps, as well as combinatorial graph analytical approaches (such as network-based role discovery).
>
> These methods augment, rather than supplant, earlier close-reading methods prevalent in folklore, allowing for a more consistent approach to the selection of study materials for a given research question. Ideally, one should be able to move seamlessly between a bird's-eye view of the overall study corpus and the complex interconnections among people, places, and artifacts that underpin the corpus at one end of the spectrum and the close reading that has characterized a great deal of prior folklore scholarship at the other (p. 62).

The Proppian template as a subject of machine learning can be of wider applicability if the morphology could be "automatically" extracted. Mark Alan Finlayson (2016) demonstrated computational system of narrative structure. In "Inferring Propp's Functions from Semantically Annotated text" (2016) Finlayson demonstrates a technique for learning Propp's functions from semantically annotated texts. Finlayson (2016) says,

> It would be of wide-ranging interest if a morphology could be automatically and reliably extracted from a given set of folktales. For folklorists and literary theorists, such a tool would be invaluable for comparison, indexing, and classification. For cultural anthropologists, it would provide a new technique for studying culture and its variations across time and space. For cultural psychologists, it would point the way to new experiments for investigating culture and its impact on thought. For cognitive scientists, it would serve as a model of understanding abstractions from texts, and the nature of narrative understanding. For computational linguists, it would be a step toward understanding the higher-level meaning of natural language. And for researchers in artificial intelligence and machine learning, it would represent an advance in our ability to extract deep structure from complex datasets. Each of these fields would naturally also find advances in the others of interest (pp. 55-56).

In a similar fashion María Arinbjarnar (2005) had proposed a computer game engine that dynamically creates new game plots for a murder mystery based game. Her work uses Proppian model to create a new plot based on a probability map of a typical murder mystery novel. She says that her plot generating engine "solves the issue of replayability as it guaranties that the player

always gets a new plot for each new game. It also tackles the problem of linearity as it is responsive to preset constraints instead of pre-authored narrations. This makes the plot generating engine adaptable to all kinds of game settings that require a plot to structure game play and game interaction. Simply by adapting the morphology to the respective story type and making the rules constraining the net at least partially responsive to the respective character played by the player the game engine is able to create new plots for the player to tackle" (Arinbjarnar, 2005, p. 3).

The work of Pablo Gervás, (2013) builds a system that generates instances of Russian folk tales and takes recourse to Propp's own view on how his morphology could be used for story generation. According to Propp (1968):

> In order to create a tale artificially, one may take any A, then one of the possible B's then a C↑, followed by absolutely any D, then an E, the one of the possible F's, then any G, and so on. In doing this, any elements may be dropped, or repeated three times, or repeated in various forms. If one, then distributes functions according to the dramatis personae of the tale's supply of by following one's own taste, these schemes come alive and become tales. Of course, one must also keep motivations, connections, and other auxiliary elements in mind" (pp. 111–112).

Gervás (2013) further adds that "One of the reasons that made Propp's work so attractive to researchers in story generation is that Propp actually describes how his formalism might be used for the generation of tales. Seen in this light, Propp's formalism constitutes a blue-print for a story generation system intended to reproduce a particular model of story, while strongly adhering to specific genre and domain conventions." (p. 107). No doubt, Propp's could not foresee the long lasting effect of his work which represented a preliminary first step in the direction of such studies of plot analysis.

Propp's *Morphology* has been revisited by academicians of all disciplines as a storehouse of inspirations owing to its potential in being used in wide range of narratives. Even though Propp's morphological framework has been found to be limited owing to its focus on the fixities of structures, the significance of his work extends far beyond the study of folktales and its power lies in its potentiality in being applied to various narratives thereby making it an important point of reference in the study of construction as well as interpretation of narratives. His concepts of functions continue to stimulate theoretical interests in scholars from a wide range of disciplines.

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