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Folktale

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Folktale

Abstract
Refers to oral narrative in general or to a particular GENRE of oral tales. As a general term folktale succeeds but does not replace the term fairy tale, which continues to be in literary and popular use. Fairy tale, in English at least since 1749, is a translation of the French conte de fée, a term that Contesse d'Aulnoy (Marie-Cathérine le Jumel de Barneville de la Motte) used in the title of her book published in 1697. Folktale is a translation of the German Volksmärchen, which appeared first in Volksmärchen der Deutschen (1782-1786), by Johann Karl August Musäus. The term, like other German compounds such as Volkslied (1778) and Volkskunde (1785), derives from Johann Gottfried von Herder’s thought, use, and coinage, particularly his formulation of the concept of das Volk. Folktale, hence is an oral narrative told by peasants, lower classes, or traditional people whose LITERACY, if existing, is minimal. In their verbal art these groups were thought to embody the spirit of a nation. Today the term extends to tales of groups with strong traditional, ethnic, or regional bases or their literary imitations.

Disciplines
Cultural History | Folklore | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Oral History
ature are the principal vehicles for the expression of national identity, pride, and spirit. Thus a quest for the roots of an authentic, indigenous national literature in folklore began in the eighteenth century with such powerfully influential compilations as Thomas Percy’s Reliques of Ancient English Poetry (1765) and Herder’s Volkslieder (1778–1779) and reached an apogee, perhaps, in Elias Lönnrot’s Kalevala (1835), the rallying symbol for Finnish national culture. The romantic aesthetic glorified folk songs, ballads, fairy tales, legends—the folk genres of poetry and prose—for their vigor, spontaneity, naturalness, emotional impact, and lack of contrivance, and the celebration of folk art has continued to be sustained by such aesthetic standards ever since. See also Folktales.

Interest in verbal art and folk Aesthetics has become one of the most vigorous sectors of contemporary development in folklore theory. An especially influential definition of folklore that highlights interest in the aesthetic dimension has been put forward by Dan Ben-Amos: “folklore is artistic communication in small groups,” that is, groups “in which people confront each other face to face and relate to each other directly.” See Interaction, Face-to-Face.

One line of analysis, now becoming increasingly influential, centers on the nature and conduct of performance, influenced by the insights of literary theory and symbolic anthropology. Here, the principal interest lies in what constitutes artfulness in speech and action, not only in the formalized genres of verbal art and the symbolic enactments of Ritual and Festival but also in the less marked ways of speaking and acting. Those who explore folklore as performance also study the functional role of artfulness in the conduct of social life: to enhance rhetorical efficacy, to elicit the participatory energies of an audience, as a medium of reflexivity or self-aggrandizement, as entertainment, and so on. Related to such performance-centered perspectives is Ethnopoetics, centrally concerned with the aesthetic patterning of oral literary forms and the problems of translating and rendering them in print in such a way that the artfulness of their oral performance is not lost. A still broader enterprise is Ethnoaesthetics, the ethnographic investigation of native systems of aesthetics in their own terms, as these condition the making, consumption, and interpretation of aesthetic productions.

All of these efforts are integrative, in the great intellectual tradition of folklore, resistant to intellectual disciplinary compartmentalization as folklore has always been since the first emergence of the concept more than two centuries ago. While the forms of folk expression and the discipline devoted to their study are continuously transformed, the symbolic construction of folklore remains a significant social force, energized by the dynamic processes of traditionalization, ideology, social thought, and the artfulness of everyday life.

See also Artifact; Ethnomusicology; Humor; Music, Folk and Traditional; Oral Culture; Oral Poetry; Riddle; Speech Play.


Richard Bauman

FOLKTALE

Refers to oral narrative in general or to a particular genre of oral tales. As a general term folk tale succeeds but does not replace the term fairy tale, which continues to be in literary and popular use. Fairy tale, in English at least since 1749, is a translation of the French conte de fée, a term that Comtesse d’Aulnoy (Marie-Cathérine le Jumel de Barneville de la Motte) used in the title of her book published in 1697. Folktales is a translation of the German Volksmärchen, which appeared first in Volksmärchen der Deutschen (1782–1786), by Johann Karl August Musäus. The term, like other German compounds such as Volkslied (1778) and Volkskunde (1785), derives from Johann Gottfried von Herder’s thought, use, and coinage, particularly his formulation of the concept of das Volk. Folktales, hence, is an oral narrative told by peasants, lower classes, or traditional people whose LITERACY, if existing, is minimal. In their verbal art these groups were thought to embody the spirit of a nation. Today the term extends to tales of groups with strong traditional, ethnic, or regional bases or their literary imitations.

As a particular genre, folktales, together with myth and legend, constitutes the primary European generic classification of oral narratives that has been adopted in scholarly discourse. These three genres are taken to differ from one another in their relation to cultural conceptions of truth and reality. Myth (from Greek mythos) is believed to be true, legend (from Latin legenda) purports to be true, and folklore is inherently untrue—only FICTION and fantasy. As a function of their distinctive relations to belief, these
three genres also differ from one another in terms of their narrative figures, times, and locations. Myths are about supernatural beings that exist beyond the boundaries of human time and space; legends involve identifiable personalities, dates, or places, yet their events have an extraordinary quality, often involving interaction between humans and supernatural beings or forces. In contrast, in the folktale the human characters, as well as the times and places, are unidentifiable in social, historic, or geographic terms, thus suspending reality and letting fantasy rule.

This division of oral narratives into myth, legend, and folktale is not universal. Societies differ in their categorizations of narratives, the choice of distinctive features that differentiate among them, and the number of categories they perceive and name. Cultural ideas, conventions, purposes, means, and meanings of narratives can potentially function as distinctive features of genres. These factors not only can vary from one culture to another but also can change over time within a single society.

Before the rise of the German term Märchen in the late eighteenth century and the acceptance of the term folktale in the English of the nineteenth century, speakers and writers in these languages used other terms to designate fictive oral tales. In German Fabel and later Mährlein served that purpose before Märchen and Volksmärchen replaced them; in English tale, fairy tale, or even old wives’ tale were in use. The equivalent of the last term served a similar purpose in classical Greece (as is suggested by PLATO in Lysis and Gorgias).

History of the Folktale

Essentially oral, folktales could not have left historical records until the introduction of literacy. The paradoxical dependence of oral tales on writing has resulted in four types of historical documentation of the folktale in which the variables are the tellers, the writers, and the literary contexts.

Intracultural recordings of folktales. With the emergence of literacy, scribes and sages, chroniclers and teachers committed to writing religious, philosophical, historical, and judicial texts. Within them they incorporated the oral literature of their societies, including folktales. However, these folktales are not characterized as fiction in the contexts in which they appear. On the contrary, their inclusion in documentation of other subjects depends on their cultural acceptance as historical reality rather than fiction. They offer sanctity to social values, institutions, or dynasties. Their fictive nature becomes apparent only anachronistically and comparatively. For example, the biblical story of David, who killed Goliath and married King Saul’s daughter to become a king himself, has the pattern of the dragon-slayer folktale variety (Types 300–359 in ANTI D’ARNE and STITH THOMPSON’s The Types of the Folktale, “The Ogre [Giant, Dragon, Devil, Cobold, etc.] Is Defeated”) detailing the hero’s rise from humble to royal status. In the Bible the narrative recounts the historical foundation of the Davidic dynasty, but comparative research could point to its folktale features.

Folktales in intercultural contacts. In the past as well as the present, contact between literate travelers and nonliterate natives has resulted in the recording of the latter’s folktale traditions. In their accounts the nonnative writers describe the tales, together with the histories, institutions, customs, or landscapes of the natives’ countries. For example, in the fifth century B.C.E. Herodotus included in his description of Egypt a rendition of the “Pharaoh Rahmpinsitus’ Thief” tale (Type 950, “Rahmpinsitus”). In modern times traders, missionaries, and anthropologists have recorded the folktales of the peoples they visited and studied and have made them available in print.

Literary writing of folktales. After the emergence of literacy, authors from different oral traditions documented in their own writings the occurrence of folktale themes and plots in specific languages and historical periods. If their own writing launched a tale into oral circulation, the written evidence could mark the earliest-known version of a tale. None of these literary texts resembles an oral narrative, nor do they purport to; nevertheless, even if they are relatively remote from their oral renditions and are currently available only as short stories, romances (see ROMANCE, THE), framed stories, or even dramas, they are milestones marking the history of particular folk stories. The tale of “The Two Brothers” (Type 318, “The Faithless Wife”), for example, was written down by a scribe called Ennana in Egypt around 1210 B.C.E. (New Kingdom); the apocryphal Book of Tobit (Types 505–508, “The Grateful Dead”) probably dated from the fourth century B.C.E., and the story of “Susanna” that is included in the apocryphal Daniel draws upon folk themes and later became part of the medieval folk-religious and religious literatures. Petronius, a first-century Roman writer, presents the realistic anecdote of the “Matron of Ephesus” (Type 1510) in a storytelling context in his Satyricon; and Apuleius, a second-century North African philosopher and rhetorician, inserts in his Metamorphoses the tale of “Amor and Psyche” (Type 425A, “The Monster [Animal] as Bridegroom”) as an old wives’ tale.

Writers used the storytelling situation as an artistic device for the presentation of narratives, some their own, some traditional. So framed are, for example, the Indian collection Pāñcakātantra (“The Five Chapters,” second century B.C.E. or 300 C.E.) and the Arabic 1001 Nights (ninth century). Later in Europe this literary device was used by Giovanni Boccaccio
(1313–1375) in the Decameron (ca. 1358) and by Geoffrey Chaucer (ca. 1342–1400) in The Canterbury Tales. The literary tradition of framed narratives as a method of folktales presentation continued up to the height of the Renaissance and the threshold of the Enlightenment. The Piacevili notti (1550–1553), by Gianfrancesco Straparola (ca. 1480-ca. 1537), was molded after Bocaccio’s Decameron, and the narratives in Il pentamerone (1634, 2nd ed. 1674), by Giambattista Basile (ca. 1575–1632), are presented as if told to a woman during the last five days of her pregnancy before the onset of labor. These last two collections include several tales that later were identified as part of the core of the European folk tale tradition. Whereas the early Asian narrative frames have a didactic, ethical purpose, the later European frames are concerned primarily with social entertainment.

Anthologies of tales that lacked a narrative frame had functional purposes: their writers intended them to be either rhetorical aids or written substitutes for storytelling entertainment. These editors did not necessarily draw on their oral traditions directly but culled the texts from former sources. These collections thus have a mnemonic function—as do current professional Japanese storytellers’ notebooks—to help memory that has declined with the increase of literacy. In the transition from oral to written texts, writers could make an additional transformation and verify the tales, which was done more than once to the Aesopian fables.

European medieval collections such as Gesta Romanorum (end of the thirteenth century, printed in 1473) contained tales from different written and oral sources. These collections had both entertainment and moralistic functions, similar to the Italian collection of tales from the same period—Cento novelle antiche—and the literary genre faraj, which flourished earlier in Arabic literature.

Modern authors who present folktales collections often are ideologically and/or nationally motivated; they resort to these tales as a symbol and resource of traditionality. However, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries some writers without scholarly responsibility changed, rewrote, and “improved” the oral texts to bring them up to the aesthetic standards of a reading audience and to meet readers’ expectations of their national rustic literature. Since the romantic period authors who have been influenced by oral tales have developed a distinct genre and literary tradition of artistic tales, Kunstmärchen, that is separate from and cannot become part of the history of the folktales. See also ROMANTICISM.

The deliberate recording of folktales. In Germany the work of the brothers Grimm, Jacob (1785–1863) and Wilhelm (1786–1859), established yet another reason for the recording of folktales: they were attributed a cultural literary import of their own. The tales were recorded by scholars who shared a native language with the tellers—the peasants and lower classes of their own society. Although historically the work of the brothers Grimm marks the inception of purposeful folktales recording by natives from natives and for natives, some of the literary writers in Italy and France were their precursors. For example, Basile’s Il pentamerone is written in a local Neapolitan dialect that attests to the author’s regard for local speech. However, these early collectors lacked the ideological motivation of the brothers Grimm and their followers concerning the recording of folktales.

The Grimms also affirmed the scholarly-literary goal of an accurate documentation of storytelling, reflecting the vocabulary, style, and narrative exposition of the oral narrators themselves. For many years this had been an ideal that could only be approximated rather than achieved—even the Grimms themselves deviated from their rule—but it became the guiding principle of folkloristic documentation of folktales. Modern recording techniques and awareness of ideational constraints now make this goal obtainable.

Research Methods

Theoretical speculations in the nineteenth century derived principally from comparative philology and comparative anthropology. On the one hand, because of the discovery of the connection between Indic and European languages, a single country—India—was thought to be the cradle of European folktales. On the other hand, the application of the theory of cultural evolution to folktales research led to the belief that the folktales emerged in a single cultural stage, one common to all peoples all over the world. The two theories are known as monogenesis and polygenesis. The research that evolved early in the twentieth century purported, in part, to resolve the conflict between these incompatible theories.

The historic-geographic method. The historic-geographic method purports to reconstruct, locate, and date the primary form of a tale through a systematic comparison of all its available written and oral versions. In the course of analysis the tale dissemination routes are delineated, and its subforms are established. The two fundamental concepts of the historic-geographic method are type and archetype (or Urform). Folklorist Stith Thompson defined the type as a “traditional tale that has an independent existence,” but in practice a tale type is not an existing story but a construct formulated in the course of classification of themes and episodes. Its correspondence to actual tales told around the world is variable, depending on the tradition in which the tale
is told and the tradition on which the typology is based. For example, European tales have a better fit with standard types than do African tales. When the correspondence between tales and types becomes too weak, a new typology is needed in order to carry out research effectively. A narrative text could be a fragment of a type, or it could combine episodes that belong to several types. On occasion folklorists refer to narrative types and consequently refer to such specific texts as fragments or conglomerates of types. A tale type is constructed inductively on the basis of all known versions and their variations, thus representing the possible thematic combinations and plot boundaries of tales that manifest similarities in spite of historical and cross-cultural differences.

Folklorists have long been aware of the fact that in oral tradition tales exist but types do not, yet they have maintained simultaneously that types have independent existence in tradition, and therefore their primary forms are describable and retrievable from among currently available versions. These primary forms are the tale archetypes. Consequently the fundamental theoretical difficulty that the historic-geographic method has had to confront is the weak link between its two basic concepts, type and archetype, often requiring reification of the former in order to recover the latter. The historic-geographic method incorporates principles of comparative philology. To a certain extent the concept of type corresponds to the notion of root—the ultimate constituent element common to all cognate words. In that respect type is the thematic core of a tale that is found in all its versions in different cultures and historical periods.

The relationship among the numerous versions that share a thematic core is based on three assumptions that are sometimes considered the “laws” of the dynamics of tales in society. First, tales are disseminated centrifugally, “like ripples in a pond,” independent of human migration, trade contacts, and linguistic affinities. Second, tales maintain their thematic similarities through a self-correcting principle that guides narrators toward median versions: each storyteller learns the tale from multiple sources, and the eventual synthesis then serves as one of the many sources for subsequent narrators. Third, innovations (mostly through errors and faulty memory) that trigger a positive response can be established in a community and generate a subtype of a tale.

**The morphological method.** The morphological method moves the historical quest from the particular tale to the genre in general, seeking to uncover the historical roots of the folktale. Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp (1895–1970), the chief proponent of this method, shifted folktale studies from a focus on change in a folktale over a period of time (diachronic analysis) to a focus on the elements in a folktale at a particular time (synchronic analysis). He proposed a morphological description of the folktale, examining the integration of narrative elements into the whole. This is in contrast to the historic-geographic method, which compares narrative elements across many versions of a single type.

The basic concepts in Propp’s morphological analysis are function and role. The functions are the fundamental components of a tale. Each function is an act of a character, described in terms of its significance for the tale’s course of action. Whereas the historic-geographic method considers acts and characters independently, the morphological method sees them in relation to each other and to the tale as a whole. The definition of each function is an abstract descriptive term: absence, violation, departure, and so forth, expressing the importance of a particular function to the general development of the plot. The folktale functions do not exceed thirty-one, following each other in a distinct sequence that characterizes the folktale as a genre. Often the functions occur as sets of logical pairs of cause and effect, action and consequence, such as pursuit and rescue, struggle and victory. The development from a conflict to its resolution is a move. A move can constitute a sequence of functions that encompasses a single episode or an entire tale.

The folktale characters fulfill seven roles: villain, donor, helper, princess, dispatcher, hero (seeker or victimized), and false hero. Each has a sphere of actions consisting of appropriate functions. When a single character is involved in several spheres of actions, the roles played change during the course of the story. The import of the morphological method exceeds its initial goal of historical inquiry or even conclusions that remain inevitably speculative. This method allows formal narrative regularities to be discovered and a story grammar to be formulated in many tales that lack an established literary text and theoretically can be transformed with each telling.

On this foundation other tale morphologists, such as Alan Dundes in the United States and Claude Brémont in France, have formulated methodological strategies and theoretical concepts that are only implicit in Propp’s own study, exploring in particular the ideas of pairing of functions, the notion of the move, and the structural semantics of the folktale. Both Dundes and Brémont maintain a syntagmatic principle of analysis, describing the tale in terms of the sequence of its elementary parts. A group of Russian morphologists, headed by Eleazar Meletinsky, has proposed a transformation of the morphological into a structural analysis of the folktale. Such a method builds on the semantic significance of the folktale functions and roles and analyzes them in terms of oppositional and paradigmatic sets that constitute the deeper structures of the tale. Actions and characters do not simply follow each other narratively but relate to each other in terms of their
values, meanings, and positions in the social structure, and the significance of their actions. See also STRUCTURALISM.

Quite apart from the trend in morphological studies of the folktales that Propp initiated is the formal description proposed by U.S. linguist William Labov. He defined the elementary part of a narrative not in terms of its significance but in terms of its sequential position and rhetorical function in the narrative. His analysis uses personal experience narratives, but it can be related to folktales morphology as well. Labov’s descriptive terms are abstraction, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, result or resolution, and coda.

The morphological method began with a historical quest but has developed into a method in its own right, the ultimate goal of which is the description of narrative grammar or grammars of the folktales told in different cultures by different peoples of different genders and ages.

The ethnographic method. The ethnographic method extends the goal of systematic description of the tale to its telling, exploring narrating in society and culture. In ethnographic research the holistic conception that is the basis for morphological analysis encompasses the entire system of storytelling in society. The major concepts of the ethnographic method are storyteller, performance, and context, thus grounding the narrative tradition of a culture in the verbal activity of its individual members and its social institutions. The storyteller is the vehicle for the articulation of a narrative tradition, for its rise and demise, for the creativity and plausibility in its delivery, and for its continuity and transformation. Storytellers differ from one another in age, gender, and verbal proficiency, and their tales and tellings are dependent on these variables. In addition, personal temperament and experience potentially affect their tales. In the past most studies have concentrated on the most proficient narrators in a community. However, in principle the ethnographic method requires the exploration of storytelling by community members who have not received, and perhaps rightly so, any public recognition for their narrative art.

Women’s tales often differ from men’s tales. The generic designation of old wives’ tales need not be derogatory but may be indicative of a thematic sphere that older women articulate best. Narrators of either gender vary their repertoire of tales as they move from childhood to adolescence and then to adulthood and old age, narrating culturally and developmentally age-appropriate tales. The focus on the storyteller implies that in spite of commonly shared aesthetic standards and cultural values, narrators differ in style, themes, vocabulary, and rhythm, as do writers in literate societies. See also LANGUAGE VARIETIES.

PERFORMANCE, as Richard Bauman defines it, is a communicative mode of artistic responsibility that

the storyteller assumes publicly as a teller of tales. It involves a shift from ordinary speaking into performance that involves dramatic use of gestures (see GESTURE), a higher frequency of formulaic and rhythmical language, as well as the possible use of instrumental accompaniment, interspersing PROSE with songs.

The nature of oral narrative performance is context dependent. Context consists of such variables as the listening community and the occasion for narration. The listening community could be children or peers of the narrator’s age and gender; itinerant listeners such as pilgrims or traveling companions; or a stable audience such as family, friends, and the native village population. The occasion could be formal entertainment associated with rites, such as a wake, or an informal aside in a daily CONVERSATION; it could take place in the market or at the bedside of a child. The tale text and its performance would vary accordingly.

The goal of the ethnographic method is to describe the total narrative potentialities and their actualizations in a single society. In practice, so far, most studies have concentrated on individual storytellers, their art, styles, and repertoires, or their performance in culturally appropriate occasions. The ethnographic approach particularizes the narrative tradition of a society, describing the general notion of tales of a nation (such as “Japanese tales” or “Zuni tales”) as a system of narratives that are dependent not only on shared AESTHETICS, common cultural values, social-historical experiences, and a common stock of themes and figures but even more so on individual narrators, their verbal proficiency, their performances, and the social institutions in which society enables them to tell stories.

Interpretation of Folktales

What do folktales mean? There have been countless interpretations of these narratives, as if fantasy without reason is senseless, and folktales cannot just be but must have MEANING. These explicative analyses interpret folktales in terms of a specific frame of reference, and in most cases the validity of such interpretations depends on the correspondence between the tales and the theoretical construct that serves as a key for their explanation.

Psychoanalytical interpretations. Probably the most controversial of these interpretive frameworks has been formulated by either Freudian (see FREUD, SIGMUND) or Jungian (see JUNG, CARL) psychoanalytic theory. Most likely, the objections to this kind of INTERPRETATION are based at least as much on its content as on its logic. Since PSYCHOANALYSIS, perhaps more than any other theory, emphasizes the sexual dimension of symbols, and since adults often have a conception of childhood as the age of sexual
innocence, it is difficult to accept an interpretation of tales told by and for children that dwells on sexuality. However, from psychoanalytic perspectives consciousness controls neither dreams nor folktales' fantasy, and therefore the two are an ideal match for mutual interpretation. The meanings of symbols in dreams can be explained in light of their significance in folktales, and folktales' fantasy makes sense in terms of its meaning in dreams. Thus conceived, the folktales is a cultural or even universal dream fantasy, reflecting emotions that individuals as well as society suppress because they are unable to confront directly the ambivalent feelings of children growing up within a family.

Although all psychoanalytic interpretations share these premises, they involve three distinct though not mutually exclusive modes: symbolic, dynamic, and equivalent. Symbolic analysis treats figures, objects, and actions in the folktales in terms of their significance in either Freudian or Jungian analytic theory. The tales become a symbolic code that represents concepts in either theory. Dynamic interpretations deal with the psychological effects the tales have or— in the words of Bruno Bettelheim's apt title—with the uses of enchantment. Accordingly, the traditionality of the folktales and their preoccupation with family figures enable children to experience their family-related fears in their fantasies and overcome them in reality. The equivalent interpretation draws on the variability of folktales themselves. The substitution of actions and figures that the narrators themselves make in different renditions of the same story offers a key, according to Dundes, to their symbolic significance. When a narrator substitutes "beheading" for "castrating" when talking to a more refined audience, an implicit interpretation is given to the verb used earlier.

Anthropological interpretation. Along with the recording of folktales of nonliterate cultures, anthropology has developed several paradigms for the interpretation and explanation of the significance of tales in society and their relation to culture. Folktales, along with other narrative genres, have complemented direct observation of and participation in the life of traditional peoples. These stories are the tales people tell to themselves about themselves, their fantasies, and their past. The tales evoke a responsive chord among the listeners only if they correspond to their worldview, their aesthetic standards, and the ethical values that were partially shaped by these tales to begin with. Hence folktales are valuable primary testimony about a society's view of itself. The validity of the interpretation of folktales depends on its agreement with observations of social conduct, analysis of language and religious symbols, and information about sociopolitical structure and history.

On the basis of these premises anthropological interpretations have taken three directions. First is the consideration of tales as a reflection of culture and history. The world of the imagination must draw on knowledge of reality, history, and a specific belief system. Hence it should be possible to read in, and not into, these tales the past and present life of the people who tell them and to consider the tales as a mirror of culture, a worldview, and modes of thought.

Often, however, direct observations of social life contrast with the folktales' popular themes. Peaceful people tell about wars, and tribes that enjoy family cohesion tell about the abandonment of children. In these cases folktales offer a reversed picture of actual conduct, and interpreting them often calls for the integration of psychoanalytic theory with anthropological observation and the suggestion that folktales reflect family tensions, unconscious wishes, and interpersonal dynamics that often stand in direct contrast to observed behavior. Hence in this second trend of anthropological interpretation, folktales, together with social acts, art forms, and rituals, might provide glimpses into the inner workings of the mind in traditional societies.

Third is the functional interpretation of folktales that purports to explain their significance in terms of a contribution to social and cultural cohesion. Functional interpretations depend on observation and inference. The consideration of the entertainment function of the folktales depends on ethnographic observation or examination of historical records concerning the occasions in which storytelling occurs in society. Similarly the idea that folktales have an educational function has its basis in observation and thematic analysis of the narrative. But the notion that folktales function as an outlet for psychological frustrations, ambivalences, and tensions incorporates psychoanalytic assumptions into anthropological interpretations, drawing on the assumed rather than the observed.

Literary interpretation. Often the applicability of psychological and anthropological interpretations has obscured the validity and import of the literary interpretations of tales. Furthermore, vestiges of nineteenth-century thought, according to which folktales represent the childhood of fiction and hence its primitive literary stage, impeded modern interpretive abilities that would have revealed the literariness of the folktales. The morphological method has made a partial contribution to literary analysis of the folktales, but since the method is concerned with narrative actions and characters in the abstract, divorced from their representation in language, its concepts and terms have but a limited application to literary interpretation of folktales. However, the necessary concepts for literary interpretation have been formulated in two contrasting trends: ETHNOPOETICS and folktales' criticism.
Ethnopoetics has emerged in recent years as a research trend and an interpretive mode that seeks the poetic principles according to which nonliterary societies create and perform their verbal art. Though not aimed at folktales in particular, ethnopoetic interpretation has been applied to folktales and has demonstrated its effectiveness in their analysis. Ethnopoetic interpretation builds on the locally defined genres as a frame to frame and communicate meanings; it explores the use of poetic imagery and cultural verbal symbols as a way to interpret emotions and ideas the narrators wish to convey artistically to their listening community, and it analyzes the linguistic means by which storytellers shift from speaking and (to use U.S. anthropologist Dell Hymes’s apt phrase) “break into performance.” See also ORAL POETRY.

Contrasted with ethnopoetic interpretation is folktales criticism. Although the two trends seek to explore the folktales’ own artistic merit, ethnopoetics is based on the group’s own terms, concepts, and linguistic phrasing in the texts, whereas folktales criticism, particularly as formulated by the Swiss folklorist Max Lüthi, proposes a set of critical concepts that would allow folktales interpretation on its own appropriate terms. Accordingly, Lüthi suggests that the folktales are one-dimensional, depthless, and abstract. The terms are taken from the critical vocabulary of modern art. Drawing on the historical connections between the emergence of modern abstract art and the European discovery of primitive art, Lüthi suggests that the very qualities that have been discerned in the visual expression of nonliterary societies are also intrinsic to their verbal art; they are the source of the folktales, its aesthetic value, and the foundation of its literary value.

Conclusions

Folktales are oral narratives. However, after centuries of interdependence on script and print their themes and figures have become an integral part of literate and now electronic society. The process began quite early. Sophocles drew on the oral traditions of his time in the writing of Oedipus the King, as did Shakespeare when he wrote The Taming of the Shrew, King Lear, and other plays. In modern literate societies, folktales themes have become the subjects of operas and ballets (see DANCE; OPERA), children’s stories, and animated movies. They are the references for cartoons and poetry alike. Some are concerned that folktales have all but disappeared from oral tradition. They have tried to renew the art of their telling in children’s library story hours and even special festivals, doing so in an exaggerated fashion, wishing to resuscitate a dying art. But neither print nor film has so far silenced the narrators in pubs and in the marketplace, in the moonlit village square or the pilgrimage van, or even on the airplane. Storytelling and folktales may change, but they do not go away. They thrive in the nonliterate societies of the world and survive even in the multimedia environment of the modern world. See also ORAL CULTURE.


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