Meaning of Folklore

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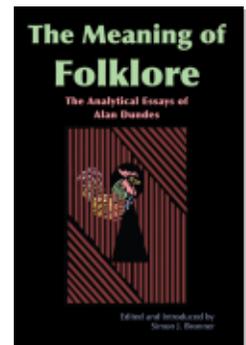
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The Study of Folklore in Literature and Culture: Identification and Interpretation

Introduction

At the time Dundes wrote this essay, during the 1960s, most scholars concerned with the study of folklore aligned with either literary or anthropological camps, a result of their educational background or organizational affiliation in a humanities or social science department. Dundes observed that what he called the "binary division" in the field had literary scholars, on one side, stressing the text and anthropologists, on the other, emphasizing context. In this seminal essay, Dundes proposed a folkloristic method that combined the pursuit of texts and contexts, and provided a foundation for a distinctive modern discipline of folkloristics.

To be sure, scholars had a methodological toolkit at their disposal, but it was often divided into approaches for specific genres, such as the historical-geographic literary method for finding the origin and distribution of folktales, or the ethnographic field observation of customs. While being an advocate of comparative approaches, Dundes recoiled at the comparative method associated with Victorian anthropologists, which treated folklore as "meaningless" survivals or relics of an evolutionary lower rung of a cultural ladder amidst humanity's upward climb toward "civilization." This natural history model adapted nineteenth-century evolutionary doctrine to propose a universal psychic unity, and a unilinear model of culture that all societies pass through (i.e., stages of savagery, barbarism, and civilization). The question that Dundes asked was whether an integrative approach could be established that connected various genres of folklore, and that had a culturally relative perspective which accounted for the emergent quality of folklore.

The folklorist, to Dundes, was a scholarly identity that signaled an overarching concern for the study of tradition, and emphasized the study of "text within context," past and present. In a rhetoric reminiscent of a homiletic jeremiad, Dundes bemoaned folklorists' literary-oriented collecting of texts as an end in itself. At the same time, he was critical of anthropological studies that did not account for textual evidence, or were narrowly focused on a single culture. While identification sounds straightforward, it is a demanding task to account for contextual and textural (or performance) information, in addition to recording texts. Dundes recognized that folklore research depends largely on field-collected

texts, so as to know the circumstances and communication of an item in folklore, but he also included working with historical and literary sources as a legitimate part of the identification stage. In this essay, the text was annotated using standard references, such as the tale-type index prepared first by Finnish scholar Antti Aarne (1910) and later revised by American folktale specialist Stith Thompson ([1928] 1961) and German literary academician Hans-Jörg Uther (2004). The annotation checked the item's provenance and distribution, and allowed Dundes to make statements to the effect that the tale uttered by his informant was European, probably French. Interpretation was necessary, he asserted, to draw meaning out of the material, and to gain academic respectability for the folkloristic enterprise. The interpretation he demonstrated here uses psychoanalytic and sociological theory, preceded by an analysis of aspects of the tradition: the nominal (e.g., the significance of French names in the Native American text), the symbolic (e.g., the equivalence of mother to sweetheart in *Ulysses*), and the functional (e.g., the action whereby Stephen's character kills the mother).

There is a narrative structure underpinning this method, suggesting that it has connections to a quest of discovery for hidden meaning. Dundes posited that a story basically proceeds from a lack (something missing) to liquidation of that lack (something found or rescued). Similarly, a folkloristic method, in the very least, comprises identification and interpretation in search of buried or disguised meaning that is not apparent from a literal reading. In addition, a narrative may contain other functions, such as an interdiction and violation, to extend the plot. So too, did Dundes imply that "analysis," an operation upon the data—and especially formal and content analyses—led to an interpretation that proposed a meaning.

Dundes's methodological purpose in this essay was to show the way that proper identification, folkloristically derived, was crucial to a convincing interpretation. By calling the conclusion "interpretation" rather than "explanation," Dundes suggested a possibility of meaning, instead of positing causation (such as a chronology of events). Dundes's interpreted meanings are frequently "latent," hidden beneath the literal surface details of the text, and are corroborated by reference to the context. Theoretically, Dundes's social and psychoanalytic meanings are not the only ones that could be posited, although he advocated for these kinds of inquiries because of their connections to cognitive patterning, which he hypothesized was a source for expressive culture.

Dundes's terms of "identification" and "interpretation" had a precedent in eminent folklorist Archer Taylor's essay "Folklore and the Student of Literature" ([1948] 1965), which Dundes reprinted in his textbook *The Study of Folklore* (1965b). In his essay, Taylor observed that a fundamental problem connecting folklore and literature "concerns the identification and interpretation of popular elements in a piece of literature." Taylor, however, was, to Dundes's way of thinking, stuck on literal aspects of texts rather than on uncovering the deeper psychological meanings and ethnographic considerations of context. For Taylor, "the description of gestures, the determination of the times and places in which they have been used, and their interpretation—such are the tasks in folklore."

In addition to constructing a folkloristic methodology, Dundes's research contributed to Joyce (1978b, 1962i), Oedipal myth (Dundes and Edmunds 1995), and Native American folklore studies (1964b, 1978c).

Dundes's methodological concerns are evident in "Metafolklore and Oral Literary Criticism" (1966c) and "The Symbolic Equivalence of Allomotifs: Towards a Method of Analyzing Folktales" (1984c), reprinted in this volume. Dundes gave an overview

of folkloristic study in "The American Concept of Folklore" (1966a) and "Ways of Studying Folklore" (1968c). For other statements on the formation of a distinctive folkloristic method, see Bronner 2006c; Abrahams 1979; Dorson 1972c, 1983; Fenton 1967; Georges and Jones 1995c; Goldberg 1984; Ketner 1973; Krohn 1971; Oring 1988, 1986; and Toelken 1996.

The Study of Folklore in Literature and Culture:
Identification and Interpretation

MANY OF THOSE OUTSIDE THE discipline of folklore and even some of those within tend to divide folklorists into literary or anthropological categories. With this binary division comes a related notion that each group of folklorists has its own methodology appropriate for its special interests; hence there is thought to be a method for studying folklore in literature and another method for studying folklore in culture. Looking at this dichotomy from the viewpoint of a professional folklorist, one can see that it is false; moreover it is a dichotomy whose unfortunate persistence has tended to divide unnecessarily scholars working on similar if not identical problems. The basic methodology of studying folklore in literature and studying folklore in culture is almost exactly the same; in other words, the discipline of folklore has its own methodology applying equally well to literary and cultural problems.

There are only two basic steps in the study of folklore in literature and in culture. The first step is objective and empirical; the second is subjective and speculative. The first might be termed identification and the second interpretation. Identification essentially consists of a search for similarities; interpretation depends upon the delineation of differences. The first task in studying an item is to show how it is like previously reported items, whereas the second is to show how it differs from previously reported items—and, hopefully, why it differs.

Professional folklorists who are usually skilled in the mechanics of identification are apt to criticize literary critics and cultural anthropologists for failing to properly identify folkloristic materials before commenting upon their use. And folklorists are quite right to do so. Naive analyses can result from inadequate or inaccurate identification. Plots of traditional tale types might be falsely attributed to individual writers; European themes in a European tale told by American Indians might be mistakenly considered to be aboriginal elements. However, folklorists themselves might be criticized for doing no more than identifying. Too many studies of folklore in literature consist of little more than reading novels for the motifs or the proverbs, and no attempt is made to evaluate how an author has used folkloristic elements and more specifically, how these folklore elements function in the particular literary work as a whole. Similarly, listing the European tales among the North American Indians does not in itself explain how the borrowed tale functions in its new environment. The concern of folklorists with identification has resulted in sterile study of folklore for folklore's sake and it is precisely this emphasis on text and neglect of context which estranged so many literary critics and cultural anthropologists. The text-without-context orientation is exemplified by both anthropological and literary folklore scholarship. Folklorists go into the field to return with texts collected without their cultural context; folklorists plunge into literary sources and emerge with dry lists of motifs or proverbs lifted from their literary context. The problem is that for many folklorists identification has become an end in itself instead of a means to the end of interpretation. Identification is only the beginning, only the first step. Folklorists who limit their analysis to identification

have stopped before asking any of the really important questions about their material. Until folklorists are prepared to address themselves to some of these questions, they must be resigned to living on the academic fringe in a peripheral discipline. As illustrations of how interpretation must follow initial identification in the study of folklore in context, the following brief discussion of a folktale found in James Joyce's *Ulysses* and a European tale found among the Prairie Band Potawatomi is offered.

In Joyce's *Ulysses,* one finds many different kinds of folklore, including tale types, nursery rhymes, tonguetwisters, folksongs, mnemonics, palindromes, and children's games.[1] Joyce's keen interest in folklore is further attested by his use of one of the minor characters, Haines, as an English folklorist come to Ireland to collect Irish folklore. Of all the examples of folklore in *Ulysses,* I have selected the riddle Stephen Dedalus asks his class to demonstrate the techniques of identification and interpretation. After reciting the opening formula and first line of a well known riddle for writing, Stephen asks his class this riddle:

> The cock crew
> The sky was blue:
> The bells in heaven
> Were striking eleven.
> 'Tis time for this poor soul
> To go to heaven.

The first riddle that Stephen recites in this situation—"Riddle me, riddle me, randy ro / My father gave me seeds to sow"—has been identified by scholars as the first part of riddle number 1063 in Archer Taylor's great compendium, *English Riddles from Oral Tradition,* and also has received interpretive examination (Weldon Thornton says, for example, that Stephen's suppression of the last part of the riddle may be an admission of his failure as a writer[2])—but so far as I know, no one has correctly identified the riddle Stephen puts to his class. Stephen's students are as much in the dark as the literary critics, though he gives them the answer, "the fox burying his grandmother under a hollybush." Work has been done on the problem of identification, since because of Joyce's frequent allusions to it throughout the book it is obviously of some importance to the interpretation of the book itself.[3] Several scholars have pointed out the similarity of Joyce's riddle with one in P. W. Joyce's *English as We Speak It in Ireland:*[4]

> Riddle me, riddle me right
> What did I see last night?
> The wind blew
> The cock crew,
> The bells of heaven
> Struck eleven.
> 'Tis time for my poor *sowl* to go to heaven.
> Answer: the fox burying his mother under a holly tree.

P. W. Joyce did not identify the riddle and he even commented upon what he called "the delightful inconsequences of riddle and answer." Yet a trained folklorist knows immediately that the riddle is closely related to a subtype of an international tale type, Aarne-Thompson 955, The Robber Bridegroom. In this subtype, which is very popular in Anglo-American oral tradition, the villainous suitor is frequently named Mr. Fox. Mr. Fox plans to do away with his betrothed and often the frightened girl, hidden in a tree, actually watches Mr. Fox

digging her grave-to-be. Later at a large gathering the girl recites the riddle describing the villain's actions and thus unmasks the villain and reveals his nefarious plot. The folklorist can tell from the riddle text alone that there is a reference to the whole folktale, but there is additional evidence that Joyce himself knew the tale. In the memorable Circe chapter, the mob shouts derisively at Bloom as a disgrace to Christian men, a vile hypocrite, and the like: "Lynch him! Roast him! He's as bad as Parnell was. Mr. Fox!"[5] This very last allusion is what T. S. Eliot calls an objective correlative in that the mob scene in the folktale is evoked, a scene in which all those present cry out at the evil designs of the wicked Mr. Fox. So much for the identification of Stephen's riddle. What about the interpretation?

All previous interpretations of the significance of the riddle and fox imagery have been made without the benefit of a correct initial identification. William M. Schutte, for example, suggests that Stephen thinks of himself as a fox in that the fox as the wily foe of the hounds employs the weapons of silence, exile, and cunning. Schutte also says that the fox must be Stephen who killed his mother without mercy and who cannot stop scratching at the ground where she is buried.[6] However, in terms of the folktale the fox only plans to kill his sweetheart; he does not actually commit the crime. The fox is judged by his thought rather than by his act. In the novel Stephen did not kill his mother, but he judges himself in thought: "I could not save her"; earlier Buck Mulligan had spoken of Stephen killing his mother.[7] Of even more interest is the fact that in most versions of the tale Mr. Fox's victim is his bride-to-be, whereas in the Joyce variant the fox's victim is a mother. If the mother is equivalent to a sweetheart, then this would be part of the extensive Oedipal aspect of Stephen's character which I have discussed elsewhere.[8] In this light, Stephen the fox kills his mother instead of marrying her as she expected. If the P. W. Joyce text of the riddle was the source for James Joyce, then Stephen's changing the mother of the original to grandmother in the answer he gives the class also points to Stephen's Oedipal problem, for it is clear that in Stephen's own mind the fox's victim is a mother, not a grandmother.

The folktale source also clarifies the puzzling association of the fox and Christ. "Christfox" is described as a "runaway in blighted treeforks."[9] The latter description suggests not only a crucifixion but also the striking scene in the tale when the girl victim, hiding in a tree, looks down upon Mr. Fox digging her grave. The accompanying phrase "women he won to him" could allude to the Bluebeard Mr. Fox plot as well as to Christ and His faithful females. Stephen as "Christfox" is both victim and villain, both innocent and guilty. The point is, however, that unless the reader understands Joyce's skillful use of the riddle from the tale type as an objective correlative, he cannot appreciate the paradox.

One could proceed in similar fashion to identify and interpret other folkloristic elements in *Ulysses*. For example, one might examine Joyce's ingenious adaption of the riddling question "Where was Moses when the light went out?"[10]—or the impact of Stephen's singing the anti-Semitic ballad "Sir Hugh" or "The Jew's Daughter" (Child 155) at that point in the novel when the Gentile Stephen has been invited to stay the night at the home of the Jew Bloom, who has a marriageable daughter;[11] but these and other examples would only demonstrate the point made here in the exegesis of the Fox riddle.

So the literary critic without proper knowledge of folklore can go wrong in identification and consequently in interpretation—but so can the anthropologist who knows only the basic tools of his discipline's trade. In April of 1963 I collected a fine example of folklore in culture from William Mzechteno, a 74-year-old Prairie Band Potawatomi in Lawrence, Kansas. Here is the raw story as I transcribed it, with myself identified by the initial D and my informant with the initial M.

M. Well there was once, there was a little boy. There was always a little boy, you know, and he had a name, his name was ah—[pause of six seconds' duration]—P'teejah. His name is P'teejah, and ah—

D. P'teejah?

M. Yeah. And he, he had a little, let's see now—[pause of three seconds' duration]—oh, he had a little tablecloth, you know. He can eat, you know, there's food every time he spreads that tablecloth on the ground or anywheres; he name many food, any kinda food he wants. It'd just appear on the, right on the tablecloth and was eaten. Well, all he had to do to clean up, you know, is just shake; everything was disappear, you know, into thin air. And he was goin' long the road one time, he met a soldier, he had a cap on. Uniform caps, you know, those soldiers wear. And the soldier was hungry. [The boy asked] "You got anything to eat?" [The soldier answered] "Oh, I got this hard bread." It's all he had. [The boy said] "Let's see that bread," he told him, "oh, that's hard, that's no good, not fit to cat," he told him. He throw it away. [The soldier said] "Mustn't do that, it's all I got to eat." (The boy said) "I'll give you something better," he told him. He pull out his tablecloth, and spread it on there, on the ground. "You name anything you want, ANYTHING! So he, ah, he named all he wanted to eat, Soldier, he was real hungry. "So, if you want any of that red water, you can have that too," he told him, whiskey.

D.   Red water?

M.   Yeah, they call it red water [laughing].

D.   Who called it red water?

M.   The Indian boy. They called it red water.

D.   Yeah?

M.   Yeah, 'cause it's red, you know. He didn't call it fire water.

D.   This is an Indian boy?

M.   Yeah, yeah, And, oh the soldier enjoyed his meal; he filled up, you know, and "Well, I got something to show you," he told me. He [the soldier] took his cap off, you know, and he threwed it on the ground and said, "I want four soldiers." And sure enough, four soldiers, there, well armed, stood there at attention. "It's pretty good," he [the boy] told him, "but you can go hungry with those four soldiers," he told him [laughing]. So, he put on his cap, you know. Course the soldiers disappeared, and he start to go and then the soldier said, "Say, little boy, how you like to trade? I'll give you this cap for that cloth." Naw, he wouldn't trade. "I'd go hungry without it." Oh, he got to thinking, you know. He said, "Well soldiers could get me something to eat," he thought, I guess. So, he traded, fair trade. He kept looking back, the little boy, you know. He had that little cap on. He thought about his tablecloth. He sure hated to lose it. So he, come to his mind, you know, "I'll get it." He took off [laughing] that cap and threwed it on the ground. "Four soldiers," he told 'em. Soldiers come up, you know, stood up right there and [he] says, "See that man goin' over there. He took my tablecloth away from me," he told 'em, "you go and git it [giggling laugh]." So they went [laughing] after that man; he fought 'em like every-thin'. "You belong to me," he said, "No [laughing] we belong to him over there," they said. So then he got his table-cloth and the boy got it back. And he had the cap too. That's where.

D. The boy was, you say, an Indian boy?

M. Yeah.

D. But the soldier was a white man.

M.   Yeah.

D.   So the Indian boy was fooling the white man.

M.   Yeah, [laughing] he put it on him.

D.   In a trade, too.

M.   Yeah, it was a fair trade but he was using his noodle [laughing].

D.   That's very nice. I didn't know it was an Indian boy.

M.   Yeah.

D.   I see.

M.   Yeah.

D.   Well, that's good, that's a fine story.

In order to analyze this tale in terms of Potawatomi culture, one must first identify the tale not as an indigenous Indian story, but as a European tale type. From the detail of the magic food-providing tablecloth (Motif D 1472.1.8), the professional folklorist can easily identify the tale as a version of tale type 569, The Knapsack, the Hat, and the Horn. Moreover, from internal evidence one can without difficulty demonstrate that the tale was borrowed originally from a French source. The Indian boy's name is P'teejah and the long pause before the utterance of the name shows the narrator's praiseworthy concern with getting the name right. P'teejah is a recognizable corruption of the French folktale character of Petit-Jean. As a matter of fact, Franz Boas in his essay "Romance Folk-Lore among American Indians" observed that the name of this French figure had been taken over by a number of American Indian groups.[12] Another trace of French culture is the allusion to "red water" which is probably wine although the narrator interpreted it as whiskey. So the tale has been identified: It is a borrowing from a French version of Aarne-Thompson tale type 569 and certainly not an aboriginal tale type. But the statement that it is a European tale does not answer such questions as what have the Potawatomi done with the tale?— how have they changed it and how do these changes tell us something about present-day Potawatomi culture? As a general rule European tales among American Indian groups can be used as indexes of acculturation. If the European tale is little changed, then it is probable that the borrowing Indian culture is waning if not defunct. If on the other hand the European tale is reworked and adapted to fit American Indian rather than European values, then it is more than likely that the American Indian culture in question is still a going concern. What about this Potawatomi tale?

First of all, the hero has been changed from a French character to an Indian boy. The narrator was questioned repeatedly about the identity of P'teejah and each time he insisted that P'teejah was an Indian boy. Secondly, the magic cap which belonged to the white soldier worked magic in American Indian symbolic terms rather than in European. Four soldiers were produced, not three; four is the ritual number of the Potawatomi as of most American Indian groups. Thus the magic soldier-producing hat (Motif D 1475.4) operates in American Indian terms and this in a sense is precisely what the whole tale does. In the tale the soldier offers to make a trade—protection in exchange for food, an exchange not unusual in the light of American colonial history. One senses that the exchange is unfair and that the adult European soldier is tricking the young Indian boy into giving up his only source of food. But in this folktale the Indian boy gets the best of the trade, the "fair trade" proposed by the white man. Although the hero does not appear to have planned his actions in advance, the narrator commented after telling the tale that the boy had "used his noodle," that is, he had out-thought the white man. In this tale of wish fulfillment, the

Indian boy has sufficient force to overpower the European soldier antagonist and to regain his original abundance of food.

In the cultural phenomenon which anthropologists term nativistic movements, it is common for the borrowing, dominated culture to dream of taking over the dominating culture's artifacts without the presence of members of that culture.[13] In this tale the Potawatomi has control of European artifacts; it is the Indian boy who is able to offer the soldier "red water" rather than soldier offering the Indian liquor—it is the Indian boy who uses the white man's object to defeat the white man. One can see even from these few comments why this particular European tale could easily have been accepted by Potawatomi raconteurs and audiences. A few deft changes made it a tale with considerable appeal for most Potawatomi. One can see from a "mistake" made by the narrator that he identified with the Indian boy. After the soldier finished eating, be told the boy he had something to show him. At this point, Mr. Mzechteno said "Well, I got something to show you," he told *me.* This use of "me" instead of "him" strongly suggests that the story was in some sense about Mr. Mzechteno and perhaps other Potawatomi. This detail plus the informant's frequent laughter demonstrate his enjoyment of and involvement with the tale.

The study of Joyce's use of a riddle and the study of a Potawatomi adaptation of a European tale appear to be distinct, but the methodology employed in both studies was the same. Identification was equally necessary. Failure to identify the Mr. Fox riddle in *Ulysses* could result in one's being unable to appreciate fully Joyce's use of this folkloristic element and accordingly limiting in a small way one's comprehension of the novel; failure to identify the Potawatomi tale as a standard European folktale might have made it difficult to determine just what changes the Potawatomi had introduced. One might have assumed, for example, that it was a Potawatomi idea to cast the dupe as a soldier, but in fact the soldier is frequently the dupe in European versions of the tale. But identification though necessary was only the first step, a prerequisite for interpretation. If it is true that folklorists too often identify without going on to interpret whereas literary critics and anthropologists interpret without first properly identifying folklore, then it seems obvious that some changes are needed. Either folklorists are going to have to educate their literary and anthropological colleagues in the mechanics of identifying folklore or they will have to undertake some of the problems of interpretation themselves. Ideally, both alternatives might be effected so that the study of folklore could become something more than a scholarly series of shreds and patches or a motley medley of beginnings without ends and ends without proper beginnings.

Notes

1. Page references to *Ulysses* are from the Modern Library edition. For a sample of Joyce's use of folksongs see Mabel P. Worthington, "Irish Folk Songs in Joyce's *Ulysses.*" *PMLA*, LXXI, 3 (June, 1956), 321–339.
2. Weldon Thornton, "An Allusion List for James Joyce's *Ulysses,* Part 2, 'Nestor,'" *James Joyce Quarterly*, I, 2 (Winter, 1964), 3.
3. *Ulysses,* 47, 60, 191, 288, 480, 544, 545, 557.
4. Scholars who have noted this source include Joseph Prescott, "Notes on Joyce's *Ulysses,*" *Modern Language Quarterly,* XIII, (1952), 149, and William M. Schutte, *Joyce and Shakespeare: A Study in the Meaning of* Ulysses (New Haven, 1957), 102, note 4.
5. *Ulysses,* 482.
6. Schutte, 103. W. Y. Tindall also remarks on Stephen's identification with the cunning fox,

but he equates the buried grandmother with Stephen's mother, the Church, and the Poor Old Woman (Ireland) in his *James Joyce: His Way of Interpreting the Modern World* (New York, 1950), 23.

7.   *Ulysses,* 46.

8.   Alan Dundes, "Re: Joyce—No in at the Womb," *Modern Fiction Studies*, VIII, 2 (Summer, 1962), 137–147.

9.   *Ulysses,* 191.

10. *Ulysses,* 754.

11. *Ulysses,* 674–676.

12. Franz Boas, *Race, Language and Culture* (New York, 1940), 517. See also Alanson Skinner, *The Mascoutens or Prairie Potawatomi Indians, Part III—Mythology and Folklore, Bulletin of the Public Museum of the City of Milwaukee*, VI, 3 (January, 1927), 400–402.

13. Sometimes the dominating culture's artifacts may be used as weapons against it. In this instance the Potawatomi have borrowed a European folktale and successfully employed it to attack Europeans. For another example of Potawatomi borrowing of European folktales in which the tales are used as vehicles for Indian superiority over whites, see Gary H. Gossen, "A Version of the Potawatomi Coon-Wolf Cycle: A Traditional Projection Screen for Acculturative Stress," *Search: Selected Studies by Undergraduate Honors Students at the University of Kansas*, IV (Spring, 1964), 8–54.