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Meaning of Folklore

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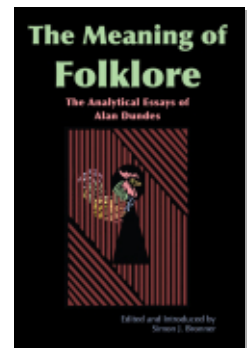
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The Symbolic Equivalence of Allomotifs: Towards a Method of Analyzing Folktales

FOLKTALES CONTAIN FANTASY AND MORE often than not, the fantasy is expressed through symbols. Folktale plots are filled with a wide variety of incredible magical transformations, objects and powers (cf. the D or Magic motifs in the *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*), and since no one has ever offered solid evidence of the actual existence of a self-grinding salt-mill (D 1601.21.1) or a magic object which answers for a fugitive (D 1611) and the like, it is not unreasonable to assume that such fictional creations might be symbols of some kind. Indeed, except for a few remaining fanatic literalists who might insist that folktales are ultimately historical and factual with respect to their portrayal of reality, most folk-tale scholars would presumably accept the notion that the content of folktales includes symbols. The important question is not really whether folktales are symbolic, but rather what are they symbolic of, and is there any rigorous and reliable methodology available to folklorists interested in investigating the symbolism of folktales. In sum, if there is a symbolic code in folktales, how can folklorists decipher this code?

In theory, it ought to be possible to devise a method which could be utilized to unlock the secrets of symbolism in folklore, and moreover unlock them in a way that is replicable. Two or more scholars should be able to apply the same methodology and produce the same results. The problem with nineteenth century solar mythologists and twentieth century Freudians is that typically the symbolic readings of folktales presented give the appearance of being arbitrary, subjective, and unsubstantiated. For a Freudian psychoanalyst, it is sometimes deemed sufficient if a single patient has offered a free association to a symbol or if some authority figure of the past (preferably Freud himself) has previously articulated a particular symbolic equation.

Freud well knew the dangers of interpreting symbols, and in the present context, it is significant that he specifically recognized the value of folkloristic data for the serious study of symbols. In a remarkable paper written in 1911 with the collaboration of David Ernst Oppenheim, a professor of classics interested in mythology, Freud examined a number of folktales in which dreams occurred. The tales for the most part were taken from the periodical *Anthropophyteia* (1904–1931) edited by folklorist F. S. Krauss which provided an important outlet for the obscene folklore collected by eminent folklorists around the turn of the century (and which could not be published in the conventional folklore journals). The dreams in these tales were “interpreted” either by characters in the tales or by the denouements of the plots. Freud was obviously delighted to discover that the penis and feces symbolism found in the folktale dreams corresponded almost exactly to his understandings of the symbolism found in the dreams of his patients. The congruence of folk and analytic dream symbol interpretations does not necessarily “prove” the validity of the interpretations. Both the folk and psychoanalysts could simply be in error. Still, the congruence noted by Freud and Oppenheim does require some explanation. The folk make their interpretations of symbols with no help from psychoanalytic theory and without any

favorite theory they are predisposed to champion. (It is more likely that psychoanalytic theory found inspiration and help from the folk. For example, the possible connection between toilet training and adult anal characteristics such as a concern for order and cleanliness was made in German and Austrian folklore long before Freud suggested the connection in 1908—cf. Dundes, 1981.)

The study by Freud and Oppenheim is a promising one, but it must be pointed out that the vast majority of folktales do not have explicit interpretations of the symbols presented in the tales. And so the question remains just how can folklorists decode the symbolic structure of folktales as well as other genres of folklore?

Most of the conventional approaches to the study of folktales are not concerned with the possible symbolic meanings of the tales. The comparative method, for example, seeks to assemble as many versions of a particular tale type as possible in order to make an educated guess at the tale's original form, age, and place of origin. The hypothetical construction of an archetype of each individual trait of the tale as well as the entire tale itself can be accomplished without paying any attention whatsoever to the symbolism of the traits. Similarly, the application of syntagmatic (Propp) or paradigmatic (Lévi-Strauss) structural analysis to a folktale can be carried out without regard for symbolic implications. Propp delineated a thirty-one function schemata for Aarne-Thompson tale types 300–749 without worrying the least little bit about the possible symbolism of individual functions or motifs. As the comparative folktale scholar desires to show the distribution of a tale through space and time, so the structuralist folktale scholar attempts to describe the underlying structure of a tale.

Students of the folktale have become accustomed to distinguishing the various different theoretical approaches to folktale, e.g., the Finnish (comparative) historic-geographic method, structural analysis, psychoanalysis, etc. One could easily get the mistaken notion that these approaches or methods are totally separate and distinct, and that they cannot be used together to attack a common problem. In fact, it sometimes appears that the practitioners of one theoretical approach are downright hostile to the others, as if the methods were somehow mutually exclusive. Thus if one is a good comparativist, he or she might see little value in structural or psychoanalytic studies. Similarly, a good structuralist might demean the painstaking work of the comparativist who carefully locates and compiles hundreds of versions of a given tale. Both comparativists and structuralists tend to dismiss the psychoanalytic readings of folktales—if they bother to comment on them at all—as being merely the doctrinaire applications of a Procrustean a priori theory. While it is unlikely that any scholar would object to the idea of synthesizing these and other approaches, it seems that intellectual synthesis is more an ideal than a common practice.

I should like to propose a method for the analysis of folktale symbolism which depends upon a combination of the comparative method and structuralist theory with implications for psychoanalytic theory. I believe the methodology, if valid, can be employed anywhere in the world—though my particular examples shall be drawn from the European folktale tradition. And I further suggest that the method can be applied to any genre of folklore, not just folktales.

First of all, what is needed is a large number of versions of a tale type. A single version of a tale is insufficient to carry out the methodology set forth here. In fact, the more versions of a tale available, the more reliable the results of the methodology are likely to be. Since we have a substantial number of completed comparative studies of folktales (cf. the tale types in the Aarne-Thompson tale type index which have double asterisked bibliographical references), we have ample materials with which to test the method.

Secondly, we need to take (Proppian) structural analysis into account. We understand from Propp that folktales consist of sequential sets of functions (which I have relabelled motifemes). Although Propp was not concerned to name the various motifs which could fulfill a given function (motifeme) slot, I have suggested (1962) that such motifs be termed allomotifs. Thus for any given motifemic slot in a folk-tale, there would presumably be two or more alternative motifs, that is, allomotifs, which might occur. If we have a full-fledged comparative study of a tale available, we probably have a good idea of what the range of allomotifs are for any one motifeme. Please note again that the concept of allomotif cannot be applied if one has just a single version of a tale type. One would need at least two versions to demonstrate the variation within a motifeme and probably a great many more than two versions to ascertain the full gamut of allomotif variation.

Now what has this to do with the analysis of folktale symbolism? Propp in his 1928 *Morphology* was only interested in the functional (or structural) equivalence of what I have termed allomotifs. But I submit that the equivalence may be symbolic as well as functional. So if motif A and motif B both fulfill the same motifeme in a tale type, I think we are justified in assuming that in some sense the folk consider them mutually substitutable. A may be used in place of B and B may be used in place of A. This is so even if any individual storyteller knows only one of the alternatives. In a study (1980B) of Aarne-Thompson tale type 570, the Rabbit-Herd, I have pointed out that if the hero fails to herd the rabbits, the king may punish him in a number of ways including throwing the hero into a snake pit, cutting off his head, or cutting off the hero's male organ. These alternatives occur in different versions of the tale. The point is that they are allomotifs. The plot is advanced equally well with any of them. What this suggests, among other things, however, is that cutting off the hero's head is regarded as the equivalent of cutting off the hero's phallus. One of Vance Randolph's Ozark informants actually knew both allomotifs, using decapitation for mixed audiences of males and females while reserving emasculation for audiences of males only (cf. Randolph, 1977:47).

From a theoretical point of view, if A and B are allomotifs of a given motifeme, it is true that we do not necessarily know whether A is a symbol of B or B is a symbol of A. The combination of comparative materials with structuralism tells us only that $A = B$ or $B = A$. On the other hand, the folklorist is perfectly free to investigate the allomotifs in his or her sample in cultural context to determine if one or more are taboo or sensitive in nature. The fact that an informant uses one motif for an audience of men and women, and another for an audience of men only would argue that the latter was the tabooed alternative. It would thus be perfectly logical to assume—on the basis of the allomotif evidence from Aarne-Thompson tale type 570—that decapitation was a symbolic form of cutting off the phallus. Please note that this equation comes from folklore data, from the folk so to speak, not from some folklorist blindly committed to psychoanalytic theory. It may be that both the folk and psychoanalysis are wrong, that decapitation is not symbolic emasculation, but the fact that folklore contains the symbolic equation independent of and apart from psychoanalytic interpretations remains to be explained.

A symbolic equation having once been established through allomotif comparison in folktales may well be manifested in other folklore genres. For example, if cutting off a head = cutting off a phallus, one might reasonably expect to find other instances of a head-phallus equation. One thinks of the pretended obscene riddle: What sticks out of a man's pajamas so far that one can hang a hat on it. Answer: his head. The same equation is found in traditional custom. Among the gamut of apotropaic methods employed to ward off the

evil eye are: displaying overtly phallic amulets, making the *fica* gesture, touching one's genitals, and spitting (Dundes, 1980A:99, 111). How can we explain why the act of spitting should be a part of this paradigm? Well, if head equals phallus, then spitting equals ejaculation, and saliva equals semen. Not only does the initial consonant cluster "sp" occur in both sputum and sperm, but there is the further corroborative metaphorical evidence from the idiom "spitten image" (or "spit and image" or "spitting image") used in English to refer to a child who greatly resembles his father. The symbolic equivalence is also attested in such jokes as the two twins conversing in the womb. One asks the other, "Who's that bald-headed guy that comes in here every night and spits in my eye?" (Legman, 1968:584).

From the same methodological viewpoint, we can see that eyes and breasts are equivalent allomotifs in Aarne-Thompson tale type 706B, *Present to the Lover*. Maiden sends to her lecherous lover (brother) her eyes (hands, breasts) which he has admired (cf. Dundes, 1980A:113). It should be emphasized that eyes may symbolize referents other than breasts. For example, in Aarne-Thompson tale type 1331, *The Covetous and the Envious*, the plot summary is as follows: Of two envious men one is given the power of fulfilling any wish, on condition that the other shall receive double. He wishes he may lose an eye. In a version of the tale type reported from New York City in 1936 (Legman 1975:611), we find "A Jew in heaven is told that whatever he asks for, Hitler will get double. He asks that one of his testicles be removed." So eyes and testicles can be equivalent allomotifs—which may explain why in Irish mythology there is motif J 229.12, *Prisoners given choice between emasculation and blinding*, and also why Oedipus blinds himself as self-imposed punishment for the sexual crime of incest (cf. Dundes, 1962:102). Some students of symbolism in folklore have wrongly assumed that a given object always had one, fixed, standard symbolic meaning. The data suggest otherwise. One of the methodological points of this exercise is precisely to indicate that there may be different sets of allomotifical equivalences for a given item or image, even in the same culture. The eye, for instance, can also be metaphorically understood as an anus (cf. Dundes, 1980A:127). If we apply the same method proposed here for folktales to traditional idioms, we can easily document this symbolic equation. In Anglo-American folk speech, one can express an emphatic negative response to a proposition by saying either "In a pig's eye" or "In a pig's ass" (Cohen and Germano 1980:65). Since the alternatives are equivalent, eye = ass. Again, it is important to keep in mind that it is not a question of applying some a priori rigid theory to unlock the symbolic code of folklore. It is rather the folklore itself which provides the necessary key. By assembling many versions of an item of folklore (the comparative method) and by examining the variation occurring within the structure of the item (structuralism), one can determine sets of allomotifical equivalents. The folklore data suggest then that in the Euro-American cultures in which the above tales or idioms occur, eyes may be symbols of breasts or testicles and a single eye may be a symbol of the anus.

The method briefly proposed here can be applied within a single culture assuming that variation within a given motifemic slot occurs. In such a context, one has the possibility of delineating a culture-specific or culturally relative set of symbolic equations. On the other hand, to the extent that a particular tale type is found in more than one culture—and few folktales are limited in distribution to one culture—one may employ the method to investigate the difficult question of cross-cultural symbolic equivalents. Please keep in mind that cross-cultural symbolic equivalents are not the same thing as universal symbols. For one thing, if few tales are found in just one culture, even fewer may be said to have worldwide distribution. Most folktales have very definite limited distribution patterns.

Thus there are Indo-European (and Semitic) folktales, African/African-American folktales, Asian-American Indian tales, etc. Accordingly, a listing of all the allomotifs occurring in a motifemic slot in an Indo-European folktale would yield only symbolic equivalences for Indo-European cultures. From such data, it would be methodologically incorrect to assume the universality of such equivalences. One cannot assert that eyes = breasts in all cultures without presenting specific evidence of the existence of such an equation in all cultures, not an easy task.

The methodology does permit, however, the application of the comparative method to the question of the distribution of symbolic equations. One could identify equations from allomotif sets in one cultural context and then compare these results with symbolic equations derived from allomotif sets in other cultures. By such comparisons, one could address the longstanding issue of the distribution of symbols with some data rather than sheer speculation.

There is a final methodological technique which is made possible through the identification of symbolic equivalences. In terms of our mathematical metaphor, if we establish that $A = B$ and we already know that $B = C$, then we might be able to suggest that $A = C$. In Genesis (2:21–23), God “caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept; and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof.” From this rib, God fashioned Eve. The creation of the first woman from Man’s rib, Motif A 1275.1, is not a very widespread myth, though it is a puzzling one. What is the significance of God’s removing one of Adam’s bones to create Eve? Is there a symbolic element here? I believe it is the “bonelessness” of a portion of a man’s anatomy which is critical. For one thing, the human phallus, unlike the phalluses of man’s primate relatives, does not have a bone. Man is missing the *os baculum*. Early man could easily have noticed the human male lacked a bone in an area of his body in contrast to many of the animals he slaughtered for food. Yet how can we prove that the phallus was ever perceived as a boneless object? An answer comes from riddles and traditional metaphors. A Rigveda text begins: “His stout one appeared in front hanging down as a boneless shank” while an Exeter Book riddle text reads “I have heard of something which increases in a corner, swelling and rising, lifting the covers. A proud-minded maid seized that boneless thing with her hands; with a garment the prince’s daughter covered the swelling thing” (Watkins, 1978). Thus both literally and figuratively, the missing bone in man clearly refers to his phallus. Having identified this symbolic equation ($A = B$), we may look at the account in Genesis ($B = C$) in a new light. In a male chauvinist creation myth in which biological reality is reversed so that man creates woman from his body, it is perfectly appropriate for man to use his genital organ (Just as woman uses hers in giving birth). The “rib” translation of “Bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh” is very likely a euphemistic one.

I am convinced that the methodological combination of the comparative method and structuralism can be applied in any culture. Unfortunately, there have been relatively few full-fledged comparative studies of Australian aboriginal tale types or African tale types undertaken. Hence it is not easy to determine the allomotif variation for tales in these areas. On the other hand, once such comparative investigations have been carried out, one could apply the method set forth here. Similarly, I believe the method can be applied to genres other than folktale. Once such studies have been completed, it may be possible to either validate or reject symbolic equations proposed in the past by psychoanalysts and others. It is time that folklorists themselves made an attempt to better understand the symbolic nature of the materials they have collected and classified for so long.

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EARTH-DIVER: CREATION OF THE MYTHOPOEIC MALE

(*Postscript*) Madness in Method
Plus a Plea for Projective Inversion in Myth

Introduction

Dundes's 1962 interpretation of the widespread "earth-diver" myth (motif A 812) as an example of the projection, in fantasy, of male "pregnancy envy" and anal birth, set the stage for several other applications of this post-Freudian idea to folklore, religion, and media. The essay was also significant for its critical survey of previous anthropological, and Freudian and Jungian, approaches to myth. He found that psychoanalytical approaches tended to overstate the universality of symbols, while most anthropological approaches were too literal in reading myths or too culturally specific in their contextual accounts. Both approaches were guilty of confusing genres (between folktales and myths, particularly) and overlooking variants that folklorists had identified. Dundes proposed a modern folkloristic approach, focusing on symbolic patterning in cross-cultural variants while questioning, for the purposes of interpretation, the particular symbols and specific projections that were culturally relative. As Dundes stated, "insofar as conditions of early childhood may vary from culture to culture, so adult projective systems, including myth, may also vary." The key psychoanalytic premise he applied was developmental and gendered: "There is a relationship, perhaps causal, perhaps only correlational, between the initial conditions of infancy and early childhood (with respect to parent-child relations, sibling relations, etc.) and adult projective systems, which include myth" (1984b).

The story of this essay's writing reveals the challenges that Dundes faced in proposing psychoanalytic approaches. In *Bloody Mary in the Mirror*, he recalled a class on South American Indian folklore at Indiana University, led by professor Erminie Wheeler-Voegelin. In response to a report by a fellow student on the plot—involving a series of animals diving into primeval floodwaters to scoop up mud, which then expands magically to form the earth—Dundes commented that "it was a classic case of male anal-erotic creativity (in which males attempt to compete with females by creating from a substance produced by their bodies)" (2002a). Dundes remembered being ridiculed by his classmates, but he persisted nonetheless, and prepared the present paper, which was originally

published in the premier flagship journal of the American Anthropological Association (1962b). The essay has not been without its critics, but it has stood, through the years, as an exemplary post-Freudian interpretation of myth.

The criticisms came first from anthropological circles. From a qualitative viewpoint, they questioned his cross-cultural comparisons (scorned as a “shreds and patches” approach) without field experience in the cultures. Quantitatively, they critiqued Dundes for drawing conclusions without a broader statistical inventory of variants (see Parker 1963). Dundes responded that for a hypothetical symbolic interpretation of a myth, having hundreds more examples would not make the interpretation any more correct. Regarding the particularistic cultural test, Dundes’s argument was “that since in *all* cultures, there are *some* restrictions governing the infant’s handling of his faeces, there may well be symbolic substitutes for faeces” (1963). Since Dundes’s application of pregnancy envy is often viewed as a feminist psychoanalytic interpretation, it may seem surprising that another criticism applied to Dundes’s work was the tendency of male ethnographers to “talk about creation through excrement and other effluvia as well as to enact elaborate male rites of *couvade* and not to address childbirth” (Weigle 1987). Dundes’s answer was that ethnographers generally, and male ethnographers particularly, were resistant to psychoanalytic ideas of compensatory creativity as a result of mental blocks against this symbolism.

Dundes was still commenting on issues of method thirty-seven years after his “earth-diver” essay came out. In “Madness in Method” (1996a), given as a postscript to this chapter, Dundes summarized much of his mythological analysis, using the concept of projective systems (particularly inversions), as well as male birth-envy. He continued his line of thinking about womb envy in an examination of the biblical myths of Genesis, and editorialized that they caused “social damage and mental anguish of Western women.” Public intellectuals, such as Joseph Campbell, popularized finding Jungian archetypes in myth. Dundes countered by addressing the differences between Jungian and Freudian interpretations, and criticized the Jungian assumption of the existence of precultural, pan-human archetypes, which are manifested in myths. (For more critical comment on the Campbellian craze, see Dundes 2005c). In the “Madness in Method” essay, Dundes echoed his early concern that myths (which he defined as “sacred narratives explaining how the world and mankind came to be in their present form” that are told as true and set in the postcreation era) were confused with folktales (“narratives understood to be fictional). “Mythologists,” unlike folklorists, narrowly considered their material without reference to variants and comparable genres. Thus the present essays are significant not only for their definition of myth and an interpretative approach to it, but also for describing the disciplinary distinction of a folklorist.