Folk Narratology: Propp’s Improved Actants and Functions

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Abstract: Folktales have a world of their own but exploring this world has always been hard due in part to the insufficiency of methods in this field. Although there have been many critics commenting on and at the same time reanalyzing Proppian pioneering formula to theorize a method of their own, this field of study still needs close scrutiny. The focus of this paper is to analyze and evaluate related methods in this field to come up with a theoretical framework, which may be employed in investigating folktale figures and functions in literary works. The narratologists discussed range from Vladimir Propp, as the pioneering theorist in this field, toward his French counterpart Algirdas Julien Greimas, and their American counterpart Emma Kafalenos. The study culminates in Brecht’s famous epigram as the rallying cry for familiarizing oneself with different theories, which seem to result in more methodical studies.

Keywords: Actants, C-Actant, Dramatis Personae, Folktales, Functions, Greimas, Kafalenos, Narratology, Propp.

I. Introduction

Narratology, the English translation of the French term narratologie, the science of narrative or the structuralist study of the narratives, introduced by Tzvetan Todorov in *Grammaire du Décaméron* (1969), is “a modern theory associated chiefly with European Structuralism” and Russian Formalism (Baldick 166). Since then, the science of narratology underwent massive changes “due to the works of such narratologists as Bremond, Greimas, Barthes, and Genette” (Onodera 13). In addition, the roots of the theories of aforementioned critics can be traced in previous theories as that of “Propp’s study of Russian folktales” and also “the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss, who had revaluated the Russian formalism” of the early 1900s (13).

In the mid-twentieth century a considerable concern was felt “with the general theory and practice of narratives” that gave rise to the antithesis of traditional narratology. The modern narratology is a term used since 1969, the starting point of which seems to be the Russian formalist Vladimir (Iakovlevich) Propp’s inspirational book *Morphology of the Folktale* (Prince 37; Baldick 166; Abrams 181). As one of the leading experts in the field of storytelling, Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* did much to turn attention to the modern narratology. Morphology, in the general sense of the word, refers to the structure and the way something is formed. Morphology of narratives or folklorist morphology is the study of structure and form of the folktales upon which Propp bases his study of Russian fairytales. As he remarks:

The word “morphology” means the study of forms. In botany, the term means the study of the component parts of a plant, of their relationship to each other and to the whole—in other words, the study of a plant’s structure. But what about the “morphology of the folktale”? Scarcely anyone has thought about the possibility of such concept. (xxv).

Thus, the book “with its theory of narrative functions” might be considered the origin of many other influential models of narrative analysis, resulting from reanalysis of Propp’s formula (Baldick 166) (emphasis added). This reanalysis led to diverse opinions the only common ground between which is treating the narrative in an unconventional way. Although the generality of the structures proposed by different narratologists is the same, some dramatic differences can be found:

Narratologists, accordingly, do not treat a narrative in the traditional way…. but as a systematic and purely formal construction. The general undertaking is to determine the rules, or codes of composition… and also to formulate the “grammar” of narrative in terms of structures and narrative formulas that recur in many stories. (Abrams 181).

Consequently, the tale morphologists are duty-bound to study the tale by breaking it into its component parts and attempting to find an underlying structure relating the fairy tale context works. In other words, the internal relation of the component parts of a narrative paves the way for unfolding different layers of meaning, while without these structures the text before us, in the structuralists’ viewpoint, is void of meaning. By following this line and by dissecting the tale into its component parts, the combination of these elements to form a complete
tale can be investigated. Moreover, “grounds for comparison with other tales on the basis of a universal structural model” overcomes the difficulty experienced by the early narratologists in comparing the tales (Brooks xiii).

II. Some Tale Morphologists

The attempt at analyzing “core elements and ideas at play in the narratological modeling of narrative” was made as early as Greek ancient times (Meister 4). Plato in The Republic and Aristotle in The Poetics proposed narratological standpoints which was later considered as the precursors of such theorists as Genette and Friedemann. Such narratologists as Propp, Gérard Genette, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Tzvetan Todorov and Jonathan Culler to name a few, “equated narrative with literary narrative thus leaving the research on the folktale to specialists” (Meister 5). These narratologists shared common goals in analyzing the narrative structures and theorizing a sequence true for all narratives; a goal that is apparently pursued by all these theorists right to the end.

This systematic study led to different theories, concepts and procedures in that some of the theorists, in spite of confessing Propp’s brilliant theory, provided a reanalysis of his theory by offering a reduction of other critics’ reductions. In their view points, Propp’s model cuts short in analyzing some aspects of the fairy tales, while they try to expand the theory to avoid its “purely sequential, mono-linear logic of action” (Meister 6). In general, Russian Formalism and Proppian Morphology paved the way for the modern narratology, while “Saussrean tradition as well as the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss” attempted to simplify Propp’s thirty-one-point system (Meister 8).

What most of the folk narratologists endeavor to accomplish, seems to give different types of narrative a separate entity in a way that a fairy tale, for instance, stops being a mere fantasy for children. The famous happy ending of the fairy tale is no more considered “the childish escape from harsh reality, but represents deep wisdom and the Divine Comedy of the Soul” (Davidson 157). Consequently and gradually, the attention turns to folk tale literature as one of the “great” kinds by which Sale meant a type of literature “that do and can do what no other kind of literature does” (Sale 372). The result of the international recognition of this revolutionary literary theory is facing with serious challenges that must be dealt with.

The aforementioned scholars are not the only ones who are in quest of investigating the underlying structures and elements of narratives. There have been and there are other skillful scholars in this field, but for the sake of clarity and conciseness this thesis limits itself to some examples of the representative narratologists who more or less deal with theorizing a method applicable to folktales. The list commences with Propp as the pioneer of modern narratology and his French counterpart Greimas and ends with his American counterpart Kafalenos. This chapter serves as a quest for finding a theoretical framework for studying folktale figures and functions in literary works.

A. Vladimir Tákovlevich Propp

Not very long ago, the lame excuse of “insufficiency of material” given by Speránskij attempted to blind researchers to the needs of tale analysis (Propp 3). Propp, the Russian structuralist, however, was acutely aware of the basic flaws in the methods of investigation than the amount of material. Consequently, as the idea is also supported by Onodera, Propp “tried to discover general rule of the tale by a morphological approach” which later made him as one of the prominent structuralists who focused on narratology, particularly narrative structure as reflected in fairy tales (15). For developing his theory, he had four fundamental tenets:

(1) Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale.
(2) The number of functions known to the fairy tale is limited.
(3) The sequence of functions is always identical.
(4) All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure (21-23).

Based on these four tenets and by analyzing 100 Russian magic inspired folktales, in his seminal book Morphology of the Folktales (1928), Propp asserts that all fairy tales are based on 31 fixed elements or what he calls, narrative functions occurring in a given sequence. As Propp discusses, these narrative functions of the dramatis personae “are basic components of the tale” defined in “a single word”, while the place of the action is significant in the course of narration (21). Function, action or event, is a keyword in Propp’s system and is “defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action” (21). Furthermore, “the (uniform) sequence of functions is always identical” and never accidental since “the absence of certain function does not distort “the order of the rest” (Propp 22). To sum up, with the help of actants and functions, Propp draws the conclusion that “all fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure” (23).

Propp’s theory identifies actants as the seven characters available to fairytale tellers. They are, as Propp believes them to be; “hero, false hero, villain, donor, helper, dispatcher and a sought-for person” (79-80). All these characters could be resolved into seven broad actants in the story by means of which predictable patterns or

1 Manuel Aguirre shares Proppian notion in that “all fairy tales are constructed on the basis of one single strict string of actions or events called functions” (2). (qd. in <http://www.northangerlibrary.com/documentos/ >).
functions are enacted to further the plot of the story. Each dramatis persona has a sphere of action that exactly corresponds to his role but sometimes “one character is involved in several spheres of action … or a single sphere of action is distributed among several characters” (80-81). 

Propppian actants exerted influence upon Greimas who proposed his theory of actants using the even number of six, subtracting one from the seven actants of Proppian theory. From Propp’s theoretical world, words such as how, and by whom are omitted; the single action although insignificant by its own, gains significance when in relation to other elements.

Propppian theory is underestimated by Lévi-Strauss in that “the linear sequential order (utilized by Propp)” is deemed “obvious and superficial” by this French theorist (Dundes 40). Furthermore, it is worth asserting that the applicability of Proppian theory to long non-linear works can be refuted. In case of some longs works as The Faerie Queene, Proppian actants that are either black or white can be found but as for functions, applying 31 of them to a long classic work is a demanding job. Among the theorists to offer a reduction of Proppian reductions, Waller Hastings and Paul Veiko Vehvilainen can be named who have simplified “Propp’s thirty-one functions into a five-point system” that like Propp’s functions “always occurs in the same order” (Bressler 113). Dyck supports the idea and claims that “Vehvilainen found that the majority of the tales he studied” includes five basic actions, appearing in exactly the same order as Propp’s functions (197). The actions proposed by Hastings and Vehvilainen appear to encompass the 31 unchangeable elements theorized by Propp. The reduction of 31 actions come under the headings of 1:

I. A lack of something exists.
II. This lack forces the hero to go on a quest to eliminate the lack.
III. During the quest, the hero encounters a magical helper.
IV. This helper is subjected to one or more tests.
V. After passing the test(s), the hero receives a reward.

Although the flaw spotted in Proppian theory of functions seem solved by these theorists’ reduction to five functions, another problem of unavailability of an authentic source explaining these critics' method is faced. Vehvilainen’s attempt at a method is elaborated in his doctoral thesis entitled “The Swedish Folktale: A Structural Analysis” (1964) which is vaguely unavailable for readers. Thus, the continued investigation brings one to the method of another prominent theorist dealing more or less with folktales.

B. Algirdas Julien Greimas (1917-1992)

Influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure’s “concept of difference or the notion of binary oppositions” (Trifonas 1100), and Propp’s theory of actants, and tied to Russian Formalism through both of these theorists, this critic also offers “a reduction of Lévi-Strauss’s reduction of Propp’s actants and functions” (Katilius-boydstun 6). Algirdas Julien Greimas (1917-1992) had the “concept of narrativity and the descriptive procedures of narratology at the very core of his semiotic” (Perron 527). For highlighting the considerable influence exerted on his theories, Greimas’ confession is noteworthy:

My theoretical genius, if I can so call it, was a form of “bricolage.” I took a little Lévi-Strauss and added some Propp. This is what I call the first stage of semiotics. When I examined Propp’s work on folktale and analyzed it, I noticed that four principal segments could be identified, that these segments could be paired, and that two of these pairs made up a Lévi-Straussian schema. It was necessary to go one step further. (541)

Although, the theories of the aforementioned critics provided Greimas with a priceless narratological background information, it should not be neglected that “these concepts were not simply borrowed but were modified, transformed, problematized, and redefined” by Greimas (Perron 527). Considered mainly as a semiotician, Greimas has written on a wide variety of subjects which are directly or indirectly related to the domain of “the Russian folktale and the folktale in general” (Perron 523). Greimas as the founder of Paris school, proposes a reduction of Lévi-Strauss’ reduction of Propp’s actants and functions arranged in two pairs. As a case in point of binary opposition is Greimas’s claim that human beings perceive the world in terms of “opposed pairs” (Hawkes 70; Tyson 224). He formed his theory of the binary system based on “Saussure’s and Jakobson’s concept of the fundamental signifying role of binary opposition” (Hawkes 69).

Greimas developed his theory of dramatis personae based on Proppian actants. He argues that “these binary oppositions form the basis of a deep-lying ‘actantial model’‘modèle actantial’ from which an even number is generated (Hawkes 89). Thus, a difference is spotted between these two theories of actantial model. Greimas proposed the formula of actants using the even number of six, subtracting one from the seven actants of Proppian theory. Greimas’ six fundamental actants are paired in Subject/Object, Sender/Receiver, Helper/Opponent. Further investigation of Greimassien actants shows a striking similarities to Proppian ones. As a result, it turned out that one character may serve as the manifestation of two or more actants and several actants may fulfill the tasks of one single actant, which is the same conclusion Propp arrived at (Hawkes 71; Baldick 3). His actantial model is followed:

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1 It is qtd. in Bressler 113, emphasis original.
He also summarized Proppian thirty-one functions into a system of binarity first limited into twenty words that are “no easier to handle than the first” (Greimas, *Structural 225*). While he believes that Greimas criticized Proppian functions in that “what Propp called a function was not a function but a sentence”, with no elaborations on the flaw in considering functions as sentences (Greimas, “On Meaning” 542). He subsequently proposed his theory of functions in single words than sentences. In the first place, the present study approves of limiting the number of functions. Since, applying 31 functions to a tale is really a demanding meticulous task, while it seems to be operative for short texts. In the second place, it is worthy to claim that although 31 functions are so great a number, 6 functions summarized in words are not only too general but simplification of simplifications. By doing so, and having the intention of representing a scientific structuralism, Greimas has seemingly turned the theories into a rather mathematical formula by coming up with syntax “that functioned more or less as a calculus” (Greimas, “On Meaning” 539-43) (emphasis added).

Furthermore, what bestows meaning upon Proppian functions is the place of the function in the course of narration. For instance, a wedding can be considered as a “reward only if it occurs at the end of a sequence or of the tale” (5). Thus, Propp further argues that “identical acts can have different meanings, and vice versa” (21). But in the Greimassian sense of binary oppositions several functions are summarized in one word and their place in the sequential narration is of little importance. It seems that the underlying structure that both Greimas and Propp arrived at is the same, but Greimassian structure does not create a meaningful story- in the Proppian sense of the word “meaning”- when elaboration on the place and time of occurrence is avoided. It is worth noting that Propp placed a considerable emphasis on functions while he believed that functions are the single significant component parts of a tale. Greimas shifts this emphasis from functions to “actors (… characters or actants), items (objects), and incidents as minimal units of narrative analysis” (Trifonas 1104). It can be said that Greimas believed in the “intuitive” nature of Propp’s model, which could be “broken down into parts, into important sequences that were covered over by the model” (Greimas, “On Meaning” 543).

It can be concluded that, although Greimas’ theory has its own flaws the main one is generalizing and oversimplifying Proppian notions, he shared the Proppian basic tenet that the deep structure are versus the surface structure and even though those stories seem different on the surface, a ‘structural’ analysis reveals that they spring from a common ‘grammar’ (Hawkes 70). Furthermore, the conclusion Greimas reaches after analyzing the discourse seems to be directly influenced by Eugene Vance in whose book he showed that different “ways of understanding the world” is of high importance (Greimas, “On Meaning” 548). Greimas uses his formula to generalize the issues posed in the world of wonder tale to the real world and addressed larger questions regarding humanity than a mere fantasy tale. He considers the idea of quest proposed in the literary world as “more or less man’s quest for meaning of life” either individual or collective (Greimas, “On Meaning” 543). He also used his system to analyze the works of Georges Bernanos and to draw the generalized conclusion about the author’s life “a double-edged sword of joy and pain” traceable in the life of the author who has faced “the conflict between life and death” (Tyson 226).

Greimas develops his theory from both Propp and Lévi-Strauss. However, Lévi-Strauss’ criticism is devoted mostly to myths than folktales. In spite of paying special attention to unfolding the story, Lévi-Strauss goes beyond this aim and believes that “If we consider only the syntagmatic sequence-that is, the unfolding of the story-it appears incoherent and very arbitrary in construction” (Dundes 40-41). Hence, discovering these layers turns to be Propp’s pursued priceless goal, but Lévi-Strauss’ unfinished one, while he understates syntagmatic sequence as being meaningless and interchangeable with the paradigmatic one. It can be stated that, Propp for proposing the theory of the structure of the fairy tales endeavors to analyze the Russian tales, one by one, each of which is regarded as an autonomous entity bearing its own significance and meaning. But, it is likely that Lévi-Strauss arrives at the same goal of finding an underlying paradigm by comparing the structure of narratives to language or the life of human beings. It is the same view point Dundes had when considering Lévi-Strauss as “much more of a comparativist than a structuralist” (41). Another reason that the study of the folktales might not draw upon Lévi-Strauss’ theory is that he seems “consistent, that is, consistently mistaken” in theorizing a structuralist method for the mixed genre of myths/tales (Dundes 45). The search toward finding a serviceable model of Proppian functions lead ones to Emma Kafalenos.

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1 For more elaborations see Greimas, *Structural xlii.*
C. Emma Kafalenos

In her paper entitled “Functions after Propp: Words to Talk about How We Read Narrative” (1996), Kafalenos reduces Proppian functions into a more serviceable method. By having Propp’s main tenets and definitions in mind, Kafalenos states that “the definitions I provide for each function are developed from Propp’s” for the sake of theorizing “a smaller and more serviceable model that contains eleven functions” 1 (Kafalenos, “Functions after Propp” 470). What makes the present study to include Kafalenos’ eleven-point system, is that the fairytales on which she applies her method for explaining her theory respond perfectly to this approach.

In her viewpoint, “a function names a position in an abstract causal sequence” (Narrative Causalities 3), which is in line with Propp’s attention to “sequence of functions [which] is always identical” (Propp 22). For this very reason she remains faithful to Proppian sequence of functions, which is ignored by Greimas in his reductions of functions. As it is implied, her model encompasses the C-actant’s quest, a character who “plays the same role of protagonist” during all steps of his journey (emphasis original) (Kafalenos, Narrative Causalities 10). Moving from the initial to the final equilibrium, the method traces C-actant’s progression in a causal sequence. Illustration of her model may reveal more:

Initial equilibrium (not a function)
A (or a) disruptive event (or reevaluation of a situation)
B request that someone alleviate A (or a)
C decision by C-actant 8 to attempt to alleviate A (or a)
C’ C-actant’s initial act to alleviate A (or a)
D C-actant is tested
E C-actant responds to test
F C-actant acquires empowerment
G C-actant arrives at the place, or time, for H
H C-actant’s primary action to alleviate A (or a)
I (or I_{eq}) success (or failure) of H
K equilibrium

Fig 2. Kafalenos’ Reduction of Proppian Functions

Kafalenos’ model by responding to the readers’ need to interpret some incidents subjectively is also well-known in reader-response approaches. Putting it on other words, for focusing on the deep meaning of allegorical, Post-modern or even nonlinear plot formulas, Kafalenos’ model seem preferable to Proppian functions, seemingly applicable to short narratives, i.e. folktales. Furthermore, in comparing Proppian theory to Kafalenos’ one, it is worth noting that a repetition of Kafalenos’ functions might occur is long works. For instance, when the hero faces several tests, functions D, E, F are repeated several times. Kafalenos uses the subscript “n” “to indicate that this series of events is repeated an indeterminate number of times” (Kafalenos, Narrative Casualties 18). Her theory is influenced by Todorov’s narrative sequence. She “adopt[s] Todorov's definition as a definition of the narrative sequence”, by which she means “one or more or a part of a move from equilibrium to disruption to equilibrium” (Kafalenos, “Functions after Propp” 472). The same as Greimas’ theory which is a bricolage of the theories of Propp and Lévi-Strauss, Kafalenos’ theory is a bricolage of the theories of Propp and Todorov; “My theory of functions is developed from ideas, which I see as interrelated, introduced by narrative theorists Tzvetan Todorov and Vladimir Propp” (Narrative 4). However, by paying special attention to the content of the story and paying heed to reader’s response, her method seems different from her Proppian Todorvian sources of inspiration.

III. Conclusion and Discussion

In conclusion, it can be highlighted that Propp provided the basis for narratology, and other critics tried their hands at improving his theory. Lévi-Strauss might have started the same study on myth before or at the same time as Propp and they seemingly have published their work unaware of the other ones pre-occupation with the same issue. But, as elaborated, Lévi-Strauss seems to treat the narratives as if the narratives are equivalent of language. Moreover, Greimas’ reduction of Proppian functions, in spite of intending to follow the same path as Propp, is more linguistic than literature based. However, his special emphasis in going one step further from the surface of meaning of literary works, toward a content-based theory puts him among the theorists whose actantial model facilitates a study of folk tale figures. In sharp contrast to Lévi-Strauss and Greimas, Hastings’s and Vehvilainen’s five point system remain secure of interference of their critics in the original Proppian

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1 In her paper published in 1997, Kafalenos discerns 11 functions containing 6 key and 5 minor functions. But with a subtle difference, in her book published in 2006, 5 major and 5 minor functions are explained. She subtracts function K or “new equilibrium” from her book.
2 Pronounced “C Prime” (Kafalenos, Narrative Casualties 10).
formula. Due to the unavailability of their discussions, the paper is led to Kafalenos’ model of Proppian functions that remains faithful to its source of inspiration. To sum up it can be said that a theoretical framework can be derived from the aforementioned theories. For investigating folk tale figures in literary works and to find their counterparts in folktales, Proppian seven dramatis persona along with Greimas’ actantial model provides the study with both a form-conscious and a content-based analysis of the characters. Moreover, Kafalenos’ functions seem promising in revealing both the surface and deep meaning of the structure of literary works to be compared with folktales. It might seem tempting to choose one of these theories and apply it to literary works to disclose their folk tale layers but a combination of theories seem to reveal more about the folk tale layers than the application of one theory reveals. Moreover, it is worth noting that every pioneering theory has its own flaws, while the passage of time makes succeeding theories that derive from it more methodical. In line with the mentioned standpoint, Brecht states that “a man with one theory is lost. He needs several of them, or lots! He should stuff them in his pockets like newspapers”. 

IV. References

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1 It is qtd. in Fuegi 174.