



Terence Patrick Murphy

The Fairytale and Plot Structure

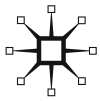


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*For Joon-kyoung and
for James and Nigel,
when they get a little bigger*

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Preface

He had likewise projected; but at what part of his life is not known, a work to shew how small a quantity of REAL FICTION there is in the world; and that the same images, with very little variation, have served all the authors who have ever written (1245–46).

James Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (1791)

In evolutionary biology, the genotype refers to the inherited instructions an organism carries within its genetic code; these instructions may be used to understand how a particular organism is specialized within the group to which it belongs.¹ By extension, the plot genotype represents the functional structure or compositional schema of a particular fairytale.² What makes the concept of greater importance is that other types of short fiction, including the majority of Hollywood movie screenplays, work with these plot genotypes. The aim of this book is to offer a detailed exploration of this important concept.

From the time of Aristotle on, literary theorists have been interested in the subject of how the plots of stories are organized. In *The Poetics*, Aristotle put forward the crucial idea that a plot must possess sufficient amplitude to allow a probable or necessary succession of particular actions to produce a significant change in the fortune of the main character.³ Aristotle also noted that plots typically contain instances of reversal and recognition: reversal refers to the moment when the main character's fortune is turned upside down; recognition refers to the moment when that main character realizes, with accompanying horror or delight, what has taken place.⁴ In the early twentieth century, the Russian scholar Vladimir Propp made a substantial contribution to plot analysis when he wrote his groundbreaking study on the plot composition of the Russian fairytale. In *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), Propp put forward the radical idea that each of the plots in his corpus of a hundred Russian fairytales consisted of a sequence of 31 functions executed in an identical order. For Propp,

function was defined as the act of a character, understood from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action.⁵ In this way, Propp had demonstrated how the specification of a continuous sequence of functions might be used to flesh out Aristotle's vague but accurate understanding of the plot as a probable or necessary succession of particular actions to achieve a happy or unhappy outcome. What is more, the fact that one of Propp's 31 functions was the function of Recognition offered a measure of reassurance that the work of the two scholars was theoretically compatible.

Nonetheless, Propp was mistaken in his belief that all fairytales are of one structural type. In truth, they are not. Although the number of plot genotypes is still unclear, the number is not excessively great. Plot genotypes fall into set categories, which means that the analysis of a few important fairytales will shed light on the way in which most fairytales—and by extension most short stories, dramatic texts and film screenplays—are also organized. To this end, this study explores the plot genotypes of ten fairytales in order to lay the foundations for a complete description of the plot genotype.

The book is organized in the following way. In Chapter 1, I offer a critical history of plot analysis from Aristotle to the work of those folklore scholars, such as Antti Aarne and Axel Olrik, who made the most substantial contributions to plot analysis before the generation of Aleksandr Nikiforov and Vladimir Propp. In Chapter 2, I examine a variety of theories about character. These range from the three classical theories of character evident in the work of Aristotle to the inchoate but innovative Cambridge Ritualist understanding of the set of dramatic characters as a meaningfully structured ensemble or network. In Chapter 3, I rehearse the major classical views of plot structure, looking briefly at the views of Aristotle and Horace, while noting some problems in Aristotle's analysis of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. After this, I conclude with a discussion of the innovative work of the Cambridge Ritualists, whose insights into certain aspects of ritual point towards the concept of the plot function. In Chapter 4, I describe the way in which an initial focus on the question of the motif in Russian poetics led to the major breakthrough of the Russian Formalists. In particular, I examine the crucial role that Victor Shklovsky played in making possible the seminal work of Nikiforov and Propp. In Chapter 5, I bring the threads of the previous three chapters together in a discussion of Propp's synthesis, emphasizing

the interplay of function, character and structure in a morphological analysis of the plot. After this, I show how Charles Perrault's *Cinderella* conforms faithfully to the 31-function Proppian genotype. In Chapter 6, I show that *Ashputtel*, the *Cinderella* of the Brothers Grimm, also conforms to this genotype, but with some interesting complications. These relate both to the fairytale's Initial Situation and to the use of a set of repeated plot sequences. In Chapter 7, I conclusively demonstrate the limits of Propp's analysis, by describing the plot structure of *The Robber Bridegroom*, a fairytale that employs a very different 29-function genotype from the one Propp discovered. In Chapter 8, I offer a second example of the 29-function plot genotype in a discussion of the Brothers Grimm fairytale *Fitcher's Bird*. In Chapter 9, I analyse *The Frog Prince* of the Brothers Grimm in order to explore the execution of the pivotal eighth function in a fairytale with both a Hero and a Heroine. In Chapter 10, I look at Marie Le Prince De Beaumont's *Beauty and the Beast*, a fairytale that also contains a Hero and a Heroine, as well as an irresolute, rather than a pivotal, 19th plot function. In Chapters 11 and 12, I make a small contribution to character theory by discussing the character of the Heroic Double in *Puss-in-Boots* and the character of the Diabolic Double in *Tom-Tit-Tot*. In Chapter 13, I examine the plot genotype of *Jack and the Beanstalk* in order to isolate the plot genotype of the Quest narrative. As readers conversant with the work of Joseph Campbell and Christopher Vogler should be able to confirm, the plot genotype of *Jack and the Beanstalk* is the compositional structure utilized in the extended literature on the subject of the Hero's Journey.⁶ In Chapter 14, I examine the shorter plot genotype discovered in the Brothers Grimm version of *Little Red Riding Hood* in order to discuss the possibility of the Heroine being defeated in the Struggle. In Chapter 15, I look at the very short plot genotype contained in the English fairytale of *The Story of the Three Bears* or *Goldilocks*, a plot genotype that runs from Departure to Escape. Finally, in my Conclusion, I offer a synthesis of my major agreements and disagreements with the work of Vladimir Propp, before concluding with a discussion of some areas of possible future research within plot genotype theory.

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“Opening the Pathway: Plot Management and the Pivotal Seventh Character in Daphne Du Maurier’s ‘Don’t Look Now,’” *Journal of Literary Semantics*, 37.2 (July 2008): 151–168. Finally, I wish to thank the many students who have attended my classes on plot at Yonsei. A number of the arguments set forth in this monograph were first aired here.

About the Author

Terence Patrick Murphy (tmurphy@yonsei.ac.kr) is Full Professor of Rhetoric and Composition in the English Department at Yonsei University in South Korea. He was educated at the University of Toronto and at Merton College, Oxford, where he wrote his doctoral dissertation on the history of the little magazine in England. His articles have appeared in journals such as the *Journal of Narrative Technique*; *Narrative*; *Language and Literature*; and *Style*. His major research interest is the stylistics of short fiction and the semiotics of film.

Note on the Selection of the Texts

One of my principal reasons for writing this book stems from my interest in the genealogy of texts, the way in which popular texts, and thereby popular plot genotypes, are passed down through the years. For this reason, I have chosen to analyse those versions of popular fairytales that have become widely known. Nowadays, the most widely disseminated of these texts tend to be those that are freely available on sites like Project Gutenberg. This interest in plot genealogy helps explain my decision to analyse Edgar Taylor's rather free adaptation of the Brothers Grimm's "Der Froschkönig oder der eiserne Heinrich". Although Taylor's version leaves out the brutal Branding scene during which the Princess smashes the Frog against the wall and thereby effects his Transfiguration, I did not consider it amiss to use this text, if for no other reason than that I grew up reading the bowdlerized version.

1

The Origins of Plot Analysis

In *The Poetics*, Aristotle suggests that a plot needs to have sufficient amplitude to allow a probable or necessary succession of particular actions to produce a significant change in the fortune of the main character.¹ What this means for Aristotle is that in comedies, the main character moves from bad to good fortune, while in tragedies the main character moves from good to bad fortune. With these definitions, Aristotle commits himself to the view that all well-structured stories have something in common. But there is little sign that Aristotle ever considered that behind the extraordinary diversity of Greek drama, there might lurk a fundamental uniformity. For Aristotle, the plot—the actions, motifs and characters—was either well-made or otherwise. The audacious insight—that *the plots of all well-made stories were, in effect, the same*—was not to receive strong critical support until the middle years of the twentieth century.²

The first inkling of this idea can be traced back to the work of philologists like William Jones, Franz Bopp and Jacob Grimm, who posited the idea of the unity of the so-called Indo-European family of languages. After the publication of William Jones's essay on the profound similarities in the sound systems of Sanskrit and Greek in 1786, it was not long before other theorists began to extend this idea to the world of story. In the second edition of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1819), the Brothers Grimm first raised the issue of the similarities that existed in the stories of nations widely removed in distance and time. By 1856, in a last considered statement on this issue, Wilhelm Grimm noted that "the outermost lines are coterminous with those of the great race which is commonly called Indo-Germanic, and the

relationship draws itself in constantly narrowing circles round the settlements of the Germans.”³

The theory of solar mythology

In *Comparative Mythology* (1856), the German-born Oxford scholar Friedrich Max Müller attempted to resolve the apparent mystery of the barbarous elements in Greek myth by suggesting that these myths were derived from an earlier set of Sanskrit originals. Müller’s major insight was the recognition of the philological connection between the Vedic sky god Dyâus and the Greek god Zeus. If these two gods were identical, Müller reasoned, then the whole pantheon of Vedic and Greek gods might be kin. At this point, Müller sought to demonstrate that “the marriage of Uranus and Gaea represents the union of heaven and earth” and that the “paternal cannibalism of Cronus originally signified the heavens devouring, and later releasing, the clouds,” while “the act of Zeus depicts the final separation of heaven and earth, and the commencement of man’s history.”⁴ By reading Greek mythology in terms of a set of analogies derived from solar mythology, Müller was able to explain to his own satisfaction the lingering barbarous elements that might be seen to mar the otherwise rationalist worldview of the Greeks. In *India: What Can It Teach Us?* (1883), Müller gave poetic expression to the expansive purview surveyed by solar mythology:

What we call Noon, and Evening, and Night, what we call Spring and Winter, what we call Year, and Time, and Life and Eternity—all this the ancient Aryans called *Sun*. And yet wise people wonder and say, How curious that the ancient Aryans should have had so many solar myths. Why, every time we say “Good Morning,” we commit a solar myth. Every poet who sings about “the May driving the Winter from the field again” commits a solar myth. Every “Christmas number” of our newspapers—ringing out the old year and ringing in the new—is brimful of solar myths.⁵

Later solar mythologists were to offer up related variants on these analogical themes, with the storm clouds, the wind and the sky alternately taking the more prominent role in the explanations of ancient myth.⁶ For all its exuberance, Müller’s work was nonetheless marked by an attention to philological detail that prevented his

theorizing from becoming too ambitious. This scholarly attention, unfortunately, was not so prominent among his successors, some of whose lack of Sanskrit meant that they were more prone to the use of analogy without sound philological underpinnings to make a mythological connection. Müller's own review of George W. Cox's *A Manual of Mythology, in the Form of Question and Answers* (1867), for example, criticized the author, a disciple of the great German scholar, for his overreliance on analogy and his lack of substantive philological evidence.⁷ The theory of solar mythology illustrates two prominent dangers that a theory of the plot inevitably encounters: those of unlimited ambition and uncontrolled extension. In the end, solar mythology succumbed to these dangers. As its defenders were forced to draw on more and more unlikely analogies in support of their central thesis, the theory of solar mythology came under sustained and eventually fatal attack, with the theory overwhelmed by the weight of exceptions to its main postulates.⁸ Nonetheless, the efforts of the solar mythologists were not wholly in vain. In time, solar mythology helped give birth to an alternative theory that attempted to explain these extraordinary similarities in terms of a common origin in ancient ritual and ceremony.

Ritualism: the savage origins of the folktale

The beginning of the theory of the savage or ritualistic origins of the folktale can be traced back to the publication of Edward Burnett Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871). Tylor was among the earliest anthropologists to draw sustained attention to the striking similarities among the great civilizational myths of the past. In the light of Tylor's work, the first generation of the English Folk-lore Society, which included such luminaries as Marian Roalfe Cox, Alfred Nutt and Andrew Lang, attempted to extend this insight into the field of folklore and folktale research. In February 1883, the English Folk-Lore Society published guidelines for the proper analysis of the folktale. Using a variant of *Cinderella*, Alfred Nutt offered a model for how this work might be undertaken:

Analysis of Story

Generic Name of Story—(To be filled in by Folk-Tale Committee)

Specific Name—The sharp (horned) grey sheep.