



## REVISITING A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF FOLKTALES: A MEANS TO AN END?

1 a tale can be regarded as the form, its social purpose the function, and its  
2 content the field. Tracing back the literature on the studies of tales, it is found  
3 that classifications of tales in a collection are mostly based on the narrative  
4 motif or content of the stories – e.g. Animal tales, Fairy tales, Trickster tales,  
5 Phenomenon tales, Wonder tales etc. However, as pointed out by Martin  
6 (1986), such thematic categorization, on the basis of a tale's subject matter or  
7 content, can lead to some problems due to the inconsistency in the choice of  
8 criterion. For example, it can be argued that the theme of an Animal tale can  
9 be the same as those of a Wonder tale, and that animals can be taking the  
10 narrative roles in a Wonder tale.

11 On the other hand, classifications of tales based on a structural analysis are  
12 not exempted from critical comments as well. The structural analysis of tales  
13 can be claimed to begin with Propp's (1958, 1968) ground-breaking  
14 morphological classification of Russian fairy tales. According to Propp, a tale  
15 can be described according to its component parts and the relationship of these  
16 components to each other and to the whole. He claims that an event as an act  
17 of a character defined from the point of view of its significance for the course  
18 of the action can be extracted as basic components of the tale. He then  
19 identifies thirty-one functional events, or "*what a tale's dramatis personae do*"  
20 (Propp 1968: 20), in his study of 115 Russian fairy tales. These thirty-one  
21 events are claimed to occur in an identical sequence as the basic components  
22 of a tale.

23 Following Propp, scholars such as Dundes (1965, 1971) and Bremond  
24 (1977) study the structures of folktales from various cultures. Dundes (1965:  
25 206) claims that 'there can be no rigorous typology without prior  
26 morphology', and studies the structural typology of North American Indian  
27 folktales. Proposing a formal analysis of tales as a means to gain an  
28 understanding of concrete human behaviour and thought, his study on African  
29 folktales (Dundes 1971) illuminates how the making and breaking of  
30 friendship serves as a structural frame within which a variety of tale types  
31 occur in that culture.

32 Similarly, Bremond (1977) attempts to construct a formal model for  
33 analyzing and classifying the episodes of the fairy tale, and proposes the  
34 morphology of French fairy tales. These studies suggest the significance and  
35 use of structural analyses not only for making typological statements, but also  
36 for understanding the cultural determination of contents within possibly  
37 transcultural forms.

38 In fact, the foregrounding of a sequence of events in these studies has  
39 given rise to many interesting story-grammars (de Beaugrande 1982), and has  
40 also led to the heyday of narrative structure studies, under the term narratology  
41 (Genette 1980). However, with the growing interest in narrative as a social  
42 and psychological phenomenon, rather than solely as a formal literary or

1 historical genre, the theories and practices in the structural analyses of stories  
 2 came under attack (Rimmon-Kenan 2002), and are often accused of  
 3 disregarding the content in the search for the form.

4 It is contended that although the explorations of story structures using  
 5 different methods have resulted in various descriptions of different models,  
 6 what is lacking in most of the models is an explanation of how formal patterns  
 7 are related to the story's content (Martin 1986). Thus poststructuralist studies  
 8 of stories have tried to include the other two aspects of the genre – the  
 9 function and the field – in specifying and explaining the nature of stories.

10 In understanding a story on the basis of its function, Brewer and  
 11 Lichtenstein (1982: 478) take a narrower view and claim that '*stories are a*  
 12 *subclass of narratives which have entertainment as their primary discourse*  
 13 *force*' (original italics). However, as pointed out by Stein (1982: 490), such  
 14 claims overlook the multifaceted nature of a story since the social purposes of  
 15 different types of stories vary. There should be no doubt about a large number  
 16 of stories which carry other functions beyond entertainment. Other functions  
 17 of stories can be to resolve personal social problems and to recapitulate and  
 18 reorganize personal experience (Labov and Waletzky 1967); to establish social  
 19 identity and social relationship, social hierarchies, and emotional bonds  
 20 (Bloome 2003); to educate, persuade, warn, reassure, justify, explain, and  
 21 console among members of an organization (Gabriel 2000).

22 In the case of folktales, it can be generally accepted that the function or the  
 23 social purpose of storytelling is to preserve the culture of a civilization, to  
 24 explain natural phenomena, to transmit historical and important social  
 25 information, or to teach important moral and ethical issues (Taylor 2000).  
 26 With the culturally determined setting for such folkloristic storytelling, it can  
 27 also be argued that there is the thematic restriction of the subject matters in  
 28 folktales (Fludernik 1996). In terms of structure, investigations and  
 29 descriptions of different structural patterns for tales from different cultures  
 30 have highlighted one striking pattern – the reward/punishment model – among  
 31 others (Drory 1977, Grayson 2002, Lwin 2003).

32 As discussed earlier, what is at issue in a study of folktales in particular,  
 33 and stories in general, is how the structural features of a story can be related to  
 34 its contents and functions. Therefore, among the different structural patterns of  
 35 tales identified in earlier folktale studies, this study will focus on the most  
 36 common and striking one – the reward/ punishment model – and highlight  
 37 how such a contrastive narrative structure is in complement with its  
 38 educational social function of instilling psychologically significant themes or  
 39 contents. Through an illustration of the relationship between the narrative  
 40 structure (form), the social purpose (function) and the story content (filed),  
 41 this study aims to suggest a structural analysis as a means, rather than an end,  
 42 to understand the nature of stories in general. For this purpose, the study takes

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1 a tale with didactic moral as a tutor text from a collection of folktales of  
2 Myanmar (Burma), where folktales have been preserved for generations not  
3 only as a reflection of a particular culture, but also as a means of instilling  
4 certain concepts in the society.

5 First, the notion of contrastive narrative structure needs to be explained.  
6

### 7 **CONTRASTIVE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE** 8

9 For an analysis of narrative structure in the tutor text, this study will adapt  
10 Propp's concepts of the event and distribution of narrative roles to the  
11 characters in a tale. In the selected tale *The Golden Crow* (Maung 1976), there  
12 are two protagonists, one of whom behaves according to certain specific rules,  
13 and is rewarded. The other breaks these rules and is punished. The four  
14 narrative roles in the tale are distributed as follows.

15 (1) Good-natured girl:	Protagonist A
16 (2) Bad-tempered girl:	Protagonist B
17 (3) Golden Crow:	Donor
18 (4) Tray of paddy:	Guide

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20 Protagonist A is the main character in the first part of the story, and  
21 Protagonist B in the second part. They are comparable and stand in contrast to  
22 each other. The donor role is distributed among several characters who set a  
23 test for the protagonists. The narrative structure in this type of tales can be said  
24 to be made up of 'two symmetrically opposed moves which are formally  
25 identical' (Drory 1977: 32). The structure of the sequence of events can be  
26 summarized as

27 Tasks → Success → Reward

28 Tasks → Failure → Punishment

29 In other words, such story structure can be understood as the contrastive  
30 narrative structure or Reward/ punishment model.  
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32 Moreover, a tale may be made up of more than one elementary sequence  
33 of events. Hence in order to explain the linkage between events, the notions of  
34 *move* by Propp (1968) and *connectives* by Jason (1977) have to be considered.  
35 *Move* is a label introduced by Propp for a series of events. Based on Propp's  
36 notion of move, Jason (1977) introduces an additional unit – *connective* – for  
37 the analysis of narrative structures in oral literature. A connective is a 'unit  
38 which connects parts of the narrative' (Jason, 1977: 104). A connective may  
39 be of two varieties:

- 40 a. An information connective: information is given  
41 1. by one character in the tale to another,  
42 2. by the narrator to the audience.

- 1  
2           b. A transfer connective in (1) state, (2) time, (3) space:  
3                 1. transition in state (transformation from one state of  
4                     being into another),  
5                 2. transition in time (lapses of time without action),  
6                 3. transition in space (transportations in space)  
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8           Such connectives should be regarded as another type of fundamental  
9 constituents like events which serves as a device through which tales are  
10 arranged into a well-organized storyline.

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12           With events, moves and connective as the units of analysis, the elementary  
13 sequence of events or the basic story structure of *The Golden Crow* can be  
14 outlined as in Table 1.  
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16           *Table 1* The elementary sequence of events in the tale *The Golden Crow*

<i>The Golden Crow</i>	<i>Events</i>
<p>Long ago there lived an old widow who was very poor. She had a daughter who was pretty and good-natured.</p> <p>One day the mother asked the daughter to scare away the birds from the tray of paddy which was being dried in the sun. So the daughter sat down near the tray and scared away the birds. When the paddy was nearly dried, however, a strange bird came flying towards the tray. It was a crow with gold feathers. The Golden Crow laughed at the little girl's efforts to scare him away and quickly ate up every bit of the rice, chaff and all.</p> <p>The girl started to cry, saying, "Oh, my mother is so poor! My mother is so poor! The rice is so valuable to her."</p> <p>The Golden Crow gave her a kindly look and said, "Little girl, I will pay for it. Come to the big tamarind tree outside the village at sunset, and I will give you something." Then the crow flew away.</p> <p>At sunset, the little girl went to the big tamarind tree and looked up at the branches. To her surprise, she saw a little house of gold at the</p>	<p><u>Move 1</u> Information connective - Protagonist A is introduced.</p> <p>Guide leads Protagonist A to Donor.</p> <p>Transfer connective Protagonist A meets</p>

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<p>top.</p> <p>The crow looked out of a window of the little golden house, and said, “Oh, there you are! Do come up. But, of course, I must drop the ladder first. Do you want the golden ladder, the silver ladder, or the brass ladder?”</p> <p>“I am only a poor little girl,” replied the girl, “and I can only ask for the brass ladder.” To her surprise, the crow put down the golden ladder, and the little girl climbed up on it to the little gold house.</p> <p>“You must have dinner with me,” invited the crow. “But let me see, do you want the gold dish, the silver dish, of the brass dish to eat your food from?”</p> <p>“I am only a poor little girl,” she replied, “and I can only ask for the brass dish.” To her surprise, the crow brought out the gold dish, and the food in it was delicious.</p> <p>“You are a good little girl,” said the crow, when the little girl had finished eating, “and I would like you to stay here with me forever. But your mother needs you more, so I must send you back before it gets too dark.”</p> <p>Then he went into the bed room and brought out a big box, a medium-sized box, and a small box. “Choose one of these boxes,” said the crow, “and give it to your mother.”</p> <p>“The paddy you ate was not much,” replied the girl, “and the little box would be more than enough.” She then accepted the little box and, after thanking the Golden Crow, climbed down the golden ladder and went home.</p> <p>When she reached there, she gave the little box to her mother. Together they opened it, and they were surprised and delighted to find in the box a hundred priceless rubies. The mother and daughter became very rich and lived in luxury.</p> <p>There was another old widow in the village, but she was not poor. She also had a daughter who, however, was greedy and bad-tempered.</p>	<p>Donor.</p> <p>Donor sets Protagonist A the first task/ test.</p> <p>Protagonist A performs successfully.</p> <p>Donor sets Protagonist A the second task/ test.</p> <p>Protagonist A performs successfully.</p> <p>Donor sets Protagonist A the third task/ test.</p> <p>Protagonist A performs successfully.</p> <p>Protagonist A is rewarded.</p>
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This widow and her daughter heard about the gift of the Golden Crow, and became very jealous of the other widow and her daughter.

They decided to try to get a similar gift for themselves. So they put out a tray of paddy in the sun, and the greedy girl kept watch. But as she was lazy, she did not try to scare away the birds that came to eat up the paddy. When the Golden crow at last turned up, there were very few grains left.

However, the Golden Crow ate what remained, and the greedy girl shouted rudely, "Hey, crow, give me and my mother some wealth for the paddy you have eaten."

The crow looked at her with a frown, but he replied politely enough, "Little girl, I will pay for the rice. Come to the big tamarind tree outside the village at sunset, and I will give you something." Then the crow flew away.

At sunset, the greedy girl went to the big tamarind tree, and without waiting for the crow to come out, she shouted, "Hey, crow, keep your promise."

The crow put his head out of the window and asked, "On which ladder do you want to climb up here?" The golden ladder, the silver ladder or the brass ladder?"

"The golden ladder, of course," replied the greedy girl. But, to her disappointment, the crow lowered the brass ladder.

When the girl entered the little gold house, the crow said, "You must dine with me. Do you want to eat your food from the gold dish, the silver dish or the brass dish?"

"The gold dish, of course," replied the greedy girl. But to her disappointment, it was the brass dish she was served. The food was delicious but it was no more than a tiny morsel, and the greedy girl was annoyed. Then the crow went into the bedroom and brought out a big box, a medium-sized box, and a small box, and said, "Choose one of these boxes and give it to your mother."

Move 2

Information  
connective -  
Protagonist B is  
introduced.  
Protagonist B learns  
about Donor.

Guide leads  
Protagonist B to  
Donor.

Transfer connective  
Protagonist B meets  
Donor.

Donor sets  
Protagonist B the first  
task/ test.

Protagonist B fails.

Donor sets  
Protagonist B the  
second task/ test.

Protagonist B fails.

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The greedy girl, of course, chose the big box, and without remembering to thank the crow, she struggled down the ladder with her burden.

When she reached home, she and her mother joyfully pulled open the big box. But to their surprise and terror, a big snake lay coiled inside. The snake hissed at them angrily, and then glided out of the box and out of their house.

Donor sets  
Protagonist B the  
third task/ test.

Protagonist B fails.

Protagonist B is  
punished.

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Following the above structural analysis, the use of reward/punishment model for the didactic purpose can be discussed.

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**REWARD/PUNISHMENT MODEL AND DIDACTIC MORAL**

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The parallel sets of contrasting narratives in the above analysis show how good actions are rewarded and evil actions are punished. It outlines one of the primary functions of this particular type of tale, which is moral teaching. Despite the outwardly simple appearance, the tale addresses themes and issues that are profound for all humanity. It touches on such psychologically significant themes as honesty, kindness, generosity, jealousy, arrogance, greed, etc. The morally significant issues on what is right and its consequences are foregrounded when it is placed in parallel against what is wrong and its consequences. Thus the contrastive narrative structure of the tale can be said to be complementing and reinforcing the moral and ethical messages that lie behind the content of the tale.

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Folktales are typically considered as children's stories in the modern world. Certainly they do appeal to children and help them develop critical, social, cognitive, and linguistic skills. In the same way, it should not be overlooked that the themes and issues raised in these tales can be significant for all ages, all humanity. While folktales from different cultures may display many differences, some elements can be justifiably claimed to be common to many or all cultures. Different cultures may offer different tasks or tests for the protagonists, nevertheless, the underlying message of what is morally or ethically right, what is wrong and what can be their consequences are proved to be the same.

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1 Interestingly, aside from the common social and moral themes that lie  
 2 behind the stories, the reward/ punishment model or the contrastive narrative  
 3 structure is also found to be common for rendering such messages of moral  
 4 concerns in tales from different cultures. In other words, the relationship of  
 5 narrative form, function and field in tales with the didactic moral seems to  
 6 appear in folktales from many lands. Just as such moral concerns of honesty,  
 7 kindness and generosity, as opposed to jealousy, greed and pride, are issues in  
 8 any culture, the contrastive structural form of presenting those issues are also  
 9 found to be transcultural, if not universal.

10 To look at other tales with a similar didactic moral from a different  
 11 culture, one can quote the study by Drory (1977), who has attempted to  
 12 formulate a model for the narrative structure of the reward/ punishment fairy  
 13 tale such as *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*. Drory contends that the reward-  
 14 and-punishment fairy tale, with its story structure made up of two  
 15 symmetrically opposed moves which are formally identical, features two  
 16 symmetrically opposed protagonists who are tested by the ethical norms. In  
 17 other words, the actions of the narrative roles are evaluated to some extent in  
 18 the framework of the socioreligious system of general values and specific  
 19 norms.

20 More recently, the study by Grayson (2002) on Korean folktales has also  
 21 proved that there is a large set of Korean folktales which are composed of  
 22 parallel sets of contrasting narratives showing how good actions are rewarded  
 23 and evil actions punished. It is claimed that the contrastive narrative structure  
 24 can be found in tales throughout East Asia and the world. However, Grayson  
 25 distinguishes Korean tales from similar tales in China and Japan as an  
 26 illustration of the Confucian concept of moral suasion, in addition to the  
 27 common theme of rewards and punishments. For example, Grayson outlines  
 28 the narrative of a Korean reward/ punishment folktale, *The Story of Hungbu*  
 29 *and Nolbu*, in the following pattern.

30	Act 1:	The younger brother
31	Scene 1:	The good actions of the younger brother
32	Scene 2:	The younger brother's reward
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34	Act 2:	The older brother
35	Scene 1:	The evil actions of the older brother
36	Scene 2:	The Punishment of the older brother

37 Grayson (2002: 52)

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 39 Similar to the Myanmar folktale, the tutor text of this article, it is also  
 40 composed of two equal narrative sections or acts (c.f. moves in the Myanmar  
 41 tale), each consisting of two scenes which balance each other with parallel  
 42 narrative content but come to a different conclusion, or dénouement. The first

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1 act or Move 1 gives a didactic moral point by showing the good motives and  
2 their consequences, while the second act or Move 2, which is formally  
3 identical to the first, contrasts the narrative content of the previous act to  
4 emphasis on the punishment which arises from bad motives.

5 The uniqueness of the Korean tale is its characteristic Confucian subtext,  
6 i.e. the emphasis on the moral power of the younger brother to influence his  
7 older brother to reform his behaviour (Grayson 2002). With the role inversion  
8 of the protagonist and antagonist, the importance of the value of moral suasion  
9 is claimed to be stressed in Korean folktales. Regardless of such uniqueness, it  
10 can still be argued that these tales with a didactic moral show the relationship  
11 of the contrastive narrative structure, the narrative content of moral issues, and  
12 the social function of moral teaching. In other words, it can be deduce that  
13 through the use of a contrastive narrative structure, the virtues of good ethics  
14 are emphasized for the purpose of moral teaching in folktales.

### 15 16 **CONCLUSION**

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18 The analysis and discussion in the article put forward an investigation of  
19 the relationship between the narrative form, function and field of a story as a  
20 method to recognize the cultural determination of narrative motif and social  
21 purpose of storytelling. It claims that in the case of stories with the didactic  
22 moral, the contrastive narrative structure serves as reinforcement in instilling  
23 the concepts of good morals, which are profound and significant for all  
24 humanity across various cultures. The feasibility to examine the relationship  
25 of narrative form, function and field in other types of stories is left open for  
26 further explorations. For a better understanding of the nature and the power of  
27 stories, it can be useful to probe the relationship among the underlying story  
28 structures, the narrative contents presented, and the social functions of  
29 storytelling in various types of stories. In a post-structural, post-modern world,  
30 the structural analysis of stories, with its focus on the relationship of forms to  
31 contents and functions, can still be a means for a better understanding of the  
32 nature and the power of stories.

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