Wilde's Fairy Tales:
A Morphological Analysis of "The Young King" and "The Happy Prince"

Rubina Rahman & Mujib Rahman

Department of English & Applied Linguistics, University of Peshawar, Pakistan

_____

Abstract

Oscar Wide is eminent literary figure known predominantly for his immortal plays and his brilliant wit. His fairy tales remained in relative obscurity. A surge of literary investigation of has arisen with recent interest in his fairy tales from various perspectives. This paper examines the structure of Oscar Wilde's fairy tales. For this purpose Vladimir Propp's morphological model is taken as tool of investigation. Any ambiguities found are pointed out. The aim is to establish their structural proximity to the fairy tale text type.

Keywords: Narrative, fairy tales, structure, morphology, functions, Propp, Wilde, "The Young King", "The Happy Prince"

_____

Introduction

Narrative has always had a strong fascination for humankind. The desire to encapsulate experiences, emotions and perceptions crystallized in the form of tales among others. According to Landa (1990:1), 'narrativization is one of the commonest ways of imposing an order and a perspective on experience." The fact

that folktales are found in all cultures of the world confirms the view. Boas considers folklore a form of art. He argues that tribes that had mobile style of life experienced long periods of enforced leisure, and since they were not able to sit down to handicraft, they created songs and tales (1927:300).These tales took several forms: myths, legends and folktales. Fairy tales are one of the subclass of folktale. Linguists and anthropologists have always been attracted to the folktale for various reasons. Many of them have tried to discover the structural composition of these tales. However, Wilde's Fairy Tales have never been subjected to this kind of analysis. In this paper, we present an analysis of Wilde's two fairy tales, "The Young King" and the "The Happy Prince" to show that Propp's morphological model is not only relevant but also brings to light certain features of the tales despite Wilde's departure from the traditional genre of the fairy tale.

Propp's Morphological Scheme

Vladimir Propp was a Russian formalist and an anthropologist. His *Morphology of the Folktales* (1968) is deemed as a ground breaking work in structural understanding of the narrative, especially the folk tale and its various types, such as the fairy tale. He used the term 'morphology' in his study of a corpus of Russian fairy tales. By this term he means "…a description of the tale according to its component parts and the relationship of these parts to each other and the whole" (1968:19). He identifies two dimensions to a fairy tale that lend themselves to its morphological study.

The first dimension is constant repetition of certain elements across the tales. These he terms as functions within the movement of a tale; a general morphological basis of a fairy tale. Propp's definition of a function is "…an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of action"(1968:20). The other dimension is the 'variability' of the realization process of these functions. The number of functions is limited but the characters that act as the agents or the vehicles of these actions are almost limitless (1968:20-21).

He then goes on to describe functions as he extracted them from his corpus of Russian fairy tales (1968). He identifies initial nine stages in what can be termed as the preparatory section of a tale (1968:25). It is a section that paves the way for the main actors and the main events in the tale; in a way, this situation is the springboard for the main action. In this sense, it has an important part to play morphologically, while not a function in essence. This he names as the initial

situation and encodes these stages in Greek letters for reference. This initial situation is not mandatory and may or may not be found in a tale.

He then identifies thirty-one main functions with their variations (p.26-65). To each function, he gives a one word 'abbreviated definition' and allots a Latin numeral capital letter as its symbol. These functions operate on a single axis and follow each other logically. He makes the claim that a tale may miss a function/s but the sequence and the order in which these occur is never reversed 1968:64). Some of the functions form a working pair implying that the presence of one entails the other. Some of them can be arranged in a group and some remain individual functions. Propp (1968:64-65) combines these into different group on the basis of their operation in the tale: Functions 1-7 is Preparation, 8-10 Complication, 11-15 Transference, 16-18 Struggle, 19-26 Return and 27-31 Recognition.

Looking at the mechanism of the tale, he identifies three elements (1968:71-78) that act as the connectives in the movement of a tale. He calls these elements 'component parts' (p.71). 'Notification' is one of them. Its basic operation is to pass on some information to a character.   It serves to connect one function with the next and can exist between most varied functions.   In places where no notification is provided, the characters are represented as *know-all* type or act *ex-machina* (p.71). The second connective element is 'trebling', a threefold repetition of particular elements in a tale (p.70). Trebling can occur at the level of individual functions, pairs of functions and groups of functions and moves. It can be a uniform distribution, a threefold accumulation or a mere mechanical repetition. The third element is 'motivation' (p.75). It represents the causes that provoke the characters to act. Within the movement of a tale, one action often acts as a motivation for further action. It is the first action, *villainy* which launches the whole narrative that requires a particular motivation. Parallel or similar actions may have entirely dissimilar motivations. This particular element is often implied rather than stated. Certain functions form a group and work in close dependence on one another, making a kind of a field of particular events. He terms these fields as 'spheres of action' (1968:79-80). These spheres take their field of action in correspondence to characters that act in that particular area. He identifies seven spheres of action; of the villain, of the donor, of the helper, of the princess (representing any sought –for person), of her father, of the dispatcher, of the hero and the false hero (p.79-80).

The distribution of the characters in the tale has a clear one to one correspondence between the action and the characters; one character operating in many spheres of action or one sphere of action disseminated to several characters at the same time (p.80-82). This distinction of the movement of the tale according to the spheres and their agents entail that there are essentially seven characters central to a tale and the movement of a tale is carried forward by them and at the same time revolves around them.

The variable measures of a tale are the taxonomy and the qualities of a character that Propp calls their 'nomenclature and attributes', one character in tale can often, without much trouble, be replaced by another. Characters for Propp remain a type of tools to carry the action of the tale forward. "…the characters being for Propp mainly just the mechanism for distributing the functions around the story (Barry, 2002:229). Again, the implication is that it is really the functions that endure in their quality and are constant element in this kaleidoscope. They acquire a scientific dimension in their constancy and so qualify as a tool with which to measure the genre of a tale (1968:90). Propp arrives at a definition of a tale from his observations and study as

> Morphologically a tale (…) may be termed any development proceeding
> from villainy (A) or a lack, (ά), through intermediary functions to marriage
> (W*), or to other functions employed as denouement (1968:92).

Any progress of a movement within a tale on this pattern is called a "move"; and a tale may have one or more than one moves. These can follow each other linear in a tale or be interwoven in one of the many patterns. The patterns of moves within a tale can be of five types: a tale can have one move following the other in a linear manner; we can have a new move beginning and ending before the first one; a more complicated scheme/design results if a third move interrupts a second one in its turn creating a web of moves; sometimes a tale begins with two moves simultaneously; one of them may be resolved before the other; and two moves may end in one denouement; variation can occur in the motifs of themes when two moves have a common ending.

Predominantly two different scheme types can be identified based on the fact that some functions are mutually   exclusive. These two types of schemes are very rarely found in a single move tale — to an extent that their occurrence together in one tale may be considered a deviation from a general rule. These are H-I that

translates as "the struggle with the villain and victory over him" and the other scheme is M-N "difficult task and its resolution" (Propp, 1968:102).

Oscar Wilde has written two collections of fairy tales *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *The House of Pomegranates* (1891) comprising nine tales in all. He wrote these tales originally for his two sons but were published (Zipes, 1999:135). These did not receive the literary merit that they deserve during his life time due to the brilliance of his immortal plays. It is the modern literary criticism that has turned its interest towards them as great literary achievement. Using Propp's morphological model as a tool we analysed two of Oscar Wilde's fairy tales: *The Young King* and *The Star-Child*.

The Young King

The Proppian formula as applied to The Young King yielded the following scheme:

$$
\begin{array}{lll}
\text{I} & A\delta^1\eta^2\theta^2U \\
& \quad \text{II} \quad A^1\ \alpha\ a^3B^2C\uparrow\ : C\uparrow D^2{}_1E^1F^3\downarrow \\
& \qquad\qquad\qquad\qquad : C\uparrow d^7E^1F^5{}_2\downarrow \quad = \text{Ex}\ \ T^3{}_1\,W^\bullet \\
& \qquad\qquad\qquad\qquad : C\uparrow D^6{}_8\,F^2\downarrow
\end{array}
$$

This tale, as compared to others in his two collections, is slightly different in its storyline. We have a back flash to the events in the past, and a significant chunk of the main action happens in 'dream' mode.

The events that took place in the past pave the way for the action in the present. The protagonists are introduced and their status is revealed in the beginning. In this tale, we encounter royalty in absentia in the beginning, involving a dead princess and her father, the king, who is also dead when the tale begins. In one long complex sentence, we are told of an *interdiction violated (δ^1)* by the princess. It is an embedded interdiction because it is not stated overtly in the text. The interdiction violated is marrying beneath her station, a visiting Rimini artist, something that is a taboo for a lady of her station. This act of violation of interdiction in itself comprises *ή (trickery and deception)* and θ *(complicity & submission)* elliptically; the princess falls to the lure of the music from the flute played by the Rimini artist — as if the music cast a spell over her better judgement. Therein follows another function, which is not really part of the preparatory section but actually is supposed to occur at the end of a move. The function is *U (punishment)*. Though it is a deviation from Propp's map of the preparatory

section, yet it does fit elliptically within the scheme. The princess is poisoned and her child kidnapped and sent to a poor family of goatherds. The kidnapping launches the main move of the tale and can be read as function *villainy* of the type A^1 *(kidnapping of person)*. This villainy ends the first move and puts into motion the main move of the story.

All this had happened in the past and when the story opens, we are once again told of the kidnapped child's new status as the king of the land; hence the title "The Young King". Following the usual storyline development of a wonder tale, the old king is struck with remorse, sends for his abandoned grandson and declares him his heir before breathing his last. The new king, a young lad reared in close proximity to nature, falls in love with the grandeur, splendour and magnificence of the beauty that only wealth can afford. His love of beauty and beautiful things, his active and alive aesthetic sense makes him send people to search and collect beauties of the world for his coronation accoutrements and to weave a unique fabric for his coronation apparel. This matches with function *a (lack).* His orders translate into function B^2 *(mediation)* and the consequent departure of his minions is the embedded $C\uparrow$ *(counteraction and departure).*

The next important thing to happen is the young king falling asleep and dreaming. In these dreams, he is taken on three journeys. He, being the hero undertakes these journeys and so his dreams are equivalent to ↑ *(departure).*

His first dream takes him to a weaving house. He experiences the murky miasmic atmosphere and falls in conversation with one, the weaver, who is quite hostile in his response. Next is the *first function of the donor*, the weaver, D^9 (with a greeting however rude) and a narration of gross bitter realities. The scene is quite painful, and the bitter realities of life behind the luxury in his world are brought home to him. His young heart is loaded with misery of the poor and the ugly. The narration has the character of a *test* (of the young king) function D^1 which he *sustains* E^1; i.e. he realizes the price that is paid by the unrecognized masses to bring beauty into his life. Function F^3 *(the agent is prepared)*, follows when the fabric is finally woven to perfection to suit a king's apparel. His waking up from the dream to reality of the world is function↓ *(return of the hero).*

Two more similar dreams follow. Like the earlier one they too have to do with the fulfillment of his desire for beauty and luxury. Are these then new moves? Though each new lack or each new villainy leads to a new move, yet we do not really have

the beginning of a new move with these new lacks; rather a trebling of the same phenomena in the next two dreams. I argue so because the lack that leads to the next two patterns of the functions ↑*DEF↓* are similar to the earlier one in nature, and ensue from a similar kind of lack; be it a fabric to be woven, pearls to be searched for or rubies to be found, they can be, in fact together regarded as a cluster of lacks. The mode remains the same, the dream, which is the awakening of his conscience to reality behind the finished products of beauty that he so enjoyed without a thought to the labour and suffering that went into their making. His reactions too are similar. He sustains the test, the magical agent is prepared and he returns to the waking world. In fact, this return too is symbolic because it is a return from a cocooned world of beauty and riches to the world of harsh reality. The repetition is too similar in every aspect to be regarded as a separate move. Hence we can regard them as 'trebling', the connective element within the action of the tale.

As the story moves forward, we do not find the usual functions *Pr (pursuit of the hero), Rs (rescue of the hero)* and *(Recognition of the hero) Q.* Since everything happens in dreams, their effect leads to function *Ex (exposure).* Upon waking the young king is a different person; a metamorphosis has taken place and we find changes in his behaviour and attitude as well. He puts on ordinary humble apparel and adorns himself with flowers and leaves. It is not just an exhibition but a real change of heart. This phenomenon is realized in function *T (Transfiguration).* At the end is his coronation, again metaphorically divine, when he chooses to wear his old ragged clothes, and a spray of flowers for his crown; a Christ figure, encoded in function *W* (*Wedding),* here realized metaphorically as he finally wakes to the reality of beauty; humbling him to the extent where he takes on an entirely different identity.

Ambiguities

The striking difference between this fairy tale and other fairy tales is its mode of action, the dreams. Action occurs at a sub-conscious level and is to be interpreted as such. The whole tale exists at an abstract parameter. Therefore, the nature of the functions ↑*DEF↓ (Departure, First function of the donor, Reaction of the hero, The receipt of the magical agent and Return of the hero) is* also fulfilled at an abstract level. The journey for the quest is taken only in dreams; he is, so to say, taken on an expedition while physically still in his own room. Consequently, the donors do not directly test the hero; they are the narrators and the actors, but in

their drama and dialogue, we do find the functions D, E and F being fulfilled, again conceptual rather than concrete. Similarly, his return from the world of his dreams to the reality of the waking world is also partially translated into function $\downarrow$. The last function W^* is highly figurative in its application. Instead of receiving wealth or riches, he achieves his reward by giving them up.

Though the tale is highly emblematic and figurative in its nature yet it seems to fit in with Propp's morphology. Its different approach does not affect the structure and pattern as presented in his model. The nature and sequence remain intact.

The Star-Child

Propp's scheme of functions gives the following structure when applied to "The Star Child":

$$I \quad \alpha \; X \; \text{mot} \; \gamma^1 \delta^1 \; A^6{}_9 \; T^1 \; B^4{}_3 \; a^1 \; C\uparrow \; D^5 \; E^1\text{-neg} \; F\text{-contr.} : G^2 \S$$
$$II \qquad M: B^2 C\uparrow D^4 E^4 F^2 N \downarrow (D^5{}_1 \; E^5 J^1)$$
$$A^{15} a^3 \; M: C\uparrow D^2 E^2 F^2 N \downarrow (D^5{}_1 \; E^5 \; J^1) \quad G^2{}_3 \; Q \; T^1 (T^1) K^4 \; U \; W$$
$$M: C\uparrow D^2 E^2 F^2 N \downarrow (D^5{}_1 \; E^5)$$

The initial situation (an important morphological element) is very clear right at the beginning. The woodcutter and the Star-Child, the protagonists of the tale are introduced and their statuses are revealed. The manner of the entry of the Star-Child is unique, has a touch of the preternatural and is very much in keeping with the element of wonder found in fairy tale. A golden star falling from the sky on the spot where he was lying guides the woodcutter and his friend to him. In the scheme, it is represented by letter X, Propp's symbol for *alien forms*, an indicator of the strangeness of the phenomena. The kind-hearted woodcutter adopts the Star-Child in spite of his poverty, the reluctance of his wife, and the fact that he has his own family to feed. All this forms part of the initial situation.

The tale moves forward in the Star-Child's pride in his unusual heavenly decent and unprecedented beauty and the resultant cruelty towards less favoured and less fortunate. He is contemptuous of not only the ordinary looking human beings but also is cruel towards animals and birds. An element of ingratitude is also indicated in his behaviour. This leads the wood-cutter to issue an *interdiction* in the form of an advice, "sometimes... an interdiction is evidenced in a weakened form, as a request or a bit of advice..." (Propp, 1968:26). The Star-Child, in his arrogance,

chooses to ignore this advice and hence we get a *violation*. So far, the match between the preparatory section of the tale and the stages of the initial situation is almost perfect.

The next motif function *A (villainy)* is "...exceptionally important ..."   because "...the complication is begun with an act of villainy" (1968:30). The act of villainy here springs from the violation of the interdiction, in keeping with Propp's idea that preparatory section paves the way for this important morphological function to occur. In this violation the Star-Child commits the sin of being cruel to his own mother only because she is ugly, old and poor. The villainy here is a combination of two subtypes $A^6{}_9$ *(maiming, mutilation and expulsion)* because he throws stones at her and bids her to leave. A disfiguration follows his behaviour to his mother rendering him as ugly in his appearance as he is in his heart which corresponds to function *Transfiguration (T^1)*. This is first of the two transfigurations that he goes through. This first one brings pain and hatred with it. When he himself experiences repulsion and rejection, the gravity of his sin dawns upon him.

The Star-Chid now faces the ensuing lack *(a^1, lack of an individual),* the lack of a mother whose love he had rejected, and to repair this lack, he decides to embark on a journey. If we are to go by Propp's order of functions, the next character (s) to appear should be the donor(s).   The mole, the linnet and the squirrel elliptically fulfil the eligibility. Function type D^5 fits in here; the animals might or might not have begged for mercy but their response at this moment seems to suggest so. His sin overtakes him here; his cruel treatment of the animals and birds in the past here fit in with the function $E^1{}_{-neg}$. He had failed the test in the past and the result has its effect now. The animals and the bird remind him of his cruelty which has now disabled them from helping him in his trouble. His past lack of pity then leads to $F_{contr.}$ He is denied help and a cruel period of his life commences from this moment. The three creatures with similar fate and responses are an example of trebling denoted by ':' denial of help from would-be donors moves our protagonist to the next function G^2 when he wanders all over the world in search of his mother. He wanders for three years, the classic number of repetition in folk and fairy tales, before he reaches anywhere.

If we go by Propp's thesis that each new act of villainy begins a new move, then we have a new move even before the old one has ended, a phenomenon quite possible in Propp's schemes.

A magician buys the now ugly Star-Child and locks him up in a room, makes him his slave and treats him very harshly; perfect match with A^{15}. The villain (the magician) expresses the desire to have three pieces of gold hidden somewhere in the woods, a *lack* of type a^3. He commands the Star-Child to get the gold pieces on threat of punishments of the worse kind. This can easily translate itself into function *M (difficult task)*. At this point enters the next character, the donor. The Star-Child ,in his search for the gold pieces in the woods hears a hare's cry of pain, and releases it corresponding elliptically to D^4 variety of the function *D (1st function of the donor).*The Star-Child's positive reaction results in the *receipt of a magical agent,* i.e., a piece of white gold. With this, we have a successful completion of a difficult task function *N*. The next function is the return of the hero and the Star-Child's return journey is a perfect fit in this case.

In a usual train of events in a story the solution of a difficult task ends the troubles of a hero and leads to motifs *K (liquidation of a lack),* ↓ *(return)* and *W (wedding).* Our tale at this point exhibits a significant deviation. The Star-Child is waylaid on the path home by another character, a leper in misery who demands the piece of white gold from him. Where do we place this character in Propp's scheme? Do we call him a donor? But he does not actually give anything to him, rather the reverse in fact. However, in the event of the tale, we find that the leper was actually testing the hero corresponding to function $D^5{}_1$ and the hero's positive response E^5. He hands the gold piece to the leper which finally leads to *K*. In this light the leper can be viewed as a 'helper', one of the dramatis personae mentioned by Propp. The consequent beating that the Star-Child receives from the magician at his failure to fulfil his demand, is in keeping with the motif *J¹ (a brand is applied to the body).* This whole episode of finding different coloured pieces of gold, the bagger's iterant request and consequent beating is repeated three times; a trebling of moves. In the third of these moves, the events take a turn forward. Before he could get to the magician, with the thought of the impending beating and threatened death in his mind, the Star-Child is surrounded by a huge crowd welcoming and admiring him for his beauty. He gets lost among the crowd as per function $G^2{}_3$. Function *Q (recognition of the hero)* is found when he is hailed as the king that was prophesied for the land. His second *Transfiguration (T^1)* has also taken place with regaining his lost beauty. Not only is it physical but a spiritual redemption too, and at the same time, we have the transfiguration of the leper and the beggar woman, too, from beggars to a king and a queen, with the *liquidation* of his *lack (K^4).* The punishment meted out to the magician relates to function *U* and the Star-Child's ascension to the throne to *W*°.

Ambiguities

The tale interpreted in the light of Propp's morphological function does present some ambiguities. The *villainy* in the first move is not generated by the villain but by the hero himself. However, the act can still be termed as villainy because Propp's measure for the judgement of a function is "…the principle of defining a function according to its consequences" (1968:67). In this light the act can be termed as villainy though enacted by the hero himself.

In fact, at the beginning of the tale we first encounter the hero as actually the villain, though later on in keeping with prototypical character of a fairy tale hero he takes a turn over to the other side of the character.

The nature of motif *M (difficult task)* also presents certain ambiguity. Propp distinguishes between *M and* "…a dispatch of complicational nature" (p.68). His morphology says that if a dispatch gives rise to a departure, prolonged search *(C↑),* the meeting with a donor and so on, we have a complicational element *(a, B, lack and its solution).* In our tale, we have all the elements of a complication because the nature of the task set to the hero resembles the quality of a difficult task. It is repeated three times as usual though not an essential feature of *M.* It can be interpreted as a synthesis of both, since it is both a difficult task as well as complicated in nature.

Monaghan (1974:162-163) has looked at the structure of "The Star-Child" from Proppian perspective. He locates a *lack* in the Star-Child's cruel attitude and lack of pity, his mal-treatment of his mother as function *B,* his wanderings as *departure↑.* He identifies the magician as the donor, function *D.* His threefold interaction with the Hare is read as function *E (Reaction of the Hero)* and function *F(the acquisition of the magical agent).* According to Monaghan (p.163) the magical agent is the pity which he had lacked at the outset. His transformation back to his physical beauty and entrance into the city is read as function *G (transference to a designated place),* the forgiveness he receives from his parents is the liquidation of the misfortune and his ascension to throne as final function *(W).*

Conclusion

Though not all thirty one functions identified by Propp were found in these tales, (it is not essential that a tale should have all these functions), yet they occur in the sequence that he specified. Neither of the tales disturbs the sequence at all. Most of

these functions are realized in abstract terms rather than n material. However, that does not affect their morphological nature or status. They fulfil the inherent act that is symbolized by those functions. The characters usually keep within their own sphere of action though some of them move between more than one sphere. *The Young King* yields *H-I* (struggle-victory) scheme of move patterns while *The Star-Child* contains both *H-I* and *M-N* (difficult task and its resolution) move patterns. This leads to the conclusion that *The Star-Child* is more complicated in its structure.

The ambiguities pointed out in the above analysis do not seriously affect the morphological structure of the tales. Instead of disturbing the morphology of the tales, they lend a richness of interpretation to them, transforming them into a form of literature that is addressed to both children and adults.

References

Barry, P. (2002). *Beginning theory: An introduction to literary and cultural theory.* Manchester: Manchester University Press

Boas, F. (1927). *Primitive Art.*   Oslo: Harvard University Press.

Landa, G.A.J. (1990). *Narrative Theory.* University of Zaragoza. On Line Edition 2005 www.unizar.es (10.8.2006)

Propp, V. (1968). *Morphology of the Folktale.*   (Trans. by Laurence Scott). Bloomington: Indiana University [Originally published in 1928]

Wilde, O. (1963). *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. London: Hamlyn

Zipes, J. (1999). *When Dreams Came True.*   Routledge: London