

Considerations in Representing Myths, Legends, and Folktales

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Abstract

Narrative originates in forms common to oral cultures. The body of work examining and analyzing myths, legends, and folklore, provides a foundation and support for a greater psychologically resonant experience. Surveyed work includes: the characteristics of oral narrative sketched by Ong, the structural interpretation of myth described by Lévi-Strauss, the psychological types outlined by Jung, and Propp's morphology.

Introduction

The representation of event sequences is a necessary, but insufficient, condition for narrative; narrativity also entails the narratee's use of a narrative, ideally the use intended by the narrator (Rudrum 2005). Jung, Levi-Strauss, Campbell, and others suggest that a purpose of primitive narratives is to assimilate and understand noetic experience, intuition and synchronicity, and other subjective aspects of the human experience, observable only indirectly (Jung 1971, 29; Levi-Strauss 1978; Campbell 1968).

Basic aspects of human psychology and intelligence are projections onto the forms of older, primitive narratives. This is especially evident in oral traditions (Ong 1982).

The umbrella term "naïve narrative" will refer to primitive myths, legends, and folktales. "Naïve" is used in two senses: (1) explanations of physical phenomenon in such tales are naïve, e.g. that a chariot and horses daily draw the sun across the sky; and (2) it is naïve to regard such explanations as the primary purpose of these stories.

Several areas of study speak to the composition and organization of naïve narrative: Lévi-Strauss's structuralist perspective of myth (Lévi-Strauss 1955), Campbell's description of the monomyth (Campbell 1968), Ong's characterization of oral narrative (Ong 1982), and Jung's description of the collective unconscious (Jung 1971).

Characteristics of Naïve Narrative

Walter Ong identifies the following characteristics of oral narrative (Ong 1982, 36-57):

- Additive rather than subordinate. Oral structures are simple and few, almost entirely bare-bones appending.
- Aggregative. Composition is axiomatic rather than the analytic. Objects occur as bundles containing at most variants of default attributes.
- Redundant. Oral narratives have a copious, repetitive quality due to the inability of the listener to backloop during the narration, in contrast to reading.
- Conservative. Oral forms are traditionalist, with limited capacity for new content. Apparently new content is interpreted in terms of known content and fitted into existing forms.
- Close reference to concrete experience. Very little abstraction is present or necessary, due to the additive, aggregative, and conservative qualities above.
- Agonistic tone. Oral narrative is combative & polemical.
- Empathetic & participatory. An oral audience exhibits little objective distancing. The audience posture is to share the point of view of the central protagonist.
- Homeostatic. An oral culture tends to retain only facts pertaining to the current state.
- Strong contextualization. Knowledge is predominantly situational. Collections are defined by purposeful utility.

Structure of Naïve Narrative

Claude Lévi-Strauss analyzes myths by arranging components called mythemes into bundles. A myth comprises two pairs of bundles signifying a binary opposition. The Oedipus myth illustrates. Its two bundles are: (1) overrating of family relations/underrating of family relations, and (2) humanity as having divine origins/humanity as having autochthonous origins. He expresses the abstract relationship among mythemes as the canonical formula (CF) (Lévi-Strauss 1955, 442):

$$f_x(a) : f_y(b) \approx f_x(b) : f_{a-1}(y)$$

The CF is a chiasmus rather than a simple analogy (Racine 2001). It expresses (a) the dialectic exhibited by myth and (b) the contradictory attributes mythic elements embody. Dialectic may manifest along either a temporal dimension (e.g. summer/winter) or a spatial dimension (e.g. earth/sky). His claim is "that every myth (considered

as the collection of all its variants) corresponds to a formula of [this] type.” Numerous scholars have considered the claim (Maranda 2001). The interaction of opposites establishes the agonistic tone of oral narrative.

The canonical formula (CF) specifies that (a) a narrative present two pair of contrasts, one between functions and one between objects, (b) the functions and objects combine in a specific fashion to form four terms, the 4th of which expresses an object-turned-function over a function-turned object. The surface form of a given narrative depends on the assignment of references to terms. The formula does not specify the arrangement of the events that make up the story. Instead, the terms of the formula define a partition of the story’s events unrelated to their temporal arrangement.

The CF captures two aspects of naïve narratives. First, there are two contrasting pairs, two objects and two functions along with an interpretation. Second, component episodes express the interpretation of one of the four terms of the formula.

Characters in Naïve Narrative

Myths are projections originating in and determined by the makeup of the human mind (Petitot 1985). This is a development of Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious (Jung 1971). Both Jung’s archetypal characters and Propp’s *dramatis personae* (Propp 1968) are projections of the paradigmatic onto the syntagmatic (Quinn 2001).

Jung’s types dovetails with Propp’s listing of folktale character prototypes, as is expected in light of Petitot’s thesis and as suggested by the aggregative quality of oral narrative. Agents in naïve narrative occur in stereotypical roles and bear attributes that emphasize and confirm that role. “Soldiers are brave and princesses beautiful and oaks sturdy forever.” (Ong 1982, 39)

Concluding Remarks

For the purposes of synthesizing naïve narratives, the overlapping observations of Ong, Jung, Levi-Strauss, Campbell, Propp, and others offer guidance for addressing an aspect of the narrative paradox: how to constrain the user’s choices such that the story moves forward (Aylett et al. 2008). Offers presented by the story manager (Swartjes and Vromen 2007) lead the user to the next stage of the monomyth. Naïve narrative symbols refer to universals of the human psyche (Jung 1971). The peculiar fourth term of the CF expresses the requirement that a transformation of terms take place (Racine 2001). The almost boundless variants among naïve narratives arise from alternate interpretations of the four terms of the CF. Complexity and variety also arises from projection of the broad array of human cultural and traditional symbols.

Mimicking the projection of psychological universals as naïve narratives offers an avenue for engaging user experiences. Further investigation is required to identify

challenges and obstacles to such an effort; and to identify existing work that can be leveraged for this purpose.

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