
From the Writer

For this assignment, I had to analyze the “Legend of King Cormac and King Conn” using the theories of Propp and Levi-Strauss. Propp examines the roles of personages and the sequence of their actions. Levi-Strauss studies the meaning of folk narratives on four layers: geographic, sociological, economic, and cosmological. Thus, the two theories form two models of interpretation, which complement each other. I reproduced the scholars’ models to create my essay’s structure. I used Levi-Strauss’s four layers for my outline: my essay examines the role of nature in each of them. Within each layer, I gave evidence that natural elements (the wolf, the otter) fulfill the functions of characters as defined by Propp. In the process, I came to the idea of a possible flaw in the two systems: the scholars assume that only humans can be characters of a narrative and do not recognize the role of nature. Therefore, I offer my own interpretation of the symbolism of the legend’s final scene where nature drives the action. If I were to revise my paper, I would compare this legend to other similar folk narratives from different cultures in order to see whether my interpretations have, or do not have, a universal aspect as those of Propp and Levi-Strauss.

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NATURE AS THE HERO IN THE LEGEND "KING CORMAC AND KING CONN" (ANALYSIS BASED ON LEVI-STRAUSS AND PROPP)

According to the folklorist Alan Dundes, his predecessors Vladimir Propp and Claude Levi-Strauss base their systems for analyzing folktales and myths on contrary approaches. While the former describes the tale in terms of its temporal and observable structure, the latter develops a logical, almost "algebraic" formula for the narrative (Dundes 40). According to Propp's theory, every folk tale consists of a set sequence of actions, which he calls functions (Propp 20). Based on his study of Russian tales, he classified these action elements into a limited sequence of thirty-one functions (26-65). These include moments such as the point when the hero is given an interdiction and violates it, when the villain tricks the victim, when the victim unwittingly helps the enemy, and when the hero is tested, acquires a magical object, defeats the villain, and returns home to marry and ascend the throne (26-65). To execute these functions, Propp identified seven universal character roles: the villain, the hero, the helper, the false hero, the princess or king, the donor who gives the hero magical powers or an object, and the dispatcher who summons or sends away the hero (22). Each of these roles does not necessarily correspond directly to a character in the story; thus, a single character could fill both the dispatcher and the donor roles. Thus Propp exclusively categorized the functions of what he called "dramatis personae" and the sequence of their actions (20). This essay does not aim to criticize the theory's limitations in outlining the characters, but rather to demonstrate that the Proppian system does not apply perfectly to all folk narratives.

By contrast, Levi-Strauss aimed to explain the seemingly random and fantastic elements of a “myth” in order to reveal the social functions of folk narratives. Levi-Strauss conducted his anthropological study by examining folk narratives on four levels: geographic, sociological, economic, and cosmological (Levi-Strauss 7-14). His theory revolves around the concept of binary oppositions (14). For Levi-Strauss, the opposition of herbivores and carnivores in many myths is analogous to the opposition between agriculture and hunting, or between (producing) life and (causing) death. With an almost algebraic approach, Levi-Strauss organized the mythological elements into graphic representations called “schemes” in order to demonstrate the relationships between the various binary oppositions (17).

In the mid-twentieth century, Levi-Strauss famously criticized the work of his Russian colleague Propp, stimulating a bitter exchange between the two scholars. Despite this historical debate in the study of folklore, the two techniques prove compatible with each other in the analysis of the Irish legend of “King Cormac and King Conn” from David Thomson’s *The People of the Sea*. According to the legend, during a warm summer day at the lake, an otter impregnates the youngest daughter of Cormac, the heirless King of Ireland. Despite the loving care of his grandfather-adopter, the despotic boy turns against Cormac, and with the help of Fionn Mac Cuil and his army, overthrows him, and proclaims himself King Conn. This brings troubles to the people and infertility to the land. Meanwhile, Cormac’s young wife, a smith’s daughter, gives birth to the true heir, but a guardian wolf takes the baby away. King Cormac’s son is later rescued and grows up with a benevolent old king and queen, until he discovers his true identity and sets off to retrieve his throne. He reunites with his mother who explains to him that King Conn, tormented with supernatural insomnia, listens to stories every night and kills the storytellers in the morning. At the palace, King Cormac’s son impresses King Conn with his storytelling and earns his trust. In order to overcome his sleeplessness, the young man advises, King Conn has to bring his bed of feathers out into a boat in the middle of the lake where he was conceived. King Conn indeed falls deeply asleep floating on the lake, but on the third night, the otter pulls him under the water and kills him. Thus King Cormac’s son takes his place. The features of both Propp’s and Levi-Strauss’s theories are evident in this legend. Yet a close examination of the multi-

layered function of nature in this narrative points out a major loophole in the folklorists' work. The two scholars' methods for identifying characters are so broad that Propp and Levi-Strauss deliberately neglect some of the results. Although the two scholars stipulate that the active characters in myths are exclusively human, in this text, a careful application of their systems recognizes another key personage, nature.

Both the Proppian and Levi-Straussian systems assume that the hero role must be filled by a human character, but when "King Cormac and King Conn" is divided into layers according to setting, it becomes evident that nature too can drive the action in the legend. For the purpose of this analysis, the term "nature" takes account of weather, environment, and animals. At the geographic level of the legend, according to the Levi-Strauss system, the natural environment and the surroundings of humans form a binary opposition. Traditionally in Irish folklore, nature shelters magical creatures such as the otherworldly and unpredictable fairy folk (Thomson 35). Thus, nature symbolizes people's fear of the unknown. In contrast, man-inhabited areas bring about a sense of security among the human community. This tale has transformed the wild into a place where human fate depends on nature. Thus when people cross the threshold between their world and the (super)natural, the "actions" of nature propel a chain of events. The natural world functions as the Proppian hero in the episodes with the otter and the wolf. When the princess enters the reign of water creatures, an otter fulfills the lack of an heir to the throne. When the smith's daughter brings the son of King Cormac to the forest, a wolf fulfills the child's need for safety and obtains a parent function. In contrast, man-made homes such as King Cormac's castle, Fionn Mac Cuil's court, and the smith's home are places where people act on their own without any paranormal intervention (Thomson 53, 59). From a more scholarly point of view, the distinction among two geographical sublevels in the legend complicates the structure beyond both folklorists' techniques: it turns out that in a natural environment, animals and weather act as the hero, while in man-inhabited locations, people drive the action.

On a sociological level, nature's dualistic role of a villain and a helper associates with the legend's depiction of the accepted course of events in human life: marriage, birth, inheritance. Traditionally, Irish folklore portrays otters as female, playful, and helpful spirits (Thomson 64). However,

in this narrative, this magical animal has an ominous image. The male king otter that catches King Cormac's youngest daughter in the lake represents an abnormal communion between human and nature (50). Levi-Strauss would see a typical binary opposition in the function of the otter, and Propp would simultaneously assign it two different roles. On one hand, according to Propp, the otter is a villain because he complicates the life of the royal family and, eventually, brings anguish to the kingdom through the conceived child (Propp's Function 8, Villainy). On the other hand, the creature fits the definition of a helper who kills the cruel King Conn and thus resolves the task for King Cormac's son (Function 19, Restoration, and Function 26, Solution). Although both analyzing approaches can be adjusted to fit the episode, neither of the folklorists attributes great significance to the otter's appearance. Interpreted from a socially-conscious standpoint, the incident serves as a warning to young women to obey their parents instead of exposing themselves to sexual danger. King Cormac's reaction—"... you had the look of a maiden in your eye and the bloom of youth in your cheek, but today you look to be carrying a child"—directly reprimands girls for not protecting their innocence and dignity (Thomson 50). From a folklorist's point of view, the legend gives out a warning about the supernatural: the attempt to go against nature's ways in marriage and birth has unwanted consequences for the whole community.

Yet nature not only punishes, but also saves. The wolf and the three cubs, according to Propp, act as helpers to the rightful heir to King Cormac's throne. When the wolf delivers the newly born son of Cormac to a safe shelter, it liquidates the baby's lack of a father and rescues him from potential pursuit (Function 15, Spatial Transference, Function 19, Restoration, and Function 22, Rescue). Simply put, since the wolf replaces a human parent, it indisputably acts as a character. As the sociological layer of the narrative evolves in this episode, nature itself defends the sanctity of birth and inheritance. Unmistakably, the wolf opposes the otter. Several universally symbolic binary oppositions emerge from this confrontation: land–water, father–mother, abuser–savior, which confirm that although dualistic, nature occupies a main role at this structural level.

Even when Levi-Strauss notes the relationship between characters and inanimate nature in connection to a myth's economic context, he avoids acknowledging that nature's role is as active as that of people.

Weather and land undergo several transformations in response to character decisions and vice versa. At first, the natural world conducts itself in unison with the routine of the king, who fulfills his royal duties according to the natural cycles of the seasons: every summer, King Cormac goes on a tour around the palaces in his kingdom (Thomson 50). Day and night alternate without causing discomfort to the king and his daughters: in the sun, the girls indulge in “sports and pleasure,” and after dark, they welcome their father with “laughter and kisses” (50). But when the climate suddenly changes, it brings change to the royal family. The paragraph that marks an important alteration from the normal course of events starts with “Things went on like that until a very warm summer” (50). “One very warm day,” the three sisters violate their father’s order not to swim (50). In the language of Proppian analysis, the unusually warm season drives the king to a longer than his usual Absentation (Function 1). The warmth and the freshness of the lake lure the daughters to violate the interdiction that Cormac had established during “previous” times (Function 3). Therefore, the inanimate nature responds to reversals in the human world and differentiates between periods in the narrative.

The climate once again changes when King Conn unlawfully ascends the throne: during King Cormac’s reign, the weather is good and the land gives plenty of food, but when King Conn gains power, the wind changes direction to the north, the farms become infertile, and winter arrives (56). The reversal in nature’s phenomena responds to the dramatic change in the royal family. Once again, Levi-Strauss’s binary oppositions characterize this response: old king–new king, fertility–infertility, southern wind–northern wind, and summer–winter. Nature mediates between good weather during the reign of a benevolent king and natural disasters in times of a destructive king; it inclines from one extreme to the other depending on the behavior of humans. With Conn’s usurpation, the climate aggravates and worsens the conditions for living, farming, and working. This synchrony implies that the whole of nature rebels against the dishonest act and, according to Levi-Strauss, explains the actual harsh weather to the folk audience. This episode demonstrates that nature has a will of its own. It is more than mere landscape. Therefore, although Propp and Levi-Strauss do not exclusively state that nature can act as a character

in response to other characters' behavior, the folklorists' systems clearly give the reader the tools to reach this conclusion.

The analyzing approaches of Levi-Strauss and Propp seem to be inefficient when explaining the role of nature in connection to the cosmological, the farthest from reality, level. The bonds between human beings and supernatural creatures testify for the curious interconnections in the cosmos. Surprisingly, the three families in the legend resemble each other tremendously. The families of King Cormac, the smith, and the wolf all consist of a single parent (at least only one parent appears in the narrative) and three children. This peculiarity of the narrative has no equivalent in the two folklorists' works. The text does not offer a binary opposition or a basis of comparison of the families to a contrasting unit.

A more suitable analytical method, it appears, would be to treat the three families as universal symbols. From this perspective, the legend demonstrates the balance in which man and nature supposedly should live because they are initially the same and share common values: the continuation of life in peace and harmony. When the equilibrium between the worlds of humans and animals breaks, unnatural events, such as the birth of an otter-man, occur. The narrator uses a fictional approach when describing King Conn, who cannot sleep at night (Thomson 61). This insomnia suggests Conn's connection to the sea creatures and the fact that he does not completely belong to the human world (62). He is a deviation from the established order in the universe, which denies him the right to such a natural process as sleep.

Furthermore, the theories of Levi-Strauss and Propp fail to account for the symbolism in King Conn's death scene. An appropriate interpretation would be to consider the lake, the chained-up wooden boat, and the bed of feathers as representations of the three mythological ambiences, water, earth, and air. Since there is no duality or contradiction in this interpretation, it does not match completely Levi Strauss's ideas. The diagram (or schemata, as Levi-Strauss uses the term) of the scene can be represented as three concentric circles (land surrounding a lake with a boat in the middle), which stand for harmony among the elements. The abnormal otter-son, who distorts the harmony between men and animals and throughout the kingdom, in the center of the picture is eventually engulfed by nature. Although it is the climax of the legend, this scene appears to

lack a hero according to Propp and Levi-Strauss (the sleeping King Conn is neither very active nor entirely human). Yet by the laws of both theories, such a major moment must have a hero. In reality, the scene demonstrates that nature holds the key to creation and destruction. The second appearance of the otter closes the frame that encompasses the tale and thus completes another compositional circle. To conclude, in this legend, nature can cause chaos and harmony with equal ease because it drives all the action in the universe; it is the most essential character in the narrative. To use Proppian terms in a counter-Proppian logic, the narrative culminates with the victory of nature, the hero, over the unnatural, the villain (Function 18). In other words, in different situations, nature attains different roles of major characters: a hero, a villain, a helper, and never simply the role of scenery.

The methods of Levi-Strauss and Propp adequately expose the general structure of folktales but fail to account for the function of non-human characters such as nature in “King Cormac and King Conn.” Although the animals and the scenery are not personified, their involvement is undeniably driven by reason. Everything about them but the human shape fits the definition of a character, yet Propp and Levi-Strauss deny them this status. The foregoing analysis opens room for the consideration of non-human entities as symbolic characters within the structure of the narrative. Each of these scholars’ techniques applies on a micro level when discussing the role of nature in connection to each structural level. In order to appreciate the full complexity of the narrative structure of this legend, scholars should acknowledge the active role of nature as a character.

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MILITZA ZIKATANOVA came to Boston University from Sofia, Bulgaria in September 2008. She attended an American high-school back home, and she knew that America is the best place to study business. She chose Boston because she found the European feel of the city irresistible. Sailing on the Charles, going to a Red Sox game, and ice-skating on the Frog Pond have been some of the unforgettable moments during her freshman year. More recently, she completed her summer semester in Madrid, where she fell in love with the Spanish sights and lifestyle. Now, she's looking forward to a relaxing August at the Bulgarian Black Sea resorts with her SMG Accounting homework. This essay was written for Anthony Buccitelli's WR150: Folk Narratives in Northern Europe.