

## DIDACTIC DIMENSIONS IN ROMANIAN FOLK AND FAIRY TALES

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### Abstract:

*The article briefly presents directions in the interpretation of folk tales and their connection to fairy tales as part of building (national) culture. The article's focus is on the didactic function of both folk and fairy tales. Therefore, two comparisons show the similar function for both category of tales. A first comparison is for the category of fantastic tales, between the folk tale, "Voinicul florilor", collected by I. Gr. Sbiera, and the fairy tale "Făt frumos din lacrimă", by Mihai Eminescu. In the short-story-like tale category, the comparison is between the folk tale Stan Pățitul, collected by Ion Pop Reteganul, and the fairy tale "Dănilă Prepeleac", by Ion Creangă.*

**Keywords:** folk tales; fairy tales; canons; didactic value.

Until not long ago, folklore was considered the effect of the mythic imagination, archetypal, timeless, and even representing the traits of a people's constant character - for example, *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* (1778-1779) by J. G. Von Herder. For Herder, people are not objective about their tradition because they are "traditional", yet the "modern" nation-state appropriates the product of their aesthetic endeavours for unification around a single principle. He argued that oral poetry was the highest expression of the people's character. Folk songs also embody a nation's beliefs, feelings, perceptions, and collective strengths. (Cocchiara 1971: 176-177)

The usual argument, religious discourse cannot be part of nationalism. Thus, people who later developed Herder's notion of the popular for nationalist purposes in Europe focused more on language as a secular and aesthetic vehicle for propagating a national ideology that glorified an essential ontological core based on ethnolinguistic identity.

On the contrary, recent folkloric studies highlight its historicity, the connection between the emergence of genres,

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their ideological agenda, and the distribution of texts in contemporaneity. The list of examples includes such a distinguished scholar as Jack Zipes (*Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization*, 1983). Jack Zipes believes that the Countess d'Aulnoy invented the genre of the fairy tale, the author of stories (*Les Contes des Fées*, 1697) very close to the fairy tales that circulated orally, who coined the term (*contes de fées*) and was the first collector of folklore. Zipes sees in her fairy tales, as in those signed by her compatriot, Charles Perrault, an attempt to reform relations in the patriarchal family, to emancipate women and children in line with the other efforts to create a more democratic society that led to the outbreak the French Revolution a century later.

Jack Zipes shows in one of his interviews that not all famous creation is meant to cross the barrier of time into the collective consciousness, in the form of memes, by memes being understood as an element of a culture or a behavioural system that passes from an individual to another by imitation or other non-genetic means:

“What is important to bear in mind is that not all folk and fairy tales are memetic. Only particular tales that are involved in evolutionary civilizing processes are significant and stick. Therefore, much of my work, even before I was familiar with memetics, has dealt with grounding the history of tales, that is, studying their origins, development, and causes in all the strains of a particular tale type. I have continued to do this in all of my theoretical books up to this day, and though there are faults in the analyses of many social scientists concerning memetics, there are now a few hundred or more books and essays that take memetics seriously and may one-day offer proof that memes do exist in various forms” (Marshall, 2022: para11).

In his work, *The Mess Inside: Narrative, Emotions and Mind*, Peter Goldie shows:

“There is a familiar distinction between a narrative as a product, and a narrative as a process. The product is the

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content of what is narrated—the story that is told. (...)The process sense of narrative is the process, the activity, of producing a particular narrative, whether for the first time or not. It is this sense we have in mind. (...) Sometimes we also speak of a narrative in a third sense, as a particular text”. (Goldie, 2012:2)

The former includes anything with a narrative structure, the story being told, while a specific human activity produces the narrative structure. Paul Ricoeur considers this narrative structure resulting from developing an understanding for readers and viewers. The French philosopher states that literary genres develop a kind of understanding in readers and viewers. This is a way of understanding reality close to morality's wisdom, designated as narrative intelligence.

Stories and fairy tales, as part of the collective memory of the popular, create an imaginary shared by the same group members, starting in childhood. Fairy tale narratives feed individuals with a sense of life experience. In addition, these narratives contribute to the imposition of a social canon in the collective imaginary. As a result, people learn how to think, feel, and behave in specific social situations.

Mark Turner defines narrative imagination as understanding a complex of objects, events, and actors as organized by our knowledge of the story. This is the fundamental tool of thought. To understand reality and each other, human minds combine stories with projection; one story is projected onto another. In his view, the intricate combination of story and projection is the essence of the parable and the central principle of our experience and knowledge. (Leersen, 2006:571)

Folklore studies contribute to culture and its “cultivation”, as noted by Joep Leersen, who constructs a culture matrix represented below:

		Types of cultivation		
		Salvage	productivity	propagation
Cultural fields	language	language description	language translations	language activism, language planning

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	discourse	text editions	translations, literature, history, criticism	education, festivals, commemorations
	material culture	archaeography	Monuments protection, musealisation, architecture	dedicatory investment of public space
	practices performed	folklore studies	Folklore revival, national music, rustic literature	folk pageantry

Table 1: Culture and its Cultivation

Source: Leersen, *Nationalism and the cultivation of culture* (2006)

Fairy tales are shared to entertain, educate people, and protect culture in every society. They are considered valuable for both national and universal cultures.

Fairy tales reflect people's hopes and aspirations, justice and injustice, life and death, hard work and laziness, imagination, and aesthetic ideas. The nature of the events in the fairy tale and the structure of the images is very simple. Depending on the nature of the subject matter and the era in which it appeared, fairy tales can be divided into animal tales, fantastic or extraordinary, and fairy tales from real life. The fairy tale is based on life experience, national identity, traditions, customs, and psychology.

The folk tale has an essential meaning in cultural manifestations and global society. Originating in archaic human communities, it has been passed down from generation to generation and functions as a connection between the past and the present.

Vladimir Propp is one of the first researchers to provide the necessary documentation and features for the genre, arguing that the folktale is constructed by certain character functions, which build specific narrative patterns - the folktale pattern focuses on the hero's initial journey to restore the original bliss that was disturbed. In his quest, he encounters antagonistic forces, magical agents, trials and metamorphosis to restore the peace of the original situation. On the other hand, the cult fairy tale has the same structure. In addition, however,

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it has an author identifiable in the historical setting and expands the universe of the story, with unique ideas and views of the author, to literature.

In this regard, one finds a so-called universal model of the folk tale, elements that can be found in the world's stories and transcend time and space. We find similar stories in isolated communities of different countries, events, or actions, just like those in the core culture. This model, repeated in cult fairy tales, also carries a didactic or educational cultural function that we want to highlight further by analysing four fairy tales, two from folk tales and two from fairy tales.

In the category of fantastic, I chose a folk tale, *Voinicul florilor*, collected by I. Gr. Sbiera, and a fairy tale, *Făt frumos din lacrimă*, by Mihai Eminescu. In the short-story tale category, I chose the folk tale *Stan Pățitul*, collected by Ion Pop Reteganul, and the fairy tale *Dănilă Prepeleac*, by Ion Creangă. I will compare the tales using the grid in the table below.

	<b>Fantastic tale</b>	<b>Short story tale</b>
<b>Dominant character</b>	Fantastic (+mythological)	Realistic
		Comical Demonstrative
<b>Localisation</b>	No	No/ yes
<b>Situational character</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Function</b>	FORMATION (afectivă, etică, estetică) INFORMATIVĂ (cognitivă, inițiatică, identitară)	INFORMATION (cognitivă, inițiatică, identitară) FORMATIVĂ (afectivă, etică, estetică)
<b>Dimension</b>	Educational Didactic	Educational Didactic

The first comparison includes the fantastic tales named above. *Voinicul florilor*, collected by I. Gr. Sbiera takes its title

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not from the main character but from the character who helps the main character in his initiatory journey, assuming the banishment from his father's court for the release of a master bird, *Voinicul florilor*. Banished alongside an evil and envious servant, the emperor's child cleverly foils the servant's plans to kill him. The child gives up his material possessions and high social position to save his life. Regaining his social position, the boy once again runs into the machinations of the argot and the credulity of a second emperor after his father, who does not discern in communication with those of the socially intermediate classes the desire to aggrandize himself and do anything for this. Helped by the Guardian of the Flowers, the rescued master bird, the child successfully completes his initiatory course and fulfils his destiny.

The tale does not refer to a specific location of the events. Instead, the characters are named according to their most obvious function or quality. For example, the boy highlights his lack of initiation towards maturity. In addition, the fairy tale carries an ethical component showing that evil and scheming do not survive, and the reward for evil deeds is not delayed.

*Făt-Frumos din Lacrimă* by Mihai Eminescu places its narrative base in the folk tale, using predefined elements, but turns into a more elaborate construction. At the beginning of the story, we find aspects common to all folk tales, the so-called initial situation that establishes the setting of the plot, the time, the space and the characters: in ancient times, when the people of today were only the project of a distant future when God Himself was treading with His feet sacred the rocky deserts of the earth—in those old days there was a king. We can observe the usual formula for the beginning of fairy tales. The time and place are not clearly stated; it falls under the circumstances of once upon a time, in a great kingdom, set somewhere in a mythical and legendary context.

However, Eminescu tends to disrupt the traditional aspects of the folk tale. As Ioana Bot states, although we can identify the motifs attached to the folktale in the story, there are some anomalies in the structure following the victory of Făt-Frumos against the Forest Mother and the return to the kingdom of his sword brother. Usually, the folk tale was

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supposed to end when the hero defeated the forces of evil, completed his evolution, and found a bride. However, the end of this narrative journey is only the beginning of a new one, as his godbrother lacks something, a bride this time, and once again asks the Fairchild to help him. However, the hero makes two initiations, one in confronting the Forest Mother, where he finds his bride, and the second in search of the Genar's daughter, to bring a bride to his godbrother.

Both the fairy tale collected by Sbiera and the one created by Eminescu has the same: the dominant character is fantastic, the place and time are not specified and belong to the times when fantastic creatures related to people, the initiatory path is present in both fairy tales, and the affective, ethical, also because the lesson of good conquering evil is present both throughout and at the end of the tale.

As far as short stories are concerned, the folk tale collected by Ion Pop Reteganul is named after the main character, Stan Pățitul, so named for his permanent involvement in unpleasant or crisis events, which he overcomes thanks to his intelligence and courage. The fairy tale created by Ion Creangă, following the model of folk tales, also bears the name of Dănilă Prepeleac, so named because the only thing he had accomplished was a stick that helped stack hay, called a *prepeleac*. Although there is no concrete indication regarding the space, the folk tale collected by Reteganul suggests the Transylvanian space through the presence of the German and Creangă's Moldavian one through his character's name. Furthermore, the situational character is present in both tales through the narrative sequences that show our hero in multiple crises that he does not overcome due to the behavioural and psychological strengths that he presents from the initial character descriptions. Initiation, however, takes place in the end through decisive behaviour in the face of the obstacle, which reveals a latent intelligence, refused for use until then. Moreover, through the character's moral exhortation to overcome his condition, there is an educational function.

We observe from the two comparisons that fantastical and short story-like fairy tales have an educational function, regardless of whether we are discussing a folk tale collected and brought to the reader through print or a fairy tale created on

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the model of folk ones. From the point of view of the educational dimension, we can say that the border between folk and fairy tale is erased and especially that folk literature proves to be a cultural element that transcends generations and inspires the cult literary creation with which it is twinned in the components that it conveys their identity, affectivity and initiative.

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