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CHARACTERS IN FILM: A NOVEL INTERPRETATION OF PROPP'S MODEL

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Abstract

The study examines the morphological model of narrative given by Vladimir Propp in the film *Enchanted* (2007). The study tries to put forth the idea that the characters in the film are not just characters following some functions or performing an action but are an important part of the plot. The analysis treats the film as a text and draws on the elements presented in the plot of the film. The characters in the film conform to the roles that are identified by Propp. The characters embody different qualities that contribute to the development of the plot. This leads to the interdependence of the characters and the plot that results in the development of both.

Keywords: Propp, Narrative, Morphological, Functions, Dramatist.

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Introduction

The art of storytelling goes back to the prehistoric times. Evidence suggests that humans have been telling stories for perhaps as long as the human history exists. (Rauf, Saqib, 2023), With development in the knowledge the form of storytelling changed and from oral tradition we moved to written stories and with the advent of a screen like television the stories were made visual. The medium of storytelling may have changed but the underlying characteristics of the basic form of story remained the same. Vladimir Propp, a Russian folklorist, examined hundreds of fairy tales and concluded that all these fairy tales have an underlying pattern that they follow. He identifies eight typical character types and 31 functions of these characters that one can identify in a fairy tale. He may have done very limited research considering only 102 fairy tales, but his work proved to be a seminal piece in the study of narrative. We took up Propp's morphological model of narrative to discuss different characters, their functions, their qualities and how they contribute to the plot in the film *Enchanted* (2007).

Theoretical Framework

Vladimir Propp (1895–1970), a Russian folklorist, analysed selected Russian fairy tales to identify the simplest irreducible narrative elements present in these tales. He identified 31 "functions" of the fairy tales that run through all of them. His study published in 1928 as *Morphology of the Folktale*, but it was not popular until after thirty years when it was finally translated into English. Application of his work is not limited to fairy tales only, but it is applicable to all types of narratives. After the publication of his seminal work many folklorists around the world started to see that all the stories share a unique element, that they can all be replicated. In many parts of the world there are similar stories that have an identifiable plot, distinguishable characters, and comparable situations. Therefore, Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* is not just useful to

understand folk or fairy tales but narratology in general. Propp sheds light on the word "morphology," as it was taken up from Botany and means the study of different parts of a plant and their relationship to not just each other but to the whole as well. He maintains that he attempts to study the deep structures of the fairy tales to do something like morphology. The basis of his study is Aleksandr N. Afanás'ev's collection of *Russian Folktales* (1957). The collection features almost six hundred folktales but Propp used just 102 tales. In his work Propp laments the lack of investigatory or scientific research work in the area where there are tons of fairy tales available for research, but critics or folklorists lack the scientific base that they can use for analysis. The paradox of the similarity of stories can be resolved by "correct morphological study" (Propp, 1968, p. 15). He says that if we cannot break a tale into its components, we cannot make a comparison and without comparison we cannot shed light on the relationship between stories from different parts of the worlds. According to Propp the components parts of the stories and separated for the sake of comparison and then the stories are compared according to their components that will result in "morphology" (Propp, 1968, p. 19). Propp compares four events in fairy tales to begin his morphological method:

1. A tsar gives an eagle to a hero. The eagle carries the hero away to another kingdom.
2. An old man gives a horse to Súcenko. The horse carries Súcenko away to another kingdom.
3. A Sorcerer gives a boat to Iván. The boat takes Iván away to another kingdom.
4. A princess gives Iván a ring. The ring takes Iván away to another kingdom. (Propp, 1968, p. 19-20).

In the preceding instance both constants and variables are present. The names and attributes of dramatis personae change but their actions and functions remain constant. This suggests that stories often attribute

similar actions to certain characters. Propp says that "This makes possible the study of the tale according to the functions of its *dramatis personae*" (Propp, 1968, p. 20). Function as defined by Propp is "an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action" (Propp, 1968, p. 21). He suggests that in different tales the function of a certain dramatist personae is similar, and the recurrence of the function is astounding. He also maintains that "the number of functions is extremely small" while "the number of personages is extremely large" (Propp, 1968, p. 20). He based his structural model on following criteria:

1. Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale.
2. The number of functions known to the fairy tale is limited. (Propp, 1968, p. 21)
3. The sequence of functions is always identical. (Propp, 1968, p. 22)
4. All fairy tales are of one type regarding their structure. (Propp, 1968, p. 23) (author's Italics)

Propp follows the order dictated by the tale to enumerate the functions of dramatist personae. Each function is presented by roman numeral and has an abbreviated definition followed by a sign and a summary of its essence. Propp's complete set of functions is as follows:

Initial Situation (α): Not a function but has important value as a morphological element (because it is not a function it does not have a roman numeral to represent it).

1. Absentation (β): "One member of the family absents himself from home" (Propp, 1968, p. 26).
2. Interdiction (γ): "An interdiction is addressed to the hero" (Propp, 1968, p. 26-27).
3. Violation (δ): "The Interdiction is violated" (Propp, 1968, p. 27-28).

4. Reconnaissance (ϵ): "The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance" (Propp, 1968, p. 28).
5. Delivery (ζ): "The villain receives information about his victim" (Propp, 1968, p. 28-29).
6. Trickery (η): "The villain attempts to deceive his victim in order to take possession of him or his belongings" (Propp, 1968, p. 29-30).
7. Complicity (θ): "The victim submits to deception and thereby unwittingly helps his enemy" (Propp, 1968, p. 30).
8. Villainy (A): "The villain causes harm or injury to a member of the family" (Propp, 1968, p. 30-35).
- 8a. Lack (a): "One member of the family lacks something or desires to have something" (Propp, 1968, p. 35-36).
9. Mediation, the Connective Incident (B): "Misfortune or lack is made known; the hero is approached with a request or command; he is allowed to go, or he is dispatched" (Propp, 1968, p. 36-38).
10. Beginning Counteraction (C): "The seeker agrees to or decides upon counteraction" (Propp, 1968, p. 38).
11. Departure (\uparrow): "The hero leaves home" (Propp, 1968, p. 39).
12. The First Function of the Donor (D): "The hero is tested, interrogated, attacked, etc., which prepares the way for his receiving either a magical agent or helper" (Propp, 1968, p. 39-42).
13. The Hero's Reaction (E): "The hero reacts to the actions of the future Donor" (Propp, 1968, p. 42-43).
14. Provision or Receipt of a Magical Agent (F): "The hero acquires the use of a magical agent" (Propp, 1968, p. 43-50).
15. Spatial Transference between two Kingdoms or Guidance (G): "The hero is transferred, delivered, or led to the whereabouts of an object of search" (Propp, 1968, p. 50-51).
16. Struggle (H): "The hero and the villain join in direct combat" (Propp, 1968, p. 51-52).

17. Branding, Marking (J): "The hero is branded" (Propp, 1968, p. 52).
 18. Victory (I): "The villain is defeated" (Propp, 1968, p. 53).
 19. Misfortune or lack liquidated (K): "The initial misfortune or lack is liquidated" (Propp, 1968, p. 53-55).
 20. Return (↓): "The hero returns" (Propp, 1968, p. 55-56).
 21. Pursuit, chase (Pr): "The hero is pursued" (Propp, 1968, p. 56-57)
 22. Rescue (Rs): "Rescue of the hero from pursuit" (Propp, 1968, p. 57-59).
 23. Unrecognized arrival (o): "The hero, unrecognized, arrives home or in another country" (Propp, 1968, p. 60).
 24. Unfounded claims (L): "A false hero presents unfounded claims" (Propp, 1968, p. 60).
 25. Difficult Task (M): "A difficult task is proposed to the hero" (Propp, 1968, p. 60-61).
 26. Solution (N): "The task is resolved" (Propp, 1968, p. 62).
 27. Recognition (Q): "The hero is recognized" (Propp, 1968, p. 62).
 28. Exposure (Ex): "The false hero or villain is exposed" (Propp, 1968, p. 62).
 29. Transfiguration (T): "The hero is given a new appearance" (Propp, 1968, p. 62-63).
 30. Punishment (U): "The villain is punished" (Propp, 1968, p. 63).
 31. Wedding (W): "The hero is married and ascends the throne" (Propp, 1968, p. 63-64).
- Along with these functions Propp also identified eight broad character types that are present in almost every fairy tale and serve a specific purpose. These types are:
1. The hero, the key person in the story and the story revolves around him. He is usually the person with whom readers associate the most.
 2. The helper, hero is supported by a helper in their quest, helper is often a magician or an old person who appears at a critical moment in the story and provides support.

3. The villain, the sharpest contrast against the hero is the villain, who struggles directly against the hero.
4. The false hero, a person who pretends to be a hero but is a potential complication in the plot, he maybe a variant on the villain.
5. The donor usually bestows special something on the hero, it can be some special magical weapon or some words of wisdom that help him through his quest.
6. The dispatcher, the hero is sent on a quest by someone early in the story and that person fills in the role of dispatcher.
7. The princess, she is the object that a hero may sought, or she may be presented to him as an award after returning successfully from his quest.
8. The princess' father, he may dispatch the hero on his quest to save the princess or he may constraint the princess.

The study of these characters, how they appear in a story, what functions they perform and what categories they fall into leads us to an understanding of the characters in depth. All the qualities of the characters provide the story with its "brilliance, charm, and beauty" (Propp, 1968, p. 87).

Research Objectives

1. To highlight the possibility that Propp's morphological model of narrative is applicable to films and can enhance the understanding of a narrative.
2. To focus on certain qualities of the dramatist personae as a vital force to drive the plot.

Research Questions

1. What functions (as identified by Propp) do the dramatist personae perform in Enchanted?
2. What are the qualities that make the dramatist personae an essential part of the plot?

Literature Review

Muhabat et. al. (2015) in their analysis of Arabic Folklore Hatim Tai use Propp's model as theoretical framework. They argue that the functions enumerated by Propp are present in

the folk tale but not in the same order. These functions are, however, well knitted and create an interesting narrative for the reader. The study highlights the fact that Propp's model is not limited to Russian Folktales and can be applied to stories produced in other parts of the world. In a narrative analysis of the film *Phir Milenge*, [Sreenivas \(2007\)](#) identified the 31 functions in the film, however, the sequence of functions was not present in the order Proposed by Propp. Absence of the sequence was attributed to advancements in film technology that allow for more complicated formats for storytelling. Nonetheless, Propp's framework was useful to understand how messages are constructed to convey meaningful information in an entertaining manner ([Sreenivas, 2007](#)). This study uses a film to claim that even complex plotlines offer the same model of functions that Propp identified in Russian folktales. This study helps our study in making the claim that Propp's model can be applied to narratives other than folk and fairy tales. [Lahlou \(2017\)](#) in his analysis of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* argues that the usage of the elements of folktale by Dickens is not by chance. The functions that Propp has identified for dramatist personae and the way Dicken structured his narrative have striking similarities. The functions enumerated by Propp constitute an organic unity in the fiction produced by Dickens and proves that every narrative follows a structure that that can be divided into its major morphological components. [Kang \(1983\)](#) opines that narrative describes morphology since all the components of folklore relate with each other as a whole. That's why morphology is utilized to narrate these stories. The question also arises here that how a model according to the culture of Russia is applicable on other cultural folklores. He tactfully answers this question as constant values of the folklores are recurrent functions. Folklores contain a theme and a message for readers and listeners. These are not just for aesthetic purposes. There are

some moral values which are rooted in all cultures and due to the similarity in cultural values, these models are applicable from one culture to another culture. [Molt \(2012\)](#) reports the criticism on the Propp's model by Levi-Strauss who doubts about the validity of folklores since they have been transmitted orally. So that, the model neglects tone, mode and other linguistic characteristics. He supports structuralism model rather than narrative. However, narrative model is preferred by numerous researchers because it bestows freedom to the story writer to create a story. [Kang \(1983\)](#) postulates that, considering its functions, writing will be divided into four types. First one is narrative, and it looks easy. In writing, it's better to adopt narrative method, because it is close to the writer's experiences. Another researcher who strongly supports Propp's model and vis-à-vis criticizes structuralism approach through psychological dimension is [Szilas \(2003\)](#) in which it is argued that there are three layers of any drama. First layer is a discourse layer, in which some messages are conveyed. Propp's model and the functions he identified have been taken up by numerous scholars in their research to highlight the fact that the all the stories have similar underlying characteristics. All the characters present in a story serve a type and consequently make a narrative that is like other such narratives in some other part of the world. The existing literature, however, lacks any discussion on the qualities of the dramatist personae and how these qualities contribute to the meaning and importance of the stories. The present study will try to fill this gap by using Propp's model to identify the qualities of dramatist personae and discussing how they contribute to the overall understanding of the story.

Research Methodology

The film [Enchanted \(2007\)](#) is analysed as a text in the light of the narrative functions that are outline by Propp in his *Morphology of the Folktale*. The study makes use of textual

analysis as a method of choice as it gives the freedom of interpretation to the researchers and allows the discussion on not just language that a text is presented in but also its visuals.

Analysis

In *Morphology of the Folktale*, Vladimir Propp offers another way to think about story classification and asserts that folktales conform to a schema of seven characters and thirty-one functions. He, being a Russian formalist, studies Russian folktales. However, the recurring plot devices which he has identified in Russian folktales can be observed in almost all stories, be it novels or films. The elements that Propp finds in the fairy tales have wider applications when we think about the concept of genre in the movies. The article uses these elements to study the narrative function of the film *Enchanted*, which offers more sophistication than many fairy tales when it comes to a realistic portrayal of the visually fantastic world. Since films create space, continuity, parallel lines of action, and depth of character that goes quite beyond the simple structure of fairy tales, it is important to analyse their narrative structure. The *Morphology of the Folktale* offers a broader spectrum of a narrative model as Propp goes beyond the structural components to study how the character is tied to the plot. It seems as if he has developed that sense that character and plot are one and the same thing. At the most basic level, Propp offers a "Dramatis personae" which means people of the drama in Latin, he finds that usually there are some archetypal characters who appear in every story time and again. Giving a list of all these characters he asserts that these characters appear for a reason in fairy tales. The character tropes not only give meaning to the story, but the functions of the characters are the most constant, stable element in a tale (Propp, 1968, p. 78). There are some character types who seek the truth, some characters are constant in their function to create destruction in the fantasy world and some characters remain true

to their cause of uniting the true lovers. To analyse the story of the film *Enchanted* we need to first identify the cast of characters as introduced by Propp in his *Morphology of Folktale*. Like every other fairy-tale, this story has a hero, a princess, a villain, a donor, a magical realm, and a false hero. In the film, Edward the hero is on a quest to find his princess, Giselle. On his way to solve the mystery of his lost love, he encounters negative forces personified in his stepmother Queen Narissa, whom we can rightly call the villain as she creates trouble for Edward to reach Giselle. Extending her evil ensorcellment to Nathaniel, she abuses her power and orders the royal servant to kill Giselle. But to counter these evil forces the donor in the form of Pip, the magical chipmunk lends support to the hero. The dissection of fairy tales into their components is important to understand how they are combined to make a whole and bestow meaning to the text. The assumption that underlies Propp's whole project is that every fairy-tale has a determinate structure and beneath the apparent differences, there is something that stays the same (Propp, 1968, p. 32). These identical features play a key role because there are always two characters fulfilling the same role. Propp identifies these two characters as the hero and donor. The hero in the film *Enchanted* has a decisive role and goal to achieve, and the donor, Pip the chipmunk, provides him with the necessary support to achieve his goal. The guidance or support that hero gets from the donor in fairy tales can be in the form of a ring or magical object. Here, in the film *Enchanted*, the hero gets guidance from the chipmunk in the form of signals, which it gives to the hero so that Edward should recognize the reality of his servant and acknowledge the cause of all the misfortunes he is bringing in his masters' way to reach Giselle. The guidance or support from the donor is to direct the hero where he needs to go and lay out the plan of action to fulfil his quest. These stock characters meet up with

plot functions, thus making the plot and the characters become one. Vladimir Propp helps us to see the wisdom in this claim and he develops this ability in the audience or the readers to analyse why the plot and the characters are so tightly bound together. For instance, in the film, *Enchanted*, the quest of Prince Edward is to find "the true love kiss" (Adams, 2007) i.e., Giselle, his dream princess. His struggle to find his true love remains constant no matter if he is transported to the other world or if his quest is obliterated several times by the forces working against the true lovers. Despite all the coarse tactics, Edward remains steadfast in his goal to achieve the princess. It is almost the same constant function of the character that the audience can witness in the film *Minority Report*, where the devoted detective wants to know the truth. He wants to know the reality no matter what, or even when all the evidence goes against the suspects and ultimately, he gets killed in this pursuit. This is one thing we learn from Propp, as he suggests that this kind of character type recurs in all kinds of fairy tales. The analysis of the structural components, both the plot and the characters of a story, offers the readers a deeper interpretation of the text. Every character type identified systematically by Propp is to understand the function they play in the events of the story. The main function of the donor, the chipmunk, lies in sending the signals to the hero and the function of the hero lies in the reception of those signals to be able to achieve his goal. The hero gets this reception of signals and guidance because of the ultimate goodness inherent in his character. The same is true for the princess and the villain, the villain does not necessarily have to be evil, or the princess must not always be beautiful or even female, but they must be part of the whole structure of the fairy-tale roles. The question that lies beyond this identification of character types is to investigate why for example a hero is called a hero. (Soomro, Shayan, 2023), There is a general perception that a hero must be

strong, muscular, handsome, and rich but in fact, the thing that makes a hero is his struggle against the villain to rescue the princess. If we consider for a while, that there is no villain and Edward marries Giselle without any opposition then *Enchanted* will not be a fairy-tale and Edward will not be a hero. He becomes a hero because he is ready to sacrifice his royalty for the peasant girl when he leaves his princely state and comes after her to New York. The heroism does not end here but he sacrifices his love for the love of his beloved and takes his hands off her for her happiness. This heroic act moves the story towards resolution and resurrected the order of the world. When it comes to the category of fake hero, Robert Phillips comes to mind immediately for he is the one who gets the girl without any confrontation. He faces no opposition or treachery against his love, nor does he try hard to reach for his dream girl rather the unforeseen things happen to work his way. Most importantly, Giselle fights for him, in the end, to rescue him from the dragon personified as Narissa; meaning thereby that the fake hero does not have the capacity to fight for himself. The weak character of Robert is in fact used as a foil to strengthen the idea of a hero as presented through Edward. Similarly, if there is no princess then there is no reason for Edward to leave his palace, a life of luxury and move to another world. So, a character is a hero not because of some intrinsic characteristics but only because he plays a certain role in the whole structure formed by the hero, the villain, and the princess. It is as if the role of the princess is to bring problems for the hero to solve on his way, thus moving from one task to another and getting a reward in the end. This is to establish that your identity as a hero does not depend so much on yourself but on your place in the larger structure. (Ringel, Ribak, 2024), Sometimes a character has multiple roles to perform in a fairy-tale, as Giselle is a princess, a damsel in distress who needs to be protected, she needs the things to be solved for

her and she acts as a helper in the life of Morgan who is donating her love and affection for the motherless girl. The character type overlaps in Phillips' role, as it happens in many fairy tales and he becomes a donor for Giselle as he offers her shelter, bestows her his valuable time, and offers her his advice. Moving away from the character types to study their function in the narrative, Propp introduces various combinations of the functions that ultimately create a well-formed fairy tale. He asserts that 'absentation' is an obligatory function of the fairytale. The idea of absentation can be made clear through the example of Giselle's departure to the other world. This absentation initiates a chain of events because she wanders off from the protection of the authority figure that is the hero, and this departure invoked other characters in the narrative of the fairy tale. This absentation accelerates 'interdiction' (440); which is another function in the narrative of the fairy tale. This comes with the royal servant warning Edward not to go after Giselle when the witch throws her out of Andalusia and the violation of that interdiction functions to bring a surprising change in the life of Giselle and Edward himself. Another function introduced by Propp in his Morphology is 'Harm and the Lack' (Propp, 1968, p. 443). The Harm is caused by the villain to the hero as Queen Narissa causes harm to Prince Edward by throwing Giselle into the well. This transportation from the fantastical world to the real world causes a lot of harm to both the lovers and changes the whole face of their lives. And the Lack would be Edwards' problems that he is unable to solve because of all the hurdles put in his way by Nathaniel, who does not want Edward to conquer the quest. The function that Propp associates with the character of the villain is 'reconnaissance' (Propp, 1968, p. 445). The easiest to explain this function is to think of Queen Narissa spying on Edward. She does this through magical means and deploys Nathaniel for this purpose. Having said this, the function

designated to this character type keeps the commotion in the story and creates an atmosphere of suspense and mystery for the audience. (Ahmed, Zamna, Hamna, 2023), The fairy tales usually follow some conventions based on which we can easily categorize them in the genre of fairy tales. For instance, the idea of 'once upon a time' is a conventional opening of a fairy tale which refers to the time lapse between the modern-day and the current world of the fairy tale. It also refers to the meta-narrative of a fairy tale genre and the obvious convention that every fairy tale tries to follow; to pay homage to the previous fairy tales. Some functions are associated with the beginning of the stories and some functions are associated with the ending of the stories (Propp, 1968, p. 56). Another reason for presenting the character types based on good and bad qualities is to elucidate morality. Edward, a humble prince, is ready to marry a peasant keeping aside his royalty. He is considerate enough to listen to the chipmunk and has friendly behaviour with his servant. All these qualities make him virtuous and show the inherent goodness in his character. Giselle, a kind girl is innocent enough to make peace with every place she inhabits, be it the jungle or New York. Her attitude toward the animals and the motherless girl is reflective of the inherent ethicality in her character. The function of the donor character, the chipmunk is to fulfil the vacuum between good and bad characters. The helper is there to promote goodness to assist morality to achieve its ultimate pinnacle. Since this world is based on binaries so the fairy tale world enhances those binaries of good and bad through characterization. Queen Narissa and her servant represent the evil prevalent in the fairy tale world and that kind of evil can perpetuate vice in the real world as it happens in the film 'Enchanted'. (Iram, Saleha, 2024), The megalomaniac queen uses her servant to eradicate every possible goodness from the world. But the good must prevail being the only

slogan of a fairy tale which it encapsulates in its line 'and they lived happily ever after' is the final ending of the rift between good and bad. This culminates in the death of the queen and Nathaniel finally resurrects himself from the evil and supports morality in the end. Propp says that sometimes you have a different kind of reward instead of getting married to the princess (899). And here in the case of Edward we can say that he gets the reward in the form of Nancy, he gets the girl and above all, he emerges as a true hero who knows the meaning of sacrifice in love, he is blessed with humility which he gets only when he is transported to the other world, and he is striped off his royalty. The ending of the film stumbles brilliantly on the conventional ending of a fairy tale giving a satisfying end to every character type and fulfilling the larger function of the fairy tale. It is satisfying as it fulfils the function of transformation in the character of Edward and to some extent Giselle as she transforms herself according to the dynamics of the new world. From an ordinary peasant, she becomes a businesswoman, but the story maintains its fantastical world by showing animated animals helping Giselle through her errands.

Conclusion

The structural analysis of various fairy tales suggests their adherence to Propp's narratemes and characters. This adherence may or may not be strict and modern fairy tales employ these narrative units in an evolved form. The aesthetic pleasure of these stories has often been related to the use of these functions. The incorporation of the functions and characters identified by Propp adds to the appeal of the stories and satisfies the aesthetic needs of the audience. The current study looks at the characters not only as performers of actions or passive recipients at the mercy of the plot but focuses on the essential qualities that make them congruous to the plot. The dramatis personae, be it Edward, Giselle, or Narissa, conform to the roles identified by

Propp in his *Morphology of the Folktale*. Moreover, it is essential for the characters to embody certain qualities, as discussed in the analysis, for the development of the plot. Seen in this light, the characters become an indispensable component of the plot where the plot and the characters are interlinked, and both develop owing to this interdependence.

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