

Jack as a Modern Hero in His Beanstalk Story

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Abstract: A hero, who undergoes an adventurous quest, is a celebration of achievement. Despite the numerous stories existent in literature and the variety of details offered, heroes share a common structure of progress in each starting from classical mythology up to our contemporary time. This paper will attempt to highlight that structure by applying it to a classic folktale entitled *Jack and the Beanstalk* in light of Northrop Frye's mythical critique.

Key words: Jack • Frye • Hero • Structure • Folktale • Jack and the Beanstalk

INTRODUCTION

The classic *Jack and the Beanstalk* is chosen for examination due to its popularity and existence in different versions of folklore forms around the globe. Folktales are traditional stories that have been passed on by word of mouth. Folktales of a culture are usually preserved as part of a long folk tradition reflecting the humor, romance and wisdom of the people in the culture.

Folktales are the simplest form of narrative and are analyzed in terms of their structure. Folktales in general are part of folk literature, which is more widely referred to as folklore. They can be classified as one of the categories of folk storytelling. Many folklorists have labeled myths, legends and folktales as major narrative genres in folklore. Myths are stories that are considered sacred, legends are more secular recounting of actual events, while folktales are simpler narratives that share diverse structures with myths and legends.

Objective: The objective of this paper is to shed light on Northrop Frye's theory about how a hero in a story is related to a single pattern of significance in the seasonal cycle of the year, the solar cycle of the day and the organic cycle of life, out of which myth constructs a central narrative around a figure, who is partly the sun, partly a god or an archetypal human being based on the study of characterization, plot and theme in a literary story.

This will be exemplified on the character of Jack in Joseph Jacob's version of *Jack and the Beanstalk* [1], which appeared in 1890 as it is considered to be the closest to the oral variants and it is the one that is most commonly used in folktale collections.

Review of Related Literature: Encyclopedia Britannica [2] states that a folktale travels with great ease from one storyteller to another. Since a particular story is characterized by its basic structure and by narrative motifs rather than by its verbal form, it passes language boundaries without difficulty. According to Harmon and Holman [3], the folktale paved the way for the development of the short story as a recognized genre in the 19th century in both Britain and America (468-469).

In "From Folktales to Fiction: Orphan Characters in Children's Literature" [4] Melanie Kimball says that folklorists, psychologists, literary scholars and sociologists who study folktales agree that these stories represent more than simple entertainment for youngsters as the meaning contained in folktales varies according to who is reading, listening, or telling the story. She adds that the cultural context in which a folktale is read or heard and the sense that the individual teller tries to convey also play a major role in defining its meaning (560).

Joseph Campbell states in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* [5] that there are basic stages all heroes go through regardless of the culture the myth or folktale belongs to. He calls these stages or this structure the "monomyth"

in which the hero leaves his ordinary world; marking the beginning of an adventure. The hero then faces a number of enemies and hardships; that he wins over after a series of struggles. Finally he is granted rewards for his audaciousness and perseverance and eventually goes back home.

DISCUSSION

Frye says in *Anatomy of Criticism* [6]:

Every human society, we may assume, has some form of verbal culture, in which fictions, or stories, have a prominent place. Some of these stories may seem more important than others: they illustrate what primarily concerns their society. They help to explain certain features in that society's religion, laws, social structure, environment, history, or cosmology. ... The more important group of stories in the middle of a society's verbal culture I shall call myths, ... [the] less important, I shall connect chiefly with the word folktale. (6-7)

Frye argues in *Fables of Identity* [7] that there are basic structures for storytelling, which are evident in folktales. He says that folktales offer dialogue, imagery, or complex behavior and that they are simply abstract story-patterns, uncomplicated and easy to remember (27). However, the difference between myths and folktales is not in structure, but rather in terms of authority and social function. Frye claims that most of the stories about gods and goddesses are myths not folktales and that this distinction is related to content (*ibid* 8).

Frye stresses that the element that gives literary form to stories is the major adventure or quest involving two main characters, the hero and his enemy. The complete form of a story is the successful quest, which consists of three main stages: First, the stage of the dangerous journey with its minor adventures and conflict (*agon*); second, the crucial death-struggle depicted in a kind of battle in which either the hero or his rival or both must die (*pathos*); third, the admiration and recognition of the hero (*anagnorisis*). Frye says that the central form of stories is dialectical in the sense that everything is about the conflict between the hero and his enemy, which takes place in our world that is characterized by the cyclic movement of nature (*Anatomy* 187).

The details of each story may vary, but the overall structure of the story remains basically the same. *Jack and the Beanstalk* is about a poor boy named Jack, who tries to fight back the bad forces in an attempt to please

his mother; and eventually do well. Jack is asked by his mother to sell their old cow in the market as it is the only worthy thing they own.

Vladimir Propp adds in *Morphology of the Folktale* [8] that the hero's quest starts with the support of a helper, who is often a wise old man or magician appearing at critical moments to fuse the hero with the momentum required to embark on such an adventure. At the beginning of the story, Jack is sent by his mother to the market to sell their cow. On the way and out of nowhere appears an old man, who seems to know why Jack is going to the market. The old man here tries to convince Jack to swap the cow with a few "magical beans" that would grow into a beanstalk as high as the sky. Jack agrees and takes the beans back to his mother. Here this old man stands for the help the hero is in need of at this initial stage.

Coming back from the market with no money and a few beans instead, Jack's mother becomes angry and tosses these magical beans out the window. They wake up the following morning to find a sky high beanstalk, which Jack climbs. There he finds an ogre's mansion, which he enters. He finds the ogre's wife and asks her for food; but she tells him he ought to leave quickly as her husband will arrive soon. She then feels sorry for Jack and offers him breakfast, but as he is eating, the ogre comes back home. In order to avoid their encounter, the ogre's wife hides Jack in the oven. In the meantime, the ogre eats, counts his gold coins and falls asleep. Jack comes out, creeps by the ogre and takes some of the gold coins and then quickly climbs down the beanstalk. Once he leaves his familiar environment, the initial episode of the dangerous journey with its minor adventure known as the *agon* begins. The structure of the story here starts to rise as it is the introduction to the adventure.

When the gold coins run out, Jack climbs the beanstalk again and brings back home the ogre's hen, which lays golden eggs. Not satisfied, Jack climbs the beanstalk a third time; taking the ogre's golden harp. But as Jack is running away with it, the harp calls out to the ogre, who chases Jack down the beanstalk. Before the ogre is able to get down, Jack chops down the beanstalk with an axe and the ogre finally falls down to his death. This episode in the adventure is the crucial death-struggle in which either the hero or his rival or both must die known as the *pathos*. The structure of the story here keeps on rising while the suspense amounts heading toward the story's climax, which is the death of the hero's enemy.

The structure of the story here reaches its peak, when there is an actual encounter between Jack and the

ogre. But after Jack gets rid of the ogre for good, the structure falls reaching to the end of the story.

Jack and his mother then become very rich, he marries a great princess, and they live happily ever after. This is the final episode that leads to the admiration and recognition of the hero known as *anagnorisis*.

In "Jack and the Beanstalk: A Critical Reporting" [9], Jack's morality is put under scrutiny as he steals from the ogre's mansion all of these valuable goods. But Karen Cruze argues in "Fearsome Giant, Fearless Child: A Worldwide Jake and the Beanstalk Story" [10] that *Jack and the Beanstalk* shares a familiarity with the English folktale of an ogre who chants "Fee - fie - foe - fum," and that this will help the readership appreciate how other cultures champion the story of a regular child facing fearsome odds whether they be a giant, a witch, or a man-eater (67). In other terms, the structure of the story juxtaposes a common poor boy, who is driven by the need to support his mother, with a gigantic ogre, who is in favor of eating helpless children alive as he constantly says:

Fee-fi-fo-fum,
I smell the blood of an Englishman.
Be he alive, or be he dead,
I'll grind his bones to make my bread!"

CONCLUSION

In light of Frye's ideas, Jack represents the quest-hero of the low mimetic mode as he becomes the savior of his society. He rids his people from the ogre by finally chopping off the beanstalk, which is viewed as an act of heroism. He is celebrated as a representative of the good against the bad, who is able to restore order once more.

Frye associates the hero with the theme of order and youth and Jack fits this pattern perfectly well. Jack resembles the seasonal cycle of summer as he is at the prime of his giving. His ability to defeat the ogre relates to the solar cycle of the sun at the time of zenith as he tries so hard not to get hurt or inflict harm on his society. Consequently, the story's organic cycle of life resembles maturity because Jack succeeds in safeguarding his town; or in a broader sense: England. At last, the common name of Jack stands for any Englishman and this is what makes him a modern hero, whose actions universalize human experience at large.

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