

Propp and the Psychological Function of Narrative in the Children's Fairy Tale

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ABSTRACT: This theoretical study explores the psychological function of narrative in children's fairy tales through a re-interpretation of Vladimir Propp's morphology. While Propp's model has traditionally been approached as a structural framework for analysing recurring narrative functions, its potential relevance for understanding the experiential dimension of storytelling remains underexamined. The purpose of the study is to reconsider narrative functions not merely as formal elements of plot organisation but as symbolic configurations through which experiences of disruption, trial, agency and restoration are structured and interpreted. Drawing on narratological and psychological approaches to children's literature, the paper offers a conceptual synthesis that aligns selected Proppian functions with recurrent psychological processes within the reading experience. Rather than proposing empirical validation, the study advances a theoretically grounded interpretive model that bridges structural analysis and psychological meaning-making. By repositioning morphology as a dynamic framework for experiential organisation, the paper contributes to contemporary discussions of the relationship between narrative form and psychological engagement in children's literature.

KEYWORDS: children's fairy tale, narrative structure, Propp's morphology, psychological function of narrative, meaning-making, narrative experience.

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Introduction

Children's fairy tales have long been examined as literary forms shaped by narrative conventions, cultural patterns and symbolic structures. At the same time, contemporary approaches to narrative increasingly recognise storytelling as a mode of psychological organisation through which individuals interpret experience, confront uncertainty, and construct meaning. Within the field of children's literature, however, structural analyses and psychological interpretations have often developed in parallel. The former have focused on narrative organisation and formal elements, while the latter have privileged thematic content and symbolic representation. The relationship between narrative structure and psychological experience, therefore, remains insufficiently articulated.

The structural study of the folktale reached a decisive moment with Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, which proposed a systematic description of recurrent narrative functions. Propp's model has been widely acknowledged for its methodological precision and its contribution to narratology. However, its reception has predominantly emphasised classification and plot sequencing, treating narrative functions primarily as formal units. Less attention has been paid to the possibility that these functions may also operate as patterns of experiential organisation, shaping how readers cognitively and emotionally process narrative events.

In the context of children's literature, this gap becomes particularly significant. Fairy tales frequently revolve around absence, prohibition, transgression, trial, assistance, struggle and restoration—configurations that mirror fundamental structures of lived experience. If narrative functions are understood not only as structural components but also as symbolic frameworks through which conflict and resolution are staged, they may be reconsidered as mediators of psychological meaning. Such a perspective allows a shift from viewing morphology as a purely formal system to recognising its potential relevance to understanding how stories contribute to processes of sense-making.

For these reasons, a theoretical re-examination of Propp's model appears warranted. Rather than revisiting the morphology of the folktale as a classificatory scheme, the present study approaches narrative functions as possible carriers of psychological significance within the reading experience. By exploring the conceptual intersection between structural narratology and psychological interpretation, the paper seeks to clarify how the formal architecture of the fairy tale may contribute to the organisation of meaning for the child reader.

Research Aim and Research Questions

This study reinterprets Vladimir Propp's morphology to examine the psychological function of narrative in the children's fairy tale. It proposes that narrative functions may be understood not only as structural elements of plot but also as symbolic patterns that organise experiences of disruption, trial, agency, and restoration. The paper advances a conceptual framework that links narrative structure with psychological meaning-making within the reading experience.

On this basis, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How can Propp's narrative functions be reinterpreted as experiential configurations rather than merely structural elements of plot?
2. To what extent does such a reinterpretation clarify the psychological function of narrative and contribute to contemporary discussions on meaning-making in children's literature?

Research Results

This section presents the theoretical results derived from a review of narratological and psychological scholarship on children's fairy tales. The findings are articulated as conceptual syntheses rather than empirical measurements, clarifying the implications of reconsidering Propp's morphology within a psychological framework.

Recent research may be organised into three main directions. The first focuses on structural and narratological analysis, examining recurring functional sequences and the organisation of the plot (Propp, 1968; Herman, 2013). While these approaches provide systematic models of narrative architecture, they often prioritise classification over experiential interpretation.

A second direction emphasises the psychological and experiential dimensions of storytelling, highlighting narrative as a mode of meaning-making and identity construction (Bruner, 1986; McAdams, 2001). Reader-oriented and cognitive approaches further stress affective engagement in children's literature (Nikolajeva, 2014; Mar, 2020), though they rarely connect psychological processes to specific structural mechanisms.

More recent interdisciplinary work seeks to bridge these domains by examining how narrative form shapes cognitive and emotional responses (Kukkonen, 2020; Caracciolo, 2021; Green & Appel, 2024). From this perspective, narrative is understood as a structured experience in which sequencing and patterned resolution contribute to the formation of meaning (Herman, 2001).

From this integrative standpoint, Propp's narrative functions may be reinterpreted as experiential configurations rather than neutral plot units. Functions such as absence, trial and return correspond to psychological dynamics of disruption, agency and restoration, aligning with broader accounts of narrative as a structuring principle of lived experience (Bruner, 1997; McAdams, 2001).

The alignment between narrative function and psychological process is summarised in [Table 1], which presents a conceptual model that links structural elements to recurrent experiential patterns. Rather than offering empirical validation, the model clarifies how narrative form mediates meaning-making.

Overall, the analysis repositions Propp's morphology as a dynamic interpretive framework that connects narratology with cognitive and experiential approaches to children's literature (Kukkonen, 2020; Caracciolo, 2021; Herman, 2001).

Table 1*Proppian Narrative Function - Psychological Process*

Narrative Function	Psychological Process
Absence / Lack	Experience of loss
Prohibition	Boundary formation
Violation	Conflict / Anxiety
Test	Agency development
Return	Restoration of meaning

Conclusions

The present study examined the psychological function of narrative in the children's fairy tale through a theoretical re-interpretation of Propp's morphology. By shifting attention from narrative functions as formal elements of plot organisation to their role as symbolic configurations of experience, the analysis highlighted the relevance of narrative structure to understanding how meaning is organised within the reading process.

The theoretical results suggest that recurring narrative functions can be understood as patterns through which experiences of disruption, trial, agency and resolution are narratively articulated. Rather than operating as neutral structural units, these functions contribute to the staging of psychological tensions and their symbolic resolution. In this sense, the morphology of the fairy tale emerges as a framework that organises experience by linking narrative form to processes of sense-making.

The contribution of the study lies in its conceptual repositioning of Propp's model. The proposed approach does not seek empirical validation or therapeutic application; rather, it offers an interpretive perspective that integrates structural narratology with psychological considerations. By foregrounding the experiential implications of narrative form, the paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the fairy tale as a literary space where meaning is negotiated rather than prescribed.

Future research may build on this framework by exploring how Proppian narrative functions operate across different cultural contexts or by examining their relevance within educational settings. While the present study remains theoretical in scope, it establishes a basis for further interdisciplinary inquiry into the relationship between narrative structure, psychological experience and meaning-making in childhood.

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