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Anthropology 1150: Intro to Folklore
Final

Section 1: *O Brother Where Art Thou* Tale Type and/or Folklore Genre

Tale Types/Folklore Genres

O Brother Where Art Thou (2000) draws on the general tale types of “Looking for a wife” 1450–1474, “The clever man” 1525–1639, and “All Stick Together” 571. The story starts off with Everett’s call to action when he hears that his wife is marrying another man due to his imprisonment. Everett’s entire journey is centered around pursuing his wife with the accompaniment of his chain-gang, so it falls within the “Looking for a wife” tale type. From the beginning of the story, we find out Everett is different from his chain-gang friends and is set apart as the clever man. Delmar is humble, sweet, and has long-term goals of owning land, whereas Pete is easily tempted by the sirens and short-tempered. Everett uses his intelligence to convince the chain-gang to help him pursue his wife, so I think this story belongs in the “clever man” tale type. Lastly, the chain gang sticks together throughout the entire story and become very successful as a group. They never try to separate for their personal gain and genuinely appreciate each other, so I believe the story also belongs in the “All stick together” tale type.

Motif Spotting

First motif is Everett refusing a higher power (religion), he always has real-world rationale for the seemingly supernatural. He brushed off meeting the blind prophet at the beginning of the movie, rationalized the sirens in the stream that seduced Pete, and finally he convinced himself the giant flood, that saved him from being lynched by the devil, was a planned flooding of the valley for a hydroelectric dam. The motif has been altered for the 20th century as Everett mentioned hydroelectric dams and lynchings. Since the movie takes place in 1937 Mississippi, an age of reason and industrialization, I think the adaptation is more relatable for the audience due to the similarities in today’s American culture.

The second motif, is the heated chain-gang. The men were stuck together regardless of whether they got along or not. There are two specific moments where Pete, a heated and short-tempered man, challenges Everett’s plan. Since Everett is a rational and level-headed man the two butt heads even though they inescapable from each other. The only adaptation I can see in this motif is the culture around chain-gangs and the fact that the binding between the men are metal instead of rope or something less robust. I think the chain-gang aspect makes their need to escape more important and intense since they are actively being pursued by the police.

The third motif is the “Book-end.” The movie opens and closes with very similar scenes. It opens with the Trio of men bound together by chains on a railroad track. Later, they also meet the prophet traveling on a neighboring railroad track. What’s interesting is that the story ends with Everett’s daughter, bound by twine, stopping as she crosses railroad tracks. She stops to look down the tracks at the same prophet, still traveling down the tracks. This motif has been modified to be relevant to 1937’s Mississippi with railroad tracks and bindings methods. These alterations don’t have a particularly important influence on the motif. What is important is that the beginning and end of the story have very consistent structures much like this story exhibits.

Character Archetypes

Everett is the clever trickster. This character uses his wits to achieve a personal goal with others only considered for personal gain or liability to his plans. He acts on impulse and in doing so creates opportunity and risk. Everett brings Pete and Delmar along for the ride allowing them be free and pardoned, but at major risk to their lives.

Pete is the short-tempered idiot. This character has short term goals in mind, is not rational at all times, and challenges authority due to his/her brute strong-willed and selfish attitude. This character keeps Everett from abusing Delmar as Pete will challenge Everett to the point of ruining a plan, if Everett is too selfish in his plans. This character allows for a good balance in the group’s interests.

Big Dan is the con man. He is two faced in his personality. Upfront, he sells bibles, is personable, and offers the Trio business advice and opportunity. Behind it all, he has the worst intentions including attack and stealing from the Everett and Delmar. He is a good characteristic example of the ill-intentioned people that exist in the world of the story.

Heroes Journey Existence?

This story is an adaptation of *The Odyssey* by Homer, so yes, it has the hero’s journey integrated. Everett hearing of his wife’s new marriage is his “Call to action.” The Trio crosses “The threshold” when they escape from prison, at that point they can’t go back. The story has many “Challenges.” Some examples are as follows: alluding the police called by Pete’s brother, being seduced by the sirens, being mugged by Big Dan during a picnic, alluding police after robbing banks with George Nelson, evading the KKK, and finding Everett’s old wedding ring. The Trio enters the “Abyss” when the group helps Everett get his wife, Penny, back. They sneak into the governor’s dinner to perform and win her back. The “Transformation” occurs when Everett agrees to get Penny’s ring because he doesn’t have to hide anymore due his being-pardoned. The “Revelation” occurs when Everett is met with his impending death and prays for help and is met with a life-saving flood. The “Atonement” occurs when Tommy finds the ring in piece of

furniture that Penny said the ring would be in. The “Return” occurs when Everett gives Penny the ring he retrieved.

Section 2: Folklore Within the World of Film

A **folk group** according to Alan Dundes is a group made up of two or more people with at least one thing in common. For example, there are religious folk groups, which are made up of people who belong to the same church or share the same beliefs. Occupation and regional folk groups are other examples bound together by occupation and where origin, respectively. [1]

Examples in the movie: there are multiple religious groups. There is a group of people being baptized in a river by a preacher. Near the end there’s a large meeting of Klu Klux Klan members chanting, marching, and preparing to hang Tommy, the guitarist of the Soggy Bottom Boys. There are also multiple occupational groups, mostly prominently, the police. Different groups of police (two groups chain gang police and lynch mob police groups) can be seen hunting and controlling the main characters and the spheres surrounding them.

A **folk belief** is a common belief that is not necessarily grounded in scientific fact but are widely accepted as truth by most members of the group [2]. Near the end of the movie, the Homer Stokes’ and the KKK group is convinced Tommy sold his soul to the devil and cites that as a reason to stop the Soggy Bottom Boy’s music. Believing you can sell your soul to the devil is a religious folk belief.

A **legend** is a traditional tale handed down from earlier times and believed to have a historical basis.

The movie doesn’t reference any legends, that I remember. An example of a legend though is commonly saved for the antagonist of the story. A common archetype might be that there’s a legend about how cruel, strong, and tyrannical the enemy is that the hero must defeat. This movie doesn’t exhibit that though.

A **folktale** is a story or legend forming part of an oral tradition. Folktales may possess many or all of the following characteristics: orally told, passed through generations, take the personality of the storyteller, speak of universal or timeless themes, help humans cope with life and the world, are about common people, contain supernatural elements, and validate aspects of the culture.

In the middle of the movie, “the three men sit around a campfire. Everett sits on a stump, expressively telling a ghost story as Delmar and Pete gaze at him from below, wide-eyed and rapt.” (movie script) [8]

Myths are traditional, typically ancient stories dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes that serves as a fundamental type in the worldview of a people. The purpose of myths is to account for the origins of something, explain aspects of the natural world or delineate the psychology, customs, or ideals of society. [4]

Examples of myths referenced in the movie are Tommy selling his soul to the devil, also the sirens located in the stream who seduce the Everett, Delmar, and Pete, and lastly when Pete is supposedly turned in a toad.

An **urban legend** is a secondhand story alleged to be true and just plausible enough to be believed about some horrific, ironic, or series of events that supposedly happened to a real person. [3].

An example of an urban legend in the movie is when Everett is talking to Penny, his ex-wife, about why his daughters keep saying he was hit by a train. Penny explains that she needed to explanation to why Everett was gone. She then says “Lots of respectable people have been hit by trains. Judge Hobbie over in Cookville was hit by a train.” This is a example of something barely believable.

A **ritual** is a sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects performed in a sequestered space and performed accord to set sequence. They are described as traditions of a community. [7]

An example of a ritual can be found near the end of the movie in a scene were the KKK is actively assembling, chanting, marching, and singing in preparation to the lynching of Tommy. It’s an intimidating situation that is diffused by the Trio interrupting the sequence of normal events with the color-guard flag and rescuing Tommy.

A **death/mourning ritual** is a time and common set of procedures that a folk group do to cope with the death of people. They can range from quiet times of sorrow and mourning to large festivals that celebrate the life of the recently deceased.

Death isn’t really seen on screen, the closest to a mourning ritual we see is when Big Dan squishes the toad, believed to be a transformed Pete by Delmar and Everett. Delmar is very distressed and worried. It’s followed by conversation of commemorating Pete’s life.

Folk celebrations or festivals are rituals commemorating traditions, major events, or achievements put on by folk groups.

The movie features a performance scene near the end where the Trio, Tommy, and a band sing their popular song “Man of Constant Sorrow.” This turns into a party with people dancing, clapping, and enjoying themselves. This is an example of a celebration involving music and togetherness. The culture of the movie is similar to ours, so the celebration seems “normal”.

Folk figures or creatures are animals or things described in non-historical or yet-to-be verified stories that sometimes involve the supernatural.

The movie does not feature any mystical creatures or figures, but does mention the need of a wizard to change Pete back to a human from toad-form. This is a weak tie to a folk figure, as I don't think the Delmar made the suggestion with serious intent. A different example may be when Tommy references selling his soul to the devil. He describes the devil as having white skin, mirrors for eyes, with a hollow voice, who also "travels with a mean old-hound." This ends up being the description of another character in the movie— the one with glasses who stalks the Trio. The reference to the a physical manifestation of the devil is an example of a folk figure.

Folk humor is any quality of being humorous or comedic that pertains specifically to a folk group. It can be expressed in literature, speech, and in physical actions.

One difficult part of this definition is discerning true folk humor from humor created and aimed at amusing the audience. Luckily, this movie has a few "in-character" humorous moments. The main characters frequently have near-death experience where Everett commonly says, "We're in a tight spot" which makes light of the situation. At the beginning of the movie, the Trio, bound by chains on their legs, are attempting to get on a train, but get pulled off due to Pete being too slow which is pretty funny. Since the movie's culture is similar to modern day America's we can see the humor in both scenes.

Children's games or riddles are games and mental puzzles meant for entertainment or teaching purposed for children relative to a folk group. The movie doesn't contain any children's games or riddles.

An example of this in common movie adaptations would be to hide a more important meaning in a seemingly innocent games or riddles. Obviously, in everyday, there is a more transcendental meaning like teamwork or critical thinking, but the meaning is usually not as dramatic as movies purposely make them seem.

Folk wisdom or medicine consists of general knowledge, healing practices and ideas of body physiology and health preservation known to some in a culture, transmitted as general knowledge, and practiced or applied by anyone in the culture having prior experience. [5]

An example of folklore medicine occurs after Pete is supposedly turned into a toad. Delmar says, "We gotta find some kinda wizard can change 'im back!" Imply that a wizard was needed to transform Pete back into a human. Apart from that, the movie doesn't use any non-supernatural ways of healing and ailment.

Foodways are the cultural, social, and economic practices related to the production and consumption of food. Food ways often refers to the intersection of food, culture, traditions, and history. [6]

The Trio of main characters is seen eating all kinds of food during the movie. From gopher roasted over an open campfire to “steaks and some gratinated potatoes and [...] your finest bubbly wine.” The setting of the movie is 1937 rural Mississippi during the Great Depression, so the culture is not too unlike modern day America. Steaks, potatoes, and fancy alcohol are considered delicacies during that time as they are now and gopher is food associated with survival or survivalists. As the characters make the transition from prisoners to wealthy bank robbers their food also changes.

Performance is the cultural activity that a person or group does to entertain an audience.

This movie has many examples of performances. Their first explicit performance is at the radio station just after picking up Tommy from the crossroads. The Trio and Tommy perform “Man of Constant Sorrow” and in return are given \$10 each. At the end, the Trio, a band, and Tommy sing a song then follow it up with another rendition of “Man of Constant Sorrow.” Their final performance allows them immunity from the KKK members and results in them getting pardoned by the incumbent governor. This scene truly shows the power of performance seeing as how it resolved the Trio and Tommy of their illegal past.

Section 3: Folklore in the 21st Century

I’m answering question #1.

“The premise of Degh and Vizsonyi's argument, however, is that awareness of the theatrical conventions, or, in this context, the laying bare of *Most Haunted's* televisual construction, denies the possibility of ostensive veracity. In this regard, Degh and Vizsonyi are in agreement with Ofcom: that the high-level of stylisation of the show imbues it with a more “entertainment”-like quality, and makes it, therefore, less real than a “proper” investigation of the paranormal. I would further disagree, and align myself with Caldwell, arguing that the excessive stylisation of the show-*Most Haunted's* videographic exhibitionism-lays bare the show’s construction and, therefore, within the televisual tradition of reality TV, increases the veracity of the show's presented evidence.” (Koven)

The quote above is from Koven’s *Most Haunted and the Convergence of Traditional Belief and Popular Television* article. He opposes the stance that high production level visualizations reduces “proper” investigation of the paranormal and reduces ostensive veracity. I am in agreement with Koven that excessive stylization of television show increases veracity of ostension. The movie *O Brother Where Art Thou* is good example of high level production of a

folktale, as it is a close adaption of Homer's *The Odyssey*. The story itself is brought to life via it's very stylized presentation with different cinematic effects. Many of the same archetypes, folk tales, and meanings are conveyed through this movie as they are in *The Odyssey* from what I can tell. I only read parts of Homer's epic in english class, but what I've researched, this movie is a direct adaptation. The point being, that all the of ostension brought to us via the text-based *The Odyssey* is brought to us via this movie. On top of that, it's even stronger due to the visual nature of humans. Visualizing an event provides much more concrete evidence than being read or told of the same event. The imagery presented in a movie allows for even more driving ostension. Koven quotes Bill Ellis saying "traditional narratives exist not simply as verbal texts to be collected, transcribed and archived. They are also maps for action ..." Since the definition of ostension is acting on this "map for action" created during a folktale, and *The Odyssey* has already proven itself as providing ostension, *and* because movie adaptations of text offer even more intense effects for "mapping action" due to their intensity and visualization I am in agreement with Koven that movies provide more veracity for ostension.

Just as one can derive *many* cultural meanings from *The Odyssey* and related them to modern culture, *O Brother Where Art Thou*, offers *many* cultural meanings as well. One could argue it shows the importance of personal audacity, perseverance, and hope. It can can also be a tale signifying the importance of following you goals and the non-linear path you may have to take to reach those goals. It can also be abstracted to the point that "one should always follow their dreams." Take what you will from it, it's most importantly a *relatable* story of a hero crawling from the depths of hopelessness to the achieve his goals and stands as a baseline to derive multiple moral lessons and thought provoking discussions.

Bonus

What reading(s) and subject(s) this semester did you like best?

I loved the readings about the "original" (e.g. Perrault and Brothers Grimm) fairy tales. It was awesome to be able to compare what you think is normal (Disney is my case), to what others thought was normal at one point in time. The difference in perspective is astounding and makes you appreciate and think critically about a culture in it's entirety given how much the foundation of the culture (i.e. it's fairy tales) changes.

I also really enjoyed "The Dozens" article. I didn't realize that insulting people like that was such a universally bonding thing and I've told multiple people that it's actually called "The Dozens"

What reading(s) and subject(s) did you like the least?

I'm not a big fan of cryptozoology and the study of animals that aren't proven to exist. I don't believe in ghosts, big foot, and Nessy. There are many more real animals that are far more fascinating, in my opinion.

References

- [1] <http://folklore.missouri.edu/whatis.html>
- [2] <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/F/FO004.html>
- [3] <http://urbanlegends.about.com/cs/urbanlegends/f/urbanlegends1.htm>
- [4] http://americanfolklore.net/folklore/2010/07/folklore_definitions.html
- [5] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folk_medicine
- [6] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foodways>
- [7] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ritual>
- [8] *O Brother Where Art Thou* movie script. http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/o_brother.html

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