Protagonists in fairy tales[[1]](#footnote-1)

The identification and categorization of the protagonists in the fairy tale first requires the interpretation of the world order that functions in the fairy tale. Based on empirical research findings, the world order known to date in the fairy tale can be described as a hierarchical system of the following actors:

**Lord:** The lord is usually a king or the lord of the family; rarely, a deity may also appear in this role.

**Successor:** The successor is considered the action-capable child of the lord.

**Offspring:** The offspring refers to representatives of the third generation, initially the child of the successor.

**Equal of the Successor from outside the clan or family:** The equal is a person with the same rights as the successor but does not belong to the successor’s clan or family.

**Priest / Magician / Totem:** This figure can be highlighted by special features, abilities, or skills, such as a beard, age, or ugliness. A magician can also be the spirit of a deceased family member. Often, totems or personified natural phenomena such as wind, frost, or sun possess magical powers. Representatives of this category stand outside the power of other order subjects in the same world.

**Underling / Professional / Official:** Typical underlings include representatives of dishonest professions like miller, shepherd, tower guard, or porter, as well as other professionals like goldsmith (while the blacksmith is compared more to a priest), innkeeper, coachman, small trader; and also officials such as minister, officer, advisor, etc. We should distinguish underling / professional / officials as representatives of the successor's status with the same occupational attribute. A good example would be the frequent use of a soldier both as a hero and as a underling in fairy tales.

**Possession / Property / Thing:** This includes material and/or immaterial inheritance that can act as an object of desire, a tool, or a magical means. Sometimes it can also be a helper, like a ring or a lamp.

**Female vs. Male:** Every member of this order can be represented by either male or female beings, but this does not automatically apply to possessions, goods, and objects unless they are personified.

**Own World vs. Foreign World:** This order applies to both worlds of the fairy tale. These are referred to as the own world and the foreign world from the hero's perspective.

**Friendly vs. Hostile:** The function of the main character in the fairy tale is determined by their affiliation with different worlds (own vs. foreign) as well as their status in these worlds. Overall, the following three categories of main characters can be identified:

A. Protagonists of the own world

B. Protagonists of the foreign world

C. Protagonists of the neutral world (characters who belong to both worlds).

The foreign does not necessarily mean hostility; nevertheless, every conflict in the magical fairy tale reflects the confrontation between the representatives of these two worlds.

**Right vs. False:** Every protagonist can behave both friendly and hostile towards their world. For protagonists without a fixed affiliation to one of the worlds, it is crucial whether they side with the representatives of the own world or the foreign world. Thus, two antipodes arise for each protagonist: the right (r) and the false (f).

In the following matrix, we attempt to present and explain the described world order and its concrete representatives in the fairy tale:

The upper half of the x-axis corresponds to the own world (the world of the hero).

The lower part of the x-axis corresponds to the foreign world (the world of the antagonist).

To the right of the y-axis is the field for right action. This means:

* Representatives of the own world act in favor of their own world.
* Representatives of the foreign world act in favor of their own world.
* Representatives of the neutral world act in favor of the world of the hero.

To the left of the y-axis is the field for false action. This means:

* Representatives of the own world act in favor of the foreign world.
* Representatives of the foreign world act in favor of their own world.
* Representatives of the neutral world act in favor of the foreign world.

The y-axis shows the entities involved in both worlds.

The x-axis corresponds to the list of antipodes of the representatives of the world order members in the fairy tale. The names of these characters are each abbreviated with two capital letters. The lowercase letters r or f before the abbreviations indicate the attributes right or false of the respective protagonist.

**Nomenclature of the protagonists:** The initials in capital letters are resolved as follows:

HH: Hero's Lord

HD: Hero

RE: Retrieval Object

HF: Helper

ST: Donor

VB: Connector

ZM: Magic Tool

BZ: Owner of the Target Object

ZO: Target Object

HP: Lord of the Potential Partner

PP: Potential Partner

AN: Antagonist

The marked cells in the fields and on the x-axis show the relationship between the members of the world order present in the fairy tale and the actors, as well as their affiliation to own, foreign, or neutral worlds.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Representatives of the own world |
|  | Representatives of the neutral world |
|  | Representatives of the foreign world |

In the following, we will consider these characters based on their right and false counterparts.

Note: There are some reservations about the entire nomenclature of the actors. Considering these conventions is essential to avoid linguistic inconsistencies. Actantial characters (persons, beings, objects) are always in the singular and are designated by the grammatical gender of the term as opposed to the gender and number of the instance. For example, the term rHD (right hero) is used for the female Cinderella; the two older brothers are referred to as fHD (false hero), i.e., in the singular and masculine, etc.

**HH** – The Lord of the hero is the lord of the family. If it is a royal family, the lord is the king. This must be distinguished from the king who is the lord of the potential partner and not the king whom the hero serves. If the Lord of the hero behaves disproportionately towards the hero, he is defined as a false Lord of the hero (fHH). Examples include: a father desires his own daughter; he delivers his own son to ruin; or he leaves his children in the wilderness. In another scenario, a king assigns a dangerous task to the younger son due to the malicious advice of his older sons. In all these cases, the family father assumes the role of a false Hero’s Lord (fHH), thus resembling the antagonist (see below).

**HD** – The Hero is the standard for identifying all other characters in the fairy tale. Typically, the hero is considered the successor unless there is no Lord of the hero (HH) in the fairy tale. Conversely, if a protagonist is equal to the lord in the fairy tale, it is necessary to look for the hero among the other protagonists. Furthermore, there can be both a searching and an expelled hero. It is not uncommon for a fairy tale to feature two heroes. These include siblings (including half-brothers or half-sisters), an equal, and the child of a displaced hero.

False heroes (fHD) are usually the hero's siblings unless they were born before the hero's activities began. The role of fHD can also be assumed by the equal. This typically begins with the closing of the brotherhood and ends with the betrayal of the hero.

**PP** – The Potential Partner represents the same status as the hero but comes from the opposite world. The partner usually has their own lord (HP). The relationship between the potential partner (PP) and the hero (HD) always begins due to the initiative of one of the two characters, usually by the male character, even if the male character is the potential partner and not the hero, as in ATU 425. Therefore, it is difficult to distinguish a female potential partner from a female target object (ZO, see below). The latter may marry the hero but is not considered a potential partner for the hero but rather a prize usually intended for the client, the false Lord of Hero (fHH), or the right antagonist (rAN). The initiative to win such a character comes from rAN or fHH. It is also difficult to distinguish a potential partner from the recovery object (RE). A distinguishing feature is the marriageability of the object; it does not have to belong to the hero's family. For example, a liberated woman in ATU 301 is considered a potential partner even if she was previously abducted and the hero follows the task or inquiry of the king to retrieve the abducted woman. This object continues to be considered a potential partner even if the hero does not want to marry her for various reasons, including the ones mentioned above.

In the case of a false potential partner (fPP), it is usually the same-sex siblings (sometimes also half-brother or half-sister) of the right potential partner or their equals.

**HP** – The Lord of the Potential Partner represents the same status as the Hero’s Lord but comes from the foreign world. His main function is to set the wedding tasks and generally the prerequisites and, if necessary, to pursue the suitors. The false Lord of the Potential Partner (fHP) acts friendly towards the hero.

**RE** -The Recovery Object (RE) can be a person, an object, an animal, or a magical item. It is the object that existed in the hero's world before their activities began and now needs to be recovered. If the object is taken, lost, or disappeared after the hero's activities begin, it retains the status it had before the crisis and does not need to be considered an RE. For example, in ATU 425, the Snake-Youth remains a potential partner even when he disappears and is sought by his wife (HD). The existence of the need for recovery before the hero’s or helper’s activities or birth is important to define the sought object as a Recovery Object (RE). In most cases, the Recovery Object behaves very actively. The hero is tasked with recovering the kidnapped mother. She helps the hero by spying on the location of the antagonist's external soul. The Recovery Object belongs to the hero's world and can represent various statuses: Successor, for example, siblings who were captured by the antagonist before the hero's birth (ATU 328). Lord, for instance, if the recovery concerns the kidnapped mother, who must also have been kidnapped before the hero's activities began, but not before the hero's birth, as in ATU 650A - Strong Hans. In some cases, it is difficult to distinguish the RE from the potential partner. The girl in ATU 301 can be both a bride and an abducted object that needs to be recovered. In such cases, the relationship between the affected and other protagonists must be considered. If a protagonist has their own lord and is in the foreign world, they are the potential partner.

The RE can become false if it turns against the hero. If the hero rescues his brothers who were held by the AN and they then throw him into the well, the brothers are the False Recovery Objects (fRE) and not fHD (they cannot be fHD if they were missing before the hero's activities began).

**ZO & BZ** – The Target Object and the Owner of the Target Object. The Target Object can be a person, an object, an animal, or a magical item. This object belongs to a different world than the hero's and was not previously mentioned. The Target Object can behave either actively or passively. For example, the right hero (rHD) is tasked by the false lord of the hero (fHH) to fetch a lion (ZO). The lion resists but is defeated and brought back. The rHD is tasked by the right lord of the hero (rHH) to fetch a horse (ZO). The hero steals the horse, which later helps the rHD solve other tasks by acting as a helper.

In most cases, these objects have their owners. The tasked hero often comes into direct contact with the owner while capturing the object. It is common for the owner to be requested as the Target Object themselves, which subsequently leads to the punishment of the antagonist (typical examples ATU 328, 531). The female figure of the Target Object is also distinguished from the potential partner (PP) by not being under any dominion. According to her status, the female figure of the Target Object should be a sorceress or an object or possession of a sorcerer. However, this does not mean that all figures in the fairy tale with magical properties belong to the category of Target Object. An example is the fairy tale ATU 313, where the youth (rHD/rPP) ends up with the sorcerer (rHP/rHH) and falls in love with his daughter (rPP/rHD), with whom he later escapes from the rHP/rHH. A Target Object can also be an abstract task, such as plowing a field, fetching wood, collecting tolls, etc., which are not considered protagonists of the fairy tale.

A false Target Object exists if the object acts in favor of the hero. For example, if an animal's organ is sought, and the animal gifts its young to the hero. The beauty follows the hero without resistance, etc. It is common for these objects to help the hero later. In the case of magical items, it could be a false object if it is switched, such as the water of life.

**ST & HF** – The Donor and the Helper. The Donor can be a human, an animal, a plant, or a mythical being. The Donor provides the hero with a necessary item, skill, or information but does not have a direct effect on the hero. For example, the Donor cannot revive the hero or offer asylum or protection. It is important that the Donor only provides supportive and never burdensome information. Instead of, for example, saying that a monster has kidnapped a princess, it would be more appropriate to guide the hero to the kidnapper, give him a weapon, or show him a trick to defeat the monster.

The Helper (HF) is someone who accompanies the hero and acts together with him. The key factor in distinguishing the Helper from the Donor is their collaborative involvement with the hero in solving the task or alleviating the crisis. The Donor's function is to assist the hero but not to act as a participant. Sometimes, the functions of Donor and Helper can be intertwined in one character, such as an animal brother-in-law in ATU 552. He first shows the hero the way to the antagonist, thus fulfilling the Donor's function. Later, when the hero is killed in combat with the antagonist, the same brother-in-law revives him, thereby fulfilling the Helper's function. By status, a Helper can be a sorcerer or a relative of the sorcerer. Almost all protagonists in fairy tales, including the antagonist, can donate and help. However, the Donor or Helper himself cannot do anything other than donate and help. In the world of sorcerers and totems, there are no statuses and hierarchy: a young snake is rescued, and the snake's father gives the rescuer a wishing stone. Another snake is rescued, and it bestows the ability to understand animal language upon the rescuer.

The false Donor (fST) or false Helper (fHF) is someone who helps or donates to evil, such as a witch commissioned by a false hero. Even the beings guarding the evil target object (ATU 551) are considered false helpers.

**VB** – The Connecting Person is represented by a human or mythical, but generally anthropomorphic being. Their main function is to ensure mediation between the hero and another key character or to inform the hero about the existing crisis or necessary burdens. Typically, subjects are employed in the role of the connecting person, such as an old hostess, an innkeeper, or a shepherd. Often, the hero's lord, usually the hero's mother, can also be found in this role.

A connecting person becomes false when they act in favor of the antagonist. Often, servants, advisors, etc., employed by the evil king are found in this role. The action of the false connecting person is not always the opposite of what the right one does. Typical actions include denouncing and playing the role of an informer or initiating malicious tasks.

**AN** – Antagonist (Opponent, Adversary): The antagonist belongs to the evil world (foreign world) and can practically be represented by all classes. As indicated above, their function can also be taken over by a false protagonist, but from their own world. Particularly common cases include the false lord of the hero (fHH) and the false hero (fHD).

A false antagonist, one who acts in favor of the hero, is not encountered but theoretically conceivable. In a fairy tale, several antagonists can appear. If the dragon is killed and his sister attempts revenge, the dragon's sister is also an antagonist.

1. The characteristics of the protagonists result from the analysis of the plot sections in the fairy tale and not the other way around, as is presented in the structure of this paper. The structure of this paper nevertheless aims to avoid commenting on numerous new terms by discussing the protagonists in the fairy tale beforehand. This would be unavoidable if this paper were to follow the actual research process exactly. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)