

## BOOK REVIEWS

The Afro-American Trickster Tale: A Structural Analysis.

By Jay D. Edwards.

Pp. vi + 92.

Monograph Series Vol.4. Folklore Publications Group:  
Bloomington, Ind., 1978. Paper. \$2.50.

Reviewed by Roger deV. Renwick and John Michael Vlach.

For years folklorists have plundered anthropological writings in search of critical insights. In this monograph by Jay D. Edwards, an anthropologist has turned the game around and given the folklorists a close reading--particularly works concerned with structural theory and Afro-American culture. Edwards' combined interests in folktale architectonics and Afro-America unavoidably carry him onto the academic battlefield to confront Richard M. Dorson where Daniel Crowley, Roger Abrahams, William Bascom, and others have previously debated with him over the Africanity of New World black lore. After reviewing these previous exchanges, Edwards suggests that a structural approach to trickster tales would resolve the conflict of opinion involving the "Africanism question" and "lead us to a fuller consideration of the nature of the folktale and its components" (p. 6).

We can hardly do justice to this densely packed and insightful monograph in a short review; a mere sketch of selected contents must suffice. What chiefly distinguishes Edwards' structural method from others in folklore (except most noticeably Volume 1 of Ojo Arewa and G. M. Shreve, The Genesis of Structures in African Narrative [New York: Conch Magazine, 1975]) is that it is not only descriptive (i.e., "syntagmatic"), and not only interpretive (cf., "paradigmatic")--both single-leveled analyses--but also generative and multi-leveled (i.e., "transformational"). The method is applied to the major segment of the tale which exhibits complex structure, the Plot. Other segments are the Formulaic Opening, Atemporal Introduction, Concluding Elements, and Formulaic Closing, in all of which "deep" and "surface" structure are pretty much the same thing. At the level of Plot's deepest structure in the Afro-American trickster tale is a base (i.e., thematic) opposition between two ideas like Harmony (coded D-) and Disharmony (D+). At the second level this base opposition combines with a secondary--but also ideational--opposition: e.g., Lack (V-) vs. Possession (V+). These constitute the repertoire of semantic components; their relationships are determined by a syntactic component, also of level two, which Edwards finds to be very similar to Lévi-Strauss' famous algorithm,  $F_x(a):F_y(b):F_{a-1}(y)$ , the a and b constants

standing for the Dupe and the Trickster. The third level (each level, of course, generates an output more concrete than the input from its preceding level, an output which in turn constitutes input to its succeeding level) is the more concrete sequencing of Narrative Components--e.g., lack (V-), initial relations established between Trickster and Dupe (D-), initiation of a contract between the two (D-), and so forth. These three levels constitute the deep structure; surface structure is composed of more specific Functions (after Propp) and of the even more concrete Episodes of the tale-as-told.

The above characterization is but the sketchiest synopsis of Edwards' analysis, which is one of the most complete, rigorous, replicable, and verifiable structural studies we know of. His presentation is also exemplary in that he discusses the methodological steps involved with clarity and insight, does not shy away from carefully reviewing the more subjective of his assumptions and procedures, and takes pains to justify his analytic decisions with cogent arguments. In short, his analysis, while not being in the least simplistic, is a lot more intelligible and persuasive than many of its kin, especially its closest relation, Arewa and Shreve's Genesis of Structures. To be sure, there are some minor areas that could do with clarification: for instance, one is unclear why the Lack/Possession semantic opposition should come at level two, for logically--and in terms of Edwards' own conclusions, in fact--it should be integral to the base level, level one; Lévi-Strauss' algorithm incorporates actors (or, to be more precise, "terms") as invariables, but actors are not well operationalized into Edwards' model at the more concrete levels; the author does not clearly specify either the content, or the role in the model, of Functions; and the posited transformational rules that aid in converting the input from deep structure (level three) into the output of surface structure--rules like expansion, deletion, reordering, and so forth--are much too general to convincingly support an argument for system.

As an ethnological rather than simply a formal structuralist, Edwards goes on to relate the revealed structure of the trickster tale to the deep structure of Afro-American worldview and ethos (and even, briefly, behavior) as well as to the empirical conditions--not necessarily perceived by Afro-Americans themselves--of Black life in the New World. Having established that a pattern of paired relationships will account for all Afro-American trickster tales, Edwards suggests that the base rule for the narrative is in fact the rule for appropriate conduct, a model for living. Thus, arguments which claim that the trickster is an underdog hero who allows oppressed blacks to vent frustration by identifying with his victory over a larger dupe are found wanting.

In fact, because the structure of the tale in oppressed America and unoppressed Africa are identical, the nature of the tale cannot be completely explained by a set of social circumstances (function cannot account for form). Edwards asserts that a basic paradox in African cultures, and elsewhere, is the conflict of individual aims with social goals. This basic relationship, he observes, is the generative motive for the type of trickster tale wherein short-term economic gain is achieved at the expense of a social contract; the trickster takes the prize and dupe is left with an empty promise. Edwards demonstrates, then, the universality of intention in trickster stories and, more importantly, shows that the Afro-American worldview is one balanced ambivalently between alternatives without a definite preference for either. This is a notion which fits closely W. E. B. Dubois' early observations on the "Two-ness of the Negro."

The Afro-American Trickster Tale is altogether an excellent piece of work, displaying in addition to everything else a wide knowledge of folklore scholarship and a sensitivity to folklore texts as imaginative constructions. The complexity of his argument has required the author to explain his points at length and militated against easy compression into an article. It is fortunate for him, and us as well, that the Folklore Publications Group is willing to handle works of such length which are still too short to become books. Perhaps the author does have a book in process on the subject and this extended essay is but a preliminary report. We certainly hope so, for Edwards has many good insights from which students of folk narrative can benefit.

Die Welt der Einfachen Formen. By Kurt Ranke.  
Pp. ix + 455, index.  
Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1978. \$81.40 cloth.

Reviewed by Wolfgang Mieder.

Kurt Ranke, emeritus professor of folklore at the University of Göttingen (Germany), is without doubt one of the leading scholars in the field of folk narrative research. With admirable personal drive and sacrifice he is now acting as the main editor of the Enzyklopädie des Märchens, whose final twelve volumes will in fact be a tribute by international scholars to his untiring research efforts. Already in 1968 he was duly honored by a Festschrift entitled Volksüberlieferung, and the present volume of twenty-five of his most important essays written between 1938 and 1976 was prepared by Rudolf Schenda (Göttingen) as a tribute to this superb scholar on his seventieth birthday.