

WHY STUDY FOLKLORE AND LITERATURE?

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The current renaissance of the study of folklore and literature, representing perhaps a desire to reinsert humanities into an increasingly social scientific approach to folkloristics, has produced a variety of papers and publications. But it has not as yet dealt overtly with the explicit reasons for the study per se, though some justification is surely implicit in motivating the various studies which have been made. Nonetheless, the question should be both raised and answered: Why study folklore and literature?

Both folklore and literature are parts of culture, produced or created by cultural beings. Their study expands our knowledge of its makers and possessors--their creative processes and strategies, their material's function. The study of the two related cultural phenomena, in tandem or simultaneously, points out their shared roots in a cultural tradition which provides not only content, but style, structure, and strategy, and forces us to look at the literary redactor and oral redactor as standing in similar relationships to the received cultural traditions. Are they in fact parallel? Do we know enough about the sources or processes of either the oral or literary redactor to answer this question? The comparison of the two--folklore as oral literature and written literature--raises, if not answers, such important questions about creativity, change, communication, thus suggesting the ultimate value of the study of folklore and literature. But let me offer through example some additional and more explicit reasons.

Wayland D. Hand's edition of beliefs, found in volumes Six and Seven of the Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore, contains a magnitude of texts, numbered and arranged in logical fashion: 5303-5315

fashion: 5303-5315 deal with the owl's prognosticatory relationship with death, such as "To hear a shivering owl is a sign of death"; 5330-5334 focus on whippoor-wills foretelling death; 5205-5214 deal with dogs in similar prophetic capacities. Category 5622 tells that "If a spider is consumed falling into a lamp, witches are near." As isolated beliefs, catalogues such as Hand's offer a multiplicity of textual data and of lore but give little information about the folk: Who believed these? How were or are they manifested in actual life? How do the discrete beliefs fit into the total belief system of a group?

Early in the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Huck alludes to these very signs:

The stars was shining, and the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heard an owl, away off, who-whooping about somebody that was dead, and a whippowill and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me and I couldn't make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers run over me. Then away out in the woods I heard that kind of sound that a ghost makes when it wants to tell about something that's on its mind and can't make itself understood, and so can't rest easy in its grave and has to go about that way every night grieving. I got so down-hearted and scared, I did wish I had some company. Pretty soon a spider went crawling up my shoulder, and I flipped it off and it lit in the candle; and before I could budge it was all shriveled up. I didn't need anybody to tell me that that was an awful bad sign and would fetch me some bad luck, so I was scared and most shook the clothes off of me. I got up and turned around in my tracks three times and crossed my breast every time; and then I tied up a little lock of my hair with a thread to keep witches away. But I hadn't no confidence. You do that when you've lost a horse-shoe that you've found, instead of nailing it up over the door, but I hadn't ever hear anybody say it was

any way to keep off bad luck when you'd killed a spider.¹

Throughout the novel one sees these and similar beliefs as a vital part of Huck's belief system, the values he holds and uses to direct his life. Twain gives Huck what I would call an ecological belief system--in tune with nature and her signs, fatalistic but accepting of the preeminence of good luck over bad. This belief system or worldview, which Huck learned from his father, is reinforced in his relationship with Jim. It enables him to accept the world realistically and to judge and respect humanity, not measuring it/them by external precepts but by responding to the worth within. Huck's traditionally inherited and proven belief system supported and sustained him, answering his questions; but, more importantly, it allowed his humanity to express itself without the blinders of the "sivilized" state.

Inherited from his dissolute father, tempered by his contact with alternate systems and by his own inner integrity, Huck's traditional belief system--shared wholeheartedly with Jim in their world on the raft--was at once too pure and too nonrational to remain whole for long under sustained assaults from Miss Watson's brand of "sivilization" or Tom's fantastic disregard of humanity. Thus Twain sends Huck off, first to the river and then to the next frontier, to allow him to retain the measure of humanity he possessed to the end, to remain both product of and symbol for his traditional and inherited belief system.

Huck's belief system is depicted overtly in incidents and signs which not only provide elements of characterization, but definitely motivate and carry along the plot. Early in the book, as I have indicated, Huck anticipates bad luck generally. Later Miss Watson thwarts Huck's counteract after spilling the salt--that is, throwing some of the salt over his left shoulder--because it is messy. Huck feared then the bad luck which would necessarily follow. And it did with the arrival of Pap, whose reappearance he anticipated after he saw Pap's footprint, which bore the characteristic cross in the left boot heel--"to

keep off the devil." Though seemingly insignificant, these events move the story and foreshadow events to come.

But Huck's belief system is best seen in the character of Jim; and Huck's response to Jim as a store of traditional knowledge shows not only Huck's growing humanity, but also a growth in Jim's own self-esteem. Jim's overt belief system before running away, however, differs in Twain's characterization from his overt belief system afterwards, which he shares with Huck. As a slave, Jim is acted upon: he believes that witches are ever-present and offers witches as an explanation for all that happens, even when the reader and other characters know that witches are not the cause. In fact, lack of knowledge of the truth by the slaves, characters and readers alike, affords Jim and the slaves a very low status. Motivated by his belief in witches, Jim builds a personal experience story out of his belief and small changes in his environment:

Afterwards Jim said the witches bewitched him and put him in a trance, and rode him all over the State, and then set him under the trees again and hung his hat on a limb to show who done it. And next time Jim told it he said they rode him down to New Orleans; and after that, every time he told it he spread it more and more, till by-and-by he said they rode him all over the world, and tired him most to death, and his back was all over saddle-boils.²

We know Tom and Huck took the candle and left five cents to pay for it, that they put his hat on a limb. Jim's explanation--that he was ridden by witches and got the nickel from the devil--grows directly out of his servile status and its attendant belief system. It is interesting to note in this connection that the next time the reader confronts slaves in the state of slavery, they too are acted upon, showing excessive fear of witches. On the Phelps's Plantation, Nat attributes anything out of the ordinary to witches:

The nigger had a good-natured, chuckle-headed face, and his wool was all tied up in little

bunches with thread. That was to keep witches off. He said the witches was pestering him awful, these nights, and making him see all kinds off strange things, and hear all kinds of strange words and noises, and he didn't believe he was ever witched so long, before, in his life. He got so worked up, and got to running on so about his troubles, he forgot all about what he'd been agoing to do.³

But Jim--and no doubt Nat, too, if he had run away or been freed--left witches behind and became an active reader of the signs, particularly those of prognostication, when he reached Jackson's Island and throughout his idyllic existence on the world of the raft. Jim's knowledge is proven valid in enough instances to reaffirm the belief system, not only to himself, but to Huck. And Huck can say in affirmation of the system and of Jim, "I had heard about some of these things before, but not all of them. Jim knowed all kinds off signs. He said he knowed most everything."⁴ Huck himself corroborated Jim's belief that looking over one's left shoulder at the moon provided bad luck, because he too held that belief. Even before Jim escaped from slavery, his common worldview with Huck brought Huck to the older man for information--through the hair ball--concerning Pap's plans. The shared system, held before their virtually familial acquaintance, is reinforced by their mutual reliance on it. Unlike the hair ball from the fourth stomach of an ox, which contained a spirit that foretold and which Jim uses while a slave, his traditional lore when free becomes far more relevant and important in the everyday, ongoing processes of life. Presented conversationally, a variety of seemingly insignificant beliefs are exceedingly important to specific incident and to the general theme. When birds fly along, periodically stopping and then resuming flight, Jim likens this to what chickens do when foretelling rain. Subsequently it rains, proving the sign's validity. Huck is prevented from catching birds by Jim's verbalization of the belief that you'll die if you do; he knows: that is what caused his father's death. Counting the number of things you eat for dinner or shaking the table cloth after sundown also bring bad luck. If

bees are not told of their owner's death, they will weaken, quit work, and die. Almost a code of ethics, enough are shown to be viable to validate the system. Not only violating the tabu against touching snakeskin, but ignoring the traditional snakelore that the dead snake's mate will come to it, Huck puts the skin in Jim's blanket as a practical joke. When Jim retires, bad luck occurs on both counts: he is bitten. Again, from his wealth of knowledge comes the cure: chop off the head and throw it away, skin the body, roast some of the meat and eat it, tie rattles around the wrist. Fortunately, the cure works and saves Jim from the bite; but, of course, it does not counter the original bad luck from touching the snakeskin, which is repeatedly and conveniently blamed for bad luck. When Jim realizes that they have missed Cairo, he refers back to this early incident: "Po' niggers can't have no luck. I awluz 'spected dat rattle-snake skin warn't done wid it's work."⁵ The belief system, then, accepts at this point. The time for action, for avoidance--in knowing what not to do--is past. Shared by the runaway slave and the boy-man Huck, the belief system not only characterizes these individuals as superstitious and as holding beliefs we do not believe, but also motivates and moves the plot on.

Huck and Jim's belief system is not the only one found in Twain's masterful novel, though it may be safe to say that Twain found more to admire in the ecological system than in the two other major worldviews presented. To an extent this is indicated by his paraphrase of Ben Jonson's comment on "Chevy Chase": "Let me make the superstitions of a nation and I care not who makes its laws or its songs either."⁶ The dominance of Huck and Jim's system and Twain's own preference for it is further underlined by the essentiality of the beliefs and their structure in the structure of the novel. Conveniently structured as cause and effect--if this, then that--the sign is read, and the results follow as the story progresses. Both content and structure motivate and contribute directly to the plot development. In focusing his and our attention on one belief system, which enabled its practitioners to achieve maturity and special attributes of humanity, Twain underscores his views of society and its values. By stressing

the least "sivilized" one, he can show by ironic contrast its inherent superiority and vulnerability: it cannot stand up under "sivilized" assaults. To persist, its believers must go to yet another outpost, another frontier. (Perhaps this meshes with the American dream of the frontier and man's perfectability through it.) The "pure in heart"--those who value humanity first--are in trouble, then and now. Society taints and corrupts them. Realist that he was, Twain refuses to let this happen; he manipulates, he does what in actuality is hardly possible: he stops the world and lets his character get off. This is art--fictive truth--not fact. It says more to us because it is. In manipulating and altering, Twain forces us to acknowledge his point.

In fact, Twain must provide contrasting belief systems, representing all the spectrums of society, in order to make his point. Each system can be judged as it affects or does not affect the central figure, whose belief system, as Twain presents it, is the ecological one--that is, Huck and Jim's. The "sivilized" state is best exemplified by Miss Watson in the early portions of the book, and later--and somewhat differently--by the Grangerfords. Thoroughly imbued with religious piety, with propriety, with excessive conformity and regularity--above all, with respectability--Miss Watson's world, filled with external sanctions, collides with Huck's world of nature and internal feeling. His poignant attempts to accommodate himself, however briefly, to this world and to the belief in the efficacy of prayer fail not so much because of his disbelief as because of a mismatch of expectations. In his world of marginal existence, when one needed something, one really needed it; signs and prognostications foretold the outcome, charms and amulets might facilitate success. The alien notion of "spiritual gifts," fostered by Miss Watson's brand of belief and religion, was of no utility. And the issue of "spiritual gifts" was a real one: one was good and pious even if fighting with others in a feud whose initial cause was lost to memory. Huck saw this belief system and how partial and basically inhumane it was. He opted to keep his own, which, of course, ultimately allowed him the greatest humanity of all.

The belief system of Tom, and perhaps of the King and Duke as well, represents the most superficial and inhumane of all: based on booklore, rooted in fantasy, nonproductive in the extreme, Tom's belief system is fragmentary and can operate only sporadically--in fact, like the Duke and the King's, it is utter sham. Surely imagination is a vital ingredient in life, but carried to the extreme and denying reality, it leads both Tom and the Duke and King to sacrifice another human being. When it spills over into the recognizable realm of game, Huck--never one for the nonutilitarian--questions its value. His own belief system, firmly rooted within, accepting of people, allows him to coexist even with the cruel, and fortunately unsustainable, system.

It is essentially through belief systems (which are made up of discrete beliefs) that Twain makes his point in the book. In doing so, he provides a whole in which to fit the parts; he gives us both the general cultural as well as the specific context, as he gives the lore to the people. He also shows us beliefs as a functioning reality. Additionally, he provides variants of already known belief texts, as we saw in the Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore--that is, folklore data.

We do not know for sure how accurate Mr. Clemens was, but even the most far-out science fiction, like Ursula LeGuin's Left Hand of Darkness, relies heavily on aspects of the mimetic. Authors must write out of their experience and their lives; their views may be skewed and selective, but they are also suggestive of reality. Sensitive to nuance, to subtlety, to the intricacies of human interaction, authors may provide valuable insights into a people's traditions--more so than does the lore--giving function and context as well. As Richard M. Dorson says in the Journal of American Folklore Symposium, "Collectors almost invariably concentrate on texts, and omit accounts of informants or the milieu, and in any case they lack the skill of novelists in depicting the folk background."⁷ Novelists, then, may provide both a general example to be followed by collectors, as well as

specific material about the contexts and functions of folkloric traditions which may be verified.⁸ The example from The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn thus provides a variety of reasons for the study of folklore and literature. Literature may provide examples of lore in its fullest sense--as possessed by people and used by them in the total context of life.

Another reason for the study of folklore and literature (limiting folklore to oral literature or verbal art) is to reveal continuities and relationships between these two forms of art. Perhaps this intuited relationship led many early scholars, such as Bishop Percy and the Chadwicks, to study oral literature, for they saw it as precursor or ancestor of written literary forms.⁹ The study of oral and written literature side by side may reveal on the one hand an author's conscious creativity, his or her change of specific material, thus giving us insight into variation and stability which may be true of all literature, oral or written. On the other hand, and perhaps more important, the study of the two simultaneously may reveal parallel content and themes, styles, form and structure. The focus here is on lore rather than on the folk per se; but through study of much oral and written lore we may discover general artistic forces of all people.

Since all literature intends to communicate, strategies for doing so are important. In an exciting piece of ethnoliterature, Chinua Achebe uses a strategy which has oral literary parallels. One of the central background issues in the novel, Arrow of God, concerns land rights--which village or group owns a particular plot of farmland, decision and action being dependent on historical legendry, of the beginnings in that locale. The various beliefs vying with one another for ascendancy actually affect the behavior of the novel's characters and the outcome of the book. The Chief Priest Ezeulu, heir to historical traditions, could call on the validity of the past, of history, to support his view and thus attempt to sway the people to his position: "My father said this to me that when our

village first came here to live the land belonged to Okperi. It was Okperi who gave us a piece of their land to live in."¹⁰ But Nwaka, who urged war on Okperi to gain the disputed land, disagreed: "My father told me a different story. He told me that Okperi people were wanderers. He told me three or four different places where they sojourned for a while and moved on again. They were driven away by Umuofia, then by Abame and Anita. Would they go today and claim all those sites?"¹¹ Nwaka's view prevailed and there was war--terminated by the White Man, who used the opportunity to assert control over the indigenous population on whom the colonial administration looked down. Later in the novel, Achebe gives a European administrator's views on the cause of the war, strangely and understandably ignorant of the historical tradition behind the war: "As I was saying, this war started because a man from Umuaro went to visit a friend in Okperi one fine morning and after he'd had one or two gallons of palm wine--it's quite incredible how much of that dreadful stuff they can tuck away--anyhow, this man from Umuaro having drunk his friend's palm wine reached for his ikenga and split it in two. . . ."¹² As in the active oral legend, Achebe's literary version involves a belief responded to cumulatively in a conversational context. It provides a literary example of a legend, which supports the dialectic theory of Dégh and Vázsonyi,¹³ and offers a model for legend collecting which includes the folk. But more importantly here, it offers an example of a parallel strategy used in both oral and written literature. One should study folklore and literature, then, for the mutual light they shed on all literatures--whether oral or written--as well as on the esthetic of the peoples who make and respond to the literature.

Undoubtedly, another reason for studying folklore and literature is related to the above but has separate aspects: oral literature, like written literature, has an esthetic dimension. It may be judged by its possessors, from an emic perspective, or from without, by an etic perspective. Some works of oral literature have transcended their milieu; others might if suitably translated and published. The

Odyssey is certainly a preeminent example. So is the beautiful Scots ballad:

The king sits in Dumferling toune,
 Drinking the blude-reid wine:
 "O whar will I get guid sailor,
 To sail this schip of mine?"

Up and spak an eldern knicht,
 Sat at the kings richt kne:
 "Sir Patrick Spence is the best sailor
 That sails upon the se."

The king has written a braid letter,
 And signd it wi his hand,
 And sent it to Sir Patrick Spence,
 Was walking on the sand.

The first line that Sir Patrick red,
 A loud lauch lauched he;
 The next line that Sir Patrick red,
 The teir blinded his ee.

"O wha is this has don this deid,
 This ill deid don to me,
 To send me out this time o' the year,
 To sail upon the se!

"Mak haste, mak haste, my mirry men all,
 Our guid schip sails the mirne:"
 "O say na sae, my master deir,
 For I feir a deadlie storme.

"Late, late yestreen I saw the new moone,
 Wi the auld moone in hir arme,
 And I feir, I feir, my deir master,
 That we will cum to harme."

O our Scots nobles were richt laith
 To weet their cork-heild schoone;
 Bot lang owre a' the play wer playd,
 Their hats they swam aboone.

O lang, lang may their ladies sit,
 Wi thair fans into their hand,
 Or eir they se Sir Patrick Spence
 Cum sailing to the land.

O lang, lang may the ladies stand,
 Wi thair gold kems in their hair,
 Waiting for thair ain deir lords,
 For they'll se thame na mair.

Haf owre, haf owre to Aberdour,
 It's fiftie fadom deip,
 And their lies guid Sir Patrick Spence,
 Wi the Scots lords at his feit.¹⁴

What are the differences between the emic and etic esthetic perspectives? What do they tell us about the producers and possessors of folklore and literature?

This preliminary discussion of and justification for the study of folklore and literature suggests that there are many questions yet to be raised, but that literature certainly offers insight into both the lore and the folk, allowing us to see lore as part of a complex whole having function and meaning in the lives of people. It suggests that such study may reveal parallels between written literature and oral lore, not only in content and formal features, but in creative process; it may reveal works of oral lore whose esthetic is universal; it may present additional data. Answering the question--why study folklore and literature--seems essential if the approach is to become, as it once was, a central part of folkloristics.

NOTES

1. Samuel Langhorne Clemens, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, facsimile of the 1st edition (Scranton, Pa.: Chandler Publishing Company, 1962), p. 20.
2. Ibid., pp. 23-24.
3. Ibid., p. 297.
4. Ibid., p. 71.
5. Ibid., p. 129.
6. Mark Twain, Following the Equator (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1929), pp. 2, 163.
7. Richard M. Dorson, "The Identification of Folklore in American Literature," Journal of American Folklore 70 (1957): 7.
8. See my "Beyond Content in the Analysis of Folklore in Literature: Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God," Research in African Literatures 7 (1976): 44-52 as an example.
9. Percy would have preferred success as a writer, but his endeavors were poorly received; he turned to his long career of editing. The Reliques of Ancient English Poetry subsequently became a kind of primer for poets, who used its contents as a guide. See G. Malcolm Laws, The British Literary Ballad (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972); the traditional genre is but a beginning point.
10. Chinua Achebe, Arrow of God (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1969), p. 17.
11. Ibid., p. 18.
12. Ibid., p. 41.
13. See Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi, "The Dialectics of the Legend," Folklore Preprint Series, vol. 1, no. 6 (Bloomington: Indiana University, December 1973), and forthcoming in World Anthropology: Papers and Conference Publications of the IXth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, Folklore in the Modern World, vol. 1, to be published by Mouton Publishers, The Hague.
14. Francis James Child, The English and Scottish Popular Ballads, vol. 2 (New York: Dover Publications, 1965), pp. 20-21. This is Child's A text, taken from Percy's Reliques, 1965, I, 71.