

A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH TO INTRODUCTORY FOLKLORE

Many, or perhaps all, of the readers of the Folklore Forum may at some time or another find themselves called upon to teach a course entitled "Introduction to Folklore." No longer novices in the field of Folklore, it is easy for us to forget that the uninitiated undergraduate approaches the study of Folklore with almost no idea of what the field covers, nor how one might set about studying it.

In order to enable the average undergraduate student to relate his past experience with folklore to the concept of Folklore as a scientific discipline, I have devised a series of experiments and projects which each student is required to complete during a one semester course. I am now teaching the course this semester at Ft. Wayne Regional Campus, Indiana University. The class in which this material is being used meets but once a week, from 5:30 to 8:15 P.M. Seventeen members, most of whom are married and employed, make up the class.

The primary emphasis of the course is on the function of folklore in the culture of the students themselves. The class assignments, rather than consisting of one extensive collecting project, were designed to highlight specific areas of culture in which folklore has a definite function. Some of the lecture topics, on which the assignments were based, were: "Folklore in the Educational Process," "Folklore as Entertainment," "Folklore as a Safety Valve," "Folklore and Protest," "Folklore and Satire," "Folklore as Validation and Sanction," "Folklore and Cohesiveness," "Folklore and the Economy." These lecture topics have each taken up an entire weekly class meeting during the latter part of the semester. They were preceded by several introductory lectures on the following topics: "Basic Concepts," "Categories of Oral Tradition," "Collecting Folklore," "Structure and Style," "Transmission and Diffusion," "Function; An Introduction."

What follows will be a discussion of some of the exercises assigned each week. Space does not permit consideration of all thirteen assignments, so I shall mention only those which I found to be most effective. All assignments were required to be completed the week before the lecture in which they were discussed. This gave me time to evaluate them and incorporate pertinent material into the lecture.

It will be noted that only one lecture was devoted to the detailing of genre differences. As class preparation for this lecture, a collecting project, the only one assigned during the semester which was intended primarily as a collecting project, was required. For this assignment the students were asked to (and I quote from the syllabus):

Record at least one item from your own memory of each of the following: folktale; legend; folksong; proverb; riddle; joke; superstition; child's traditional game. Tell how, when, and where each item is usually used. If you cannot recall an item for some of the categories, collect from some other person, but not from a member of the class. Give a short biographical sketch of any informants. Note the place, the approximate date, and the source from which you, or your informants, heard each item.

Since this assignment was the first one to be given, and was due on the second meeting of the class, it is obvious that the students were getting a pretty sudden initiation into the mysteries of folklore collection and classification. They were, of course, able to get some information from the assigned readings, primarily selections from Alan Dundes, The Study of Folklore (Englewood Cliffs,

N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965). As was expected, there was some confusion as to what constituted a folktale, a legend, and a folksong. However, having had to struggle with the process of recalling, or recording from an informant, a number of items of folklore in several different genres, the students were ready to follow the lecture on genre classification, and the one on collecting, with fairly obvious comprehension.

The lecture on "Transmission and Diffusion," was preceded with a somewhat complex experiment designed to reproduce as closely as possible the folk process in joke transmission. Instructions given the students (quoting again from the syllabus) were as follows:

Select a joke of any type which you know well. Choose one of your friends who likes such jokes and tell it to him (or her) in a casual, natural manner. After telling the joke, write it down. The next day or so, tell your friend that the joke was part of an experiment in folklore, and that you'd like him to repeat it, under the same circumstances, to one of his friends when you are not present. He should tell his friend a day or so later about the experiment, and ask him to repeat the joke under the same circumstances to another friend. The process should continue through five cycles. The last person, a day after being told the joke, should be instructed to contact you. Collect his version of the joke and enough information about him to make a short biographical sketch. Then get the name of the next person up the line, record the joke as he remembers it, and information about him. Repeat the process until you have retraced the entire path that the joke has taken. Compare your original version with that of each of the informants to show how the joke changed with each retelling.

Throughout the experiment it is important that each participant, upon first hearing the joke, be unaware that it is part of an experiment. It is further important that he be given at least one day to incubate the joke before being told that it was an experiment. It is desirable that he should then tell the joke to the next person without any reinforcement, but if it is not possible for the recipient to remember enough of it to pass it on, it is permissible to refresh his memory, but only to the extent absolutely necessary. A detailed note should be kept of any such hints.

Since the entire experiment had to be completed within three weeks, in order to be available for discussion during the lecture scheduled for the fourth session, there was no time for repeated attempts at getting a chain of transmission going if initial ones failed to keep up steam. Nevertheless, out of fifteen reports, seven students were able to trace the joke through the required five cycles. The remainder reported that the jokes were passed on by either two, three, or four informants. The changes apparent in the jokes were, in a number of cases, extremely useful in illustrating the classic laws of folklore transmission.

The assignment which prepared the students for the lecture on "Folklore and Satire" was as follows:

- (1) Select any well-known folktale and rewrite it as a political satire.
- (2) Clip, or make a copy of, a political cartoon which uses as a point of reference, a folktale, proverb, superstition, or other item of oral tradition.

Since the lecture was given in mid-April, at the height of the campaigning in the Indiana primaries, there was ample material at hand for satirical treatment. Many of the rewritten tales showed an excellent grasp of the possibilities of this type of folklore function. Clippings of cartoons from news media were

plentiful and cogent.

The lecture on "Folklore as Validation and Sanction," was accompanied by the following assignment:

(1) Show how the story of Christmas as given in the Bible validates the rites and customs of Christmas as it is generally observed in America. Note any discrepancies between ideal and actual practices and explain how the discrepancies may have arisen. (2) Describe as fully as possible an incident when you used a proverb, or heard one used, to prove a point in an argument.

This lecture was given fairly near the end of the semester. The students were willing to view the Christmas story with considerable objectivity and were eager to accept it as an illustration of the relationship between myth and ritual.

The function of folklore in building and maintaining the cohesion of a group was explored in a lecture on "Folklore and Cohension." As preparation for the lecture, the students were assigned this project:

Collect five jokes about someone who is different from your informant in at least one of the following areas: nationality (or region of birth); race; religion; social class; or occupation. Collect another five jokes about someone who is like your informant in one or more of these areas. Describe what seems to you to be the point of each joke. Record what the informant states to be the point of each joke, and if he is able to say, why he remembers it. Give a short biographical sketch of each informant, being sure to note his nationality, race, religion, etc.

A wide variety of jokes were collected and proved to be extremely useful in illustrating the lecture.

A final assignment which aroused some very effective response was the following:

(1) Clip or copy an advertisement which makes reference to any item of oral tradition. (2) Describe a radio or television advertisement which makes reference to any item of oral tradition. (3) Describe a belief, superstition, or charm which has affected your economic activities or those of someone you know.

A number of students concurred in the observation of one member of the class who stated, after completing this assignment, "I'll never be able to look at T.V., listen to the radio, or read a magazine again without running into all sorts of folklore."

As a means of broadening the students' concept of folklore, its transmission, and its function, I have found these types of exercises to be of considerable value. A strictly generic approach, with a major collecting project in one genre, may tend to leave the student with a fragmented view of folklore as a series of discrete and unrelated phenomena. Having to participate in a number of exercises, each designed to illustrate a particular facet of the function of folklore, the student has an opportunity to gain a thorough understanding of some basic theoretical premises. Upon these he can build a continuing awareness of the pervasive influence of folklore in his own culture.

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