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Looking at the Donor Character Through a Formalist Lens

In this essay, I will consider the sub-genre of popular literature that has variously been called the fairytale, the wonder tale, the folktale, the novelistic tale, and the moralistic tale, all of which forms have their branches and subdivisions. After establishing a definition of the subgenre that is my actual object of consideration, I will go on to demonstrate that the best and most accurate tool for analyzing the literary qualities of this literature is formalism. Formalism should not be confused, I will argue, with structuralism. Structuralism usually is taken to mean a synchronic account or slice of culture, and therefore it generally involves an account of social, geographical, and other cultural factors that I contend are extraneous to the fairytale/folktale. Rather, the more austere lens of formalism is the best instrument to apply to this particular global subgenre. That is why the subgenre is global and why every culture has its own version of the folktale/fairytale. The formalist analysis confines itself to the actual words on the page, their syntax, grammar, images, and rhetorical. Social and political considerations are all set aside. My principal guides in offering this formalist reading of folktale/fairytales are Vladimir Propp who is the author of *Morphology of the Folktale* and *The Russian Folktale*, where he discusses in full length the outline of the folktale and displays his formalist point of view. Also, important have been Sibelan Forrester and Svatana Pirkova-Jakobson who both edited Propp's works and academically defend his formalist position. Through other scholars I will also

demonstrate that Vladimir Propp's folktale structure is very much on the formalist side and can be applied to other fairytales from around the world and not just limited to Russian tales which were his prime source of data for the studies he published during his lifetime. In addition, it is imperative to also discuss a component that Propp has brought forth in his work on Russian tales that yet can be seen in multitudes of stories from all over the world. This exemplary component is the function of the "donor."

However, the first issue that needs to be resolved is, what sort of literary object are we talking about? The fairytale. All people can easily comprehend a fairytale. Regardless of culture or religion, it is one of the few forms of literature that is universally understood by all. It is one of the rare types of literature that "contains eternal, unfading values" (Propp 5). But Propp titles his famous study something else: he calls the literary object a "wonder tale." According to Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp in his work *The Russian Folktale*, one of the reasons for this that very seldom do these unique tales have fairies in them, yet much more seem to always involve a journey of some kind. Why Propp labeled them wonder tales and not wander tales, he never addressed. In sum, the body of work considered in this thesis need not include fairies but generally involve journeys.

Everything Propp knew about folklore was self-taught. He was born in 1895 in St. Petersburg, Russia, to parents of Volga German descent. He spoke German to his mother and Russian to his father and siblings. He attended St. Petersburg University and began studying German philology but soon switched over to Russian philology. From that point, Vladimir Propp has become the most widely known Russian folklore specialist outside of Russia today. His book *Morphology of the Folktale* published in 1928 has influenced our understanding of the folktale,

shaped contemporary narrative and textual studies, and even—according to some commentators—given birth to structuralism. In the *Morphology of the Folktale*, Propp analyzes the plots of folktales/fairytales, which he has renamed wonder tales. His analysis was perhaps the most striking achievement of Russian formalism. Most important, he demonstrated that a relatively small cluster of narrative events keep reappearing in all the tales. These repeating events were christened as “functions.” There is a formula to many of them. In his studies he discovered 31 functions in total. Vital to my argument is the fact that these functions can be applied to tales from all over the world, not only Russian tales, but German tales, Greek myths, even Korean folklore. However, before exploring the functions Propp first had to define the folktale/fairytale genre.

For centuries many scholars have attempted this difficult task of defining the folktale/fairytale. In Vladimir Propp’s second book *The Russian Folktale*, edited by Sibelan Forrester and published after his death in 1984 using notes that the folklorist left behind, this topic is discussed at length. At first it seems such a simple question, yet many scholars have never been able to give a unified definition. Finnish scholar Janos Honti describes how the folktale/fairytale is, “a one-sided definition of a concept that everyone knows is in fact superfluous” (Propp 11). It is superfluous and unnecessary, he maintains, because “everyone knows what a folktale is and can use that sense to distinguish it from so-called related genres-- the folk predanie, the legenda, and the anecdotes” (Propp 11). It is not entirely clear what distinction Honti was trying to make. Presumably, plausibility or even possibility is an element that the folktale/fairytale lacks. Along these same lines, Johannes Bolte and Jiri Polivka give a definition that was accepted in Europe yet reveals many weaknesses in its very broad

description. They state, “since Herder and the Grimm brothers, the folkloric tale has been understood as a story based on poetic fantasy, particularly one from the world of magic, an account not connected with the conditions of real life, which people at all levels of society listen to with pleasure, even if they find it unlikely or implausible” (Propp 14). Aleksandr Nikiforov’s definition tends to be the one Vladimir Propp agreed with the most. It is also the only one that has not lost its scholarly significance to this day. According to Nikiforov, “folktales are oral stories, known among the people with the purpose of entertainment, containing events that are unusual in the everyday sense (fantastic, miraculous, or everyday), and distinguished by a particular compositional and stylistic structure” (Propp 16). The taxonomic question forces itself: can Greek myths be considered to be folktales/fairytales? Or even the Christian tales of a resurrected God? The Ancient Greeks had no special word for such stories. They used the word myth to mean folktale. However, unlike the folktales in most cultures which were told to pass the time away, myths were connected to cults and had a social and religious significance, which indicates that the “myth is an earlier formation; the folktale is a later one” (Propp 24). The distinction he is making is not entirely clear. Perhaps an answer is to be found in European characterizations of their folktale/fairytales. In order to label such tales, the Germans, Italians, and French used a word that resembles the word “fable,” which means to tell an exaggerated story. In Russia they have the word “skazka,” which is known to be an invention and recognized as a narrative genre. Aside from the numerous definitions of a fairy tale, it is also clear that many cultures themselves have had difficulties in finding an accurate designation for this distinctive genre.

Defining the folktale/fairytale for Propp, proves to be far from simple. He had a need to be specific and in order to do so he could not ignore other forms, so as not to be confused about what a fairytale/folktale is other forms will be defined as well. Other forms include memorates, which are stories about forest spirits, water spirits, the field spirit, the rusalka (a female spirit), the bathhouse spirit and so on. These spirits were demonic beings who exert their supernatural powers on human beings for good or evil. Propp wished to exclude the memorates from the category of the folktale/fairytale. Another form Propp mentions is the legenda, which one might confuse with a folktale but differs vastly, since its goal is not to entertain but to moralize and which reflects the beliefs of Christianity. Many of these stories tend to be about sinners and the price simple folk pay for doing wrong. Then there are anecdotes, literally stories that have never been published. Anecdotes are brief narratives that are meant to be witty. However, brevity proves to be an unreliable standard. Some anecdotes that have been recorded are of considerable length and are as a result have been mistaken for folktales.

But even within the fairytale/folktale genre, Propp still had a desire to be even more precise. The name folktale comes from the people who passed on the stories, which was the peasant class and the name fairytales comes from some of the stories containing fairies in them. However, Propp after reading the most famous collection of Russian fairytales ever to be recorded by Alexander Afanasyev, and which also serves as the basis for his book *Morphology of the Folktale*, had come to realize a few striking facts that could not be ignored. One, not all tales contained fairies, therefore, they should be called something other than fairytales, and two, that because of the patterns he saw in many of the tales, the more fitting name would be

wonder tales, since many of the stories not only contained magic in them, but involved a journey as well. Marina Warner, author of *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairytale*, clarifies the term 'wonder tale' and states that it "catches a quality of the genre more eloquently than 'fairy tale' or 'folk tale.'" Although it does not enjoy the currency of 'fairy tale,' 'wonder tale' recognizes the ubiquitousness of magic in the stories. The suspension of natural physical laws produces a magical state of reality throughout this form of narrative, which leads to wonder" and "astonishment" (Warner xxiv). Propp divided the Alexander Afanasyev collection into four categories: The Wonder Tales, the Novelistic Tales, the Cumulative Tales, and the Animal Tales. Let us briefly consider each of the five types because, although he specifically designed each category for Russian tales, they can be applied to all fairytales/folktales universally and it is significant to have a solid foundation and understanding of how Propp perceived and categorized all these stories.

According to Propp in his work *The Russian Folktale*, the wonder tale is the most "distinct from all other forms" (Propp 147). What first comes to mind when speaking of these magical tales is the similarities they hold within their plots and motifs; whether it is a familiar tale such as Cinderella and Snow White or the Russian tales Propp was working with such as Elena the Wise, The Three Kingdoms, The Frog Princess, and so on, we consistently see a classic structure. The protagonist must complete an impossible task, a journey often takes place, a princess is won, a monster is slain, and in each one some kind of magical power is always present. However, not every folktale that contains magic is considered a wonder tale. For example, Propp discusses the tale of the evil and unfaithful wife who turns her husband into a dog when he discovers her infidelity. It is a tale with magic but clearly isn't a wonder tale, it falls

under the category of the novelistic tale. What makes a wonder tale is not only similarities of plots but also shared motifs. Let us take the example of the stepmother in wonder tales. Stepmothers are often depicted as evil and treat their stepdaughters terribly while their true daughters are spoiled and waited on by the suffering stepdaughter. Another striking element of wonder tales is the way in which they begin and the great tension woven into them. The formula “once upon a time,” “in a certain kingdom,” or “in the old years there stood a little village” (Propp 151) implies that the “action takes place outside of time and space,” (Propp 152). Additionally, a wonder tale never describes or characterizes much, “instead it strives for action” (Propp 151).

Unlike the novelistic tales that are much more connected to the everyday reality of the common person, in wonder tales there are usually two worlds present. In novelistic tales there is only one, “our own” (Propp 226). They can be considered everyday tales because they give the “everyday life of peasants...a fairly broad description” (Propp 225). However, depicting the everyday life of the common person was never their intention. They are called novelistic tales because often they are entertaining, interesting short narratives. The hero is never a prince but a young boy from a clear and situated social class either peasant, soldier or worker and his antagonist might be a nobleman, rich man, or judge. The evil the hero faces is never creatures or witches but other people from town. These tales tend to study the “peasant worldview and the peasant philosophy of life” (Propp 225), which is why they tend to focus on a person’s virtue.

Cumulative tales, also known as chain tales, comprise the one genre that can easily be classified. Although the events in the plot are often “trifling” (Propp 277), the basic composition

of a cumulative tale is the constant “increasing repetition of one and the same action, until the created chain breaks or unravels in the opposite, diminishing direction” (276). Famous cumulative tales that the western world is familiar with include Henny Penny and the Golden Goose, a tale in where several villagers get their hands stuck onto a golden egg laying goose. This chain of repetitious action breaks off when Henny Penny enters the tale and interrupts the series of duplications. Interestingly enough, according to Propp there have been cases in which animal tales have been erroneously classed into cumulative tales. The essential quality is the chain of repetition whereas the substitution of animals for humans is a superficial element.

Animal tales is a genre one might think can effortlessly be categorized, but it is not. One cannot go by structure or plot when classifying animal tales because they resemble wonder tales and many novelistic tales. Also, to declare it an animal tale on the sole reason that the main character is an animal would be logically incorrect because it then “introduces a different principal into the basis of division” (Propp 283). There are only three true statements that can be said about animal tales. One, in animal tales, people and animals are interchangeable. Two, animal tales do not “represent stories from the lives of animals” (Propp 286). On the contrary, animal tales appear to represent people in the guise of animals and this allegorical quality of animal tales has led some people to confuse them with fables. However, according to Propp, this too is an incorrect assumption to make since the fable is an entirely different genre in its own essence. The truth is animal tales incorporate too many aspects of all literature and stories to be simply categorized, which brings me to Propp’s third true statement:

Human life, with its passions, thirst, greed, treachery, stupidity, and craftiness but at the same time with friendship, fidelity, gratitude—that is, the broad spectrum of human

feelings and characters—finds a broad reflection in the animal epos, as does the realistic depiction of human and, in part, everyday peasant life. (Propp 287).

It is the wonder tale that Propp used to categorize the 31 functions. Clearly, Propp didn't believe that every wonder tales held all 31 functions, but he did claim that wonder tales have recurring motifs and elements. Propp preferred the word "functions." Each tale selects, cafeteria style, several functions from the list of 31. By examining one function in detail I will demonstrate that that the functions are universal in ancient mythology, fairy tales, and folktales. The prominent function I have chosen is the task of the donor, which Propp describes at length in his first book *Morphology of the Folktale*. It is the donor character that I will be focusing on primarily. The donor role is one of Propp's functions that have appeared in numerous tales from around the world, regardless of era or culture. The job of the donor is quite extensive and Propp was forced to expand the role into three functions in his book. Functions 12, 13, and 14 contain the donor's important duties.

Function XII: The hero is tested, interrogated, attacked, etc., which prepares the way for his/her receiving either a magical agent or helper. Then Propp gives several examples on how it might occur in the tale. 1. The donor tests the hero. He/she might give the hero a task to be done. The task can range from chores to years of service. (In one story the hero had to listen to the playing of an instrument without falling asleep. In another the donor who was a witch proposes the hero to spend the night with her daughter). 2. The donor greets and interrogates the hero. 3. A dying or deceased person requests the rendering of service. 4. A prisoner begs for his freedom. 4. The hero is approached with a request for mercy. 5. Disputes request a division of property. 6. Other requests. Examples: a mouse might ask to be fed, or a robber might ask

the hero to carry his/her goods. A hostile creature engages the hero in combat. The hero is shown a magical agent which is offered in exchange for services, or perhaps the magical agent is simply gifted to the hero after s/he performs a generous deed. In all cases, a donor tests a hero.

Function XIII: The hero reacts to the actions of the future donor. (Definition: the hero's reaction. The reaction is either positive or negative). 1. The hero withstands (or does not withstand) a test. 2. The hero answers (or does not answer) a greeting. 3. He/she renders (or does not render) a service to a dead person. 4. He/she frees a captive. 5. He/she shows mercy to a suppliant. 6. The hero completes an apportionment and reconciles the disputes. 7. The hero performs some other service. 8. The hero saves himself from an attempt on his life by employing the same tactics used by his adversary. 9. The hero vanquishes (or does not vanquish) his adversary. 10. The hero agrees to an exchange. In all cases, the hero rises to the challenge that the donor proposes.

Function XIV: The hero acquires the use of a magical agent. The following things are capable of serving as magical agents: animals, people and objects such as cudgels, rings, balls, clothing, etc. 1. The agent is directly transferred. 2. The agent is pointed out. 3. The agent is prepared. 4. The agent is sold and purchased. 5. The agent falls into the hands of the hero by chance. 6. The agent suddenly appears in its own accord. 7. The agent is eaten or drunk. 8. The agent is seized. 9. Various characters place themselves at the disposal of the hero. Whatever form it may take, the donation made by the donor empowers the hero.

The donor is a particularly important role in the wonder tale. Without the donor the hero cannot succeed. Donors can be almost anyone the hero encounters, a witch, a spirit, a creature, or even a beautiful princess. It is the job of the donor to aid the protagonist in his/her quest or even in his/her current circumstance, which may not have to do with a fatal mission. At times, the donor can provide an object to the hero or simply information. Propp made sure to cover many situations.

Although Propp was focused on Russian tales, surprisingly, the function of the donor can be found in countless tales around the world. Svatava Pirkova-Jakobson, who wrote the introduction to the *Morphology of the Folktale* states, "Propp's analysis might be applicable to non-Indo-European folktales," which suggests that parts of "Propp's Morphology may be cross-culturally valid" (Pirkova-Jakobson XIV). The belief that Propp's functions can be applied to other folktales from different cultures is not widely accepted, but in these four stories, that I will discuss at length, from four different countries it will be demonstrated. One will be a Russian tale, in order to demonstrate the function as Propp intended, one German tale to reiterate the function from a neighboring country's perspective, an ancient Greek myth, to show that the function goes back much further than one might have anticipated, and a Korean tale, to illustrate that no matter how distant and distinct a culture is from the western world the function of the donor is a vital character and necessary. In each story the characteristics of the donor is vividly present and succeeds in completing its imperative task, which is to help the protagonist triumph, confirming Propp's genius discovering of this universal function.

The Russian tale, *Elena the Wise* has a great model of the donor. The story is taken from one of Alexander Afanasyev's collection of Russian tales that was recorded sometime between

1855-1867. The story begins at night, in an unnamed kingdom, as a soldier stands guard near a stone tower. As midnight approaches, he hears a cry coming from the tower, "Eh, soldier," says a voice. The soldier quickly turns and asks, "Who calls me?" "It is I, an evil spirit," says the voice from behind the iron bars. The spirit pleads to be set free and in exchange he promises the soldier that whenever he is in need the evil spirit will appear and help him. Here we see the beginning of the donor's role, which Propp mentions in function XII example four: a prisoner begs for freedom. It is the first step of the donor to either test or interrogate the hero, which he clearly does, since the soldier is not so quick to release an evil spirit that he himself is guarding. Yet, the offer is too tempting, and he releases the spirit, complying with function number XII example four. The soldier also feels bad for the spirit because he has been trapped there for thirty years (another motif you find in fairytales, the number three). However, after setting the evil spirit free the soldier decides to leave the kingdom because of what he has done. By releasing the spirit, he has disobeyed his duties as a soldier and to his king, so he sets out on a journey with no destination. One might say he begins to wander.

Function XIV, the hero receives the magical agent, does not come into play until the very end of the story. It would be difficult to understand the function of the donor if one is not knowledgeable of all the events of the entire story.

The soldier wanders for three days and then finds a place to sit down. Hungry and thirsty he begins to regret freeing the spirit and blames him for his current misfortune, out loud. "Well, am I not the fool? I served the king 10 years and always had food and drink. But I had to run away and die of hunger. Eh, evil spirit, it is all your fault!" Suddenly the evil spirit appears before him. "Good day soldier. Why are you so sad?" "How can I help being sad when I

haven't eaten for three days?" Immediately the spirit assures the soldier not to be concerned and rushes to retrieve him some provisions. The spirit returns with wine and food and feeds the soldier to his heart's content, then invites him to his house. "In my house you will have an easy life," the evil spirit informs the soldier. "You can eat, drink and be merry. All I ask of you, is to look after my three daughters." The soldier agrees and watches over the evil spirit's three beautiful daughters. All goes well until one day he realizes that after he goes to bed every night the three daughters disappear into the night only to return by morning. He tries to question them, but they refuse to answer him. The soldier, determined to discover their secret, decides to stay up one night, and feign sleeping to spy on the lovely girls. From behind a slightly opened door, he sees the three girls pull out a magic carpet and strike it with their feet, transforming them all into doves. They all fly out the window and he quickly does the same to follow them. However, he isn't turned into a dove when he strikes the magic carpet like the girls, he instead changes into a hedge sparrow. The doves swiftly fly into a meadow deep in the forest where they are joined by flocks of other doves who sit there waiting. The soldier stays close behind hiding in a nearby bush. In the middle of the meadow, he sees there was a magnificent golden throne. Moments later the sky illuminates, a bright light appears and through the clouds he sees a golden chariot being pulled through the air by six fiery dragons and in the carriage sits Elena the Wise, a woman of such stunning beauty no words could describe her. She lands in the meadow and one by one calls the doves over and demonstrates her powerful magic to them and cunning tricks. When she is done with her lesson, she jumps back on her chariot and rides away. The soldier is mesmerized by the image of Elena the Wise and can not erase her from his mind. When they return home the soldier tells the evil spirit's three daughters what he had

done, and they warn him to stay away from Elena the Wise. "Elena the Wise is very powerful," they inform him, "and if she had had her magic book of spells, she would have discovered you and made you pay dearly." But the soldier doesn't listen and the next night he strikes the magic carpet again turning into the hedge sparrow. This time, instead of returning home after her performance to the eager little doves, he follows Elena the Wise to her home. The soldier still disguised as the hedge sparrow, perches himself on a tree outside of the beautiful sorceress' bedroom window to stare at her. Still enthralled by her beauty, he begins to sing splendid songs to her. The sparrow sings the songs so captivating that Elena the Wise sends out her servants to capture the creature. Unfortunately, her servants cannot capture the bird and she is forced to do it herself. She goes outside to the tree and quickly clasps her enchanted hands around its body and puts it in a golden cage for her to treasure. She then undresses for night and goes to bed. As the sorceress sleeps the sparrow gazes at her white body and barely able to contain his desire he immediately flies out of the cage and strikes the floor transforming himself back into a man. He then leans over Elena the Wise and steals a kiss. She immediately awakens, stunned and furious that a mere mortal man has dared to deceive her. She vows revenge on the foolish soldier before dashing off to retrieve her book of spells. The soldier pleads for his life, but it is too late, Elena the Wise will not relent. The soldier continues to beg for his life and asks her for one last request. "Please," he begs, "may I just sing you one more song." She thinks for a moment and then agrees. The soldier then sings to her a song so moving that she strikes a deal with him. "I will give you 10 hours to find a hiding place where I cannot find you. If I discover you, you will die, if not we will marry." The soldier is frightened more now than before. "What chance do I stand against a powerful sorceress? Where should I hide," he asks himself. The evil

spirit suddenly appears, "Come with me. I will help you." The evil spirit turns the soldier into a pin and turns himself into a mouse. The evil spirit then takes the pin into his mouth and hides it in the magical book of spells that belongs to the sorceress. After the 10 hours have gone by Elena the Wise goes to her book of spells and began to look for where the bird hid, but the book showed her nothing. Frustrated she tosses the book on the floor, the pin falls out and when it hits the floor the soldier once again changes into a man. Elena the Wise then takes the soldiers by the hand and says, "I am clever, but you have surpassed my cleverness." They marry and begin to live a long and happy life together.

According to function XIV the hero is to acquire the use of a magical agent, which the soldier does. The magical agent in the story is the evil spirit who is a prime example of a donor. He aids the hero every time he is in need. If not for the donor in the story, Elena the Wise would have executed the soldier. Heroes rarely succeed on their own in wonder tales, a point Propp makes clear with the function of the donor. In Propp's own essay, "Study of the Folktale: Structure and History," he explains how after reading Afanasyev collection he discovers how many of the tales have a "common subject," which is the persecution of a character. Propp also notes how in many tales the persecuted character always encounters another character whether it be a "wood sprite," or a "bear," who tests the character and rewards him/her. The example he uses is the story of Morozko, which is called Jack Frost in the Afanasyev collection. Morozko is the spirit of the frost and Propp explains how the stepmother in the story sends her stepdaughter into the woods to die. However, because the stepdaughter is sweet and kind Morozko doesn't freeze her to death but instead spares her life by setting her free and rewarding her with many gifts. When the stepdaughter returns alive, her stepmother is

extremely jealous of the gifts she has received and sends her own daughter, who is rude and selfish, to obtain gifts from Morozko as well. As expected from characters with villainous characteristics, the stepmother's daughter fails Morozko's test and perishes in the cold snow. In another tale, Propp explains how, "the stepdaughter" in this particular tale "encounters not Morozko but a wood sprite," and in the one after that, a bear. Propp remarks, "It is very clear that Morozko, the wood sprite, and the bear perform the same action in a different guise." Yet, aside from the variant donors "the development of the action is the same." Morozko, the wood sprite, and the bear both test the stepdaughters' character and reward them accordingly, displaying the importance of the donor for the protagonist to succeed.

The action Propp is referring to in his essay is the function of the donor, which he has discovered is vital to the stories. It is quite clear that the stories are unable to move along without the donor or even have the conflict resolve without them. However, Propp's purpose in the functions was to establish a structure. A structure that Propp himself notes in *The Morphology of the Folktale*. When the book was published and finally translated into English in 1958 it "elicited two kinds of reactions." Some folklorists, and literary scholars, "received it favorably, while others accused its author of being formalistic," which has become the main debate over the years. Is it possible to structuralize a literary form that varies not only from culture to culture but at one time from villages to village? We must remember folk tales were first told orally by the people and depending on who the people were and the era they were living in stories would often become complex to structuralize. Although Propp appears to believe in a formalistic point of view, he admits that sometimes the reduction of tales to functions is not possible since folktales at times are rooted in the people's everyday lives and

beliefs. However, I, myself, believe that tales no matter how diverse and different are always built upon the same structural functions. In 'Elena the Wise' the Russian tale, there is no evidence of the culture, and although Propp argues marriage at the end might demonstrate Russian roots, the same can be said in many Christian cultures. Nevertheless, it is the donor character that I believe formalistically transcends into many fairytales from around the world. Propp may have used Russian tales to create his 31 functions, but whether he meant to or not, created a structure that could be applied to many tales universally.

The universality of the folktales offers some insight into the question, What are the fundamental issues that excite attention in all human beings everywhere in every era? In Emma Kafalenos' essay, "Functions after Propp: Words to Talk about How We Read Narratives," she states, "the shape of the narrative sequence," is "from equilibrium to disruption to equilibrium." A statement that is true of many forms of literature, not only fairytales. There is always a disruption and within that disruption an action must emerge to remedy that disruption. Kafalenos' claims that Propp defines his functions as actions. It is not really the donor itself that he focuses on but their actions towards the protagonist in the wonder tale. In the tale of the Armless Maiden, another story that can be found in Alexander Afanasyev' collection, the donor appears for only but a moment to give the poor girl some much-needed advice and then disappears. The tale is about a brother and a sister. The brother marries an evil sorceress who is jealous of the love the brother has for his sister. The evil wife then uses her wicked ways to turn brother against sister and the brother not only cuts his sister's arms at the elbow but abandons her in the woods to die. The sister makes her way to a village where she begs for alms and the son of a wealthy merchant falls in love with her and marries her. The

sister has a son with the merchant's son, but the girl's wicked sister-in-law will not allow her any happiness and manages to get her thrown out of her new home as well. The armless maid then with her baby strapped to her chest, goes off weeping into the woods. She finds an opening in the woods where there is water. Thirsty she bends over a well to drink the water, but to her horror the baby falls in. Frantically, she paces about wondering what to do until an old man appears and says, "why are you weeping, you slave of God?" The girl cries, "How can I help weeping? My baby fell into the well." The old man then says casually, "Bend down and take him out." The armless maiden looks at the old man in shock, "I cannot. I have no hands." "Do as I tell you," Commands the old man. The armless maiden does as she is told and stretches her arms out, and with the help of God suddenly has hands again, all whole, ending the role of the donor. After that he is seen no more. His appearance is brief but significant.

Again, here we see the donor's role taking a formalistic point of view. His actions are not attached to any one culture. He provides the girl with essential information so she can triumph on her journey and disappears. Although one might argue his language and background are very Christian-like. Calling the girl "slave of God" and appearing out of nowhere like an angel. There is nothing structural with a servant of God playing the role of a donor, since his function is purely mechanical in the realm of formalism.

In the Russian Folktale edited and translated by Forrester, the preface states, "Russian scholars tend to be smarter and more subtle than the western scholars they followed, foreshadowed, or challenged" (Forrester XIX). Propp is a clear example of this. He meticulously took his time with sorting out the fairy tale structure and thus was able to trace the gradual evolving and understanding of the genre of folktales, numbering the achievements as well as

the failings. Forrester also claims Propp had an intellectual relationship with Marxism. Many believe that it influenced his writings, although we are not absolutely sure. However, I believe that it does. Marxism is the theory and practice of socialism, which paints a classless society in which advocates that the means of production, distribution, and exchange should be owned or regulated by the community as a whole. Communal ownership gives everyone equal power and creates a society where all have equal opportunity. Giving the weak equal power is the job of the donor in wonder tales. Donors step in and help create a balance in the lives of those who are often being treated unfairly by the circumstances of their life, which they have no fault in.

Additionally, Marxism has a great deal to say about traditional societies, and one belief was that traditional societies and national folklores would be left behind in the evolution, which I believe Propp would have disagreed with. Vladimir Propp's dedication to folktales, and to their brilliant structure, which not only connects many Russian tales but countless others from around the world, demonstrates the everlasting universal connection all people have with them. Despite this belief in traditional societies, Marxism does recognize the value of the past and suggests ways to connect that past with folklore. Anatoly Liberman, an author who wrote an edition of Propp's *Theory and History of Folklore*, states "Marxist ideas pervade everything Propp wrote between 1928 and the sixties." Therefore, one can conclude that Propp was indeed behind formalism and not structuralism. In literature formalism is the study of a text that does not take into account any outside influence. Yet, structuralism is the methodology that implies elements of human culture must be understood by way of their relationship to a broader, overarching system or structure. Formalism appears to go hand in hand with Marxism because if the creation of a society that is equal to all is the goal, it would be unnecessary to

perceive details and relationships of human culture if everyone will be starting with a clean slate, so to say. Although Propp wrote his book *Morphology of the Folktale* with the sole intention of publishing patterns he had discovered within Russian fairytales, he states he was “not a formalist but a structuralist” (Forrester XXIV) in the 1969 Italian translation of his own book, Propp unknowingly found patterns that can be applied to fairytales from around the world, thus painting himself in many ways a formalist. Even Marina Warner refers to Propp as the “Russian formalist,” (xxii) in her work *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy tale*. She even goes further to state that one of the reasons that makes fairy tales so compelling is “the universalizing method ipso facto looks for resemblance, not distinctiveness” and “erases historical and social conditions,” (xxiii). Yet, I cannot deny because fairytales have such deep roots within everyday people it makes it difficult to ignore the fact that perhaps Propp was a structuralist. However, according to Sibelan Forrester we will never know. In the preface to *The Russian Folktale*, he states:

How much Propp personally believed in it all is hard to say; it was certainly true that in the 1930’s and 1940’s scholars less careful or less lucky than Propp could pay with their lives (if they had admitted to being a formalist). (Forrester xviii)

The Soviet Union regulated literary production, demanding socialist realism in literature and sociological analysis in literary criticism. Formalism was not sociological.

During his lifetime Propp claimed to be cursed with the gift of being able to see patterns, a talent that no less helped him write his 31 functions and discover the central role of the donor. Whether he was a formalist or a structuralist will forever be difficult to say.

Nevertheless, one cannot refute the role of the donor that can be found in numerous of tales from around the world.

What universal desire might the donor represent? The donors' function transcends and expands through many tales and is not surprising that even in Disney films they are usually the most extraordinary characters. Who could forget the genie in Aladdin or the sea witch from The Little Mermaid? These characters are always filled with vigor and magic. One that has become a memorable classic is the all-powerful fairy Godmother in Cinderella. However, the original donor in the tale was a lot less theatrical and a bit darker while still retaining all the magic and wonder of the Disney version.

The story of Cinderella was first recorded by the Grimm brothers in Germany during the 19th century and since then it has been published countless times over the past 300 years. In The Complete First Edition the Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm translated by Jack Zipes and published in 2014 the reader learns that the original tale was called Aschenputtel, meaning digging in the ashes. In the beginning of the story the young girl is called in by her dying mother and is told to always stay good and pure. The dying mother also instructs the girl to plant a tree on her grave when she is gone, so that when the girl needs anything all she must do is wish for it, shake the branches and it will appear. Then the mother closes her eyes and dies. The father soon remarries, and the girl welcomes a new stepmother and two stepsisters to her home. However, the stepmother and stepsisters treat Aschenputtel terribly. They take all her beautiful clothes, make her wear a gray smock and force her to serve them. They begin to call her Aschenputtel because she sleeps near the hearth and is always covered in ashes. In later versions of the story, which is familiar to many today, she is called Ella

who her stepsisters call Cinderella because like the German version she is forced to sleep near the cinders of the hearth and is always filthy. Another distinct difference from the original German tale and the one many know today is the donor character. When the king of the land announces he will host a ball to find his son the prince a wife, instead of a fairy Godmother appearing out of nowhere to aid Aschenputtel in getting to the ball, she goes to the tree where her dead mother lies and recites:

Shake and wobble, little tree!

Let beautiful clothes fall down to me. (Grimm 73).

In the original German tale, it is Aschenputtel's dead mother who is the donor and provides her with the dress she needs to go to the ball, not a fairy godmother. Here the donor character is dead, which according to Propp falls under function XII example number three, a dying or deceased person requests the rendering of a service. However, it can also fall under function XII example one, the hero is tested, interrogated, and attacked, which prepares the way for the magical helper. In the beginning of the story before Aschenputtel's mother dies she asks her to plant a tree on her grave so she can help her after her death, yet with the arrival of the stepmother and stepsisters' harsh treatment of Aschenputtel, you can also say she was being tested to see if she maintains her goodness and truly deserves her mother's gifts. It is up to the reader to decide which of Propp's examples most fits this donor. I believe it is a little of both. In many wonder tales the hero is tested and goes through trials before achieving his or her happy ending, and it is the same in Aschenputtel. Although, the donor is presented very

early in this tale, as readers we must read on to see how *Aschenputtel* responds to the events unfolding in her life, bringing us to function XIII, the hero reacts to the actions of the future donor. Like in function number XII, *Aschenputtel* intricately connects to examples one and three by withstanding the cruel treatment of her stepfamily and obeying her dead mother's request by not only planting the tree but remaining pious and kind. One can say both of Propp's examples in function XIII for this story are one in the same. Some might see *Aschenputtel*'s endurance of her evil stepmother and stepsisters is what allows her to be worthy of her mother's aid. Yet, one can also argue it is *Aschenputtel*'s strength in retaining her goodness that allows her to pass the "test" paving the way for her to receive magical gifts that elevate her life to what it was before her mother's death. These two examples overlap, which only serve to reinforce Propp's genius functions that can so easily be applied. In many ways these two examples from function XIII are interchangeable.

Interestingly, function XIV ties into *Aschenputtel* in a very distinct and unique way. As I said before it is *Aschenputtel*'s goodness that allows her to acquire the use of her mother's help (the magical agent) according to Propp. However, one can say she's not magical, but more spiritual, since she was once a person and now is dead. Religion plays a tremendous role in this tale and although Propp does not bother to distinguish between magic and God in the donor's functions, which is what a formalist would do, I cannot ignore that many cultures do. It is plain to see that in Christian cultures the donor acts as an instrument of God, which is quite fascinating. In the *Armless Maiden*, which I have mentioned before we see that the maiden meets the donor by the river and refers to her as a "slave of God." When the maiden puts her stumps in the water it states in the tale that it is with "God's help," that her arms are restored,

indicating that the donor was a messenger from God and not just a man who happen to be in the forest. According to an article by Kent Gould called, "Beowulf and Folktale Morphology: God as a Magical Donor," he claims God is the donor in that story as well. In the article Gould states that some of Propp's 31 functions can be applied to the old English epic poem of Beowulf that dates back to 700-1000 AD. Gould undeniably states that it is "God" that "directs the hero to the giant sword," at the end of chapter XXII:

and holy God

brought victory in war; the wise lord,

Rule of heavens, decided it was right,

easily, when Beowulf stood again.

So here we see that God is the magical donor in this legendary poem since it is God who replaces Unferth's failed sword with a successful one. Gould refers to this as "Christian Magic," and states that it shouldn't be confused for, "traditional magic," because, "this magic is," only workable, "when the man is pure and strong enough to put it to use." The same can be said for Aschenputtel, whose mother told her to stay good and pure. Although, Beowulf is a pagan character, the poem's Christian audience would have found it completely plausible that only God can sum up enough power to help Beowulf overcome his enemies. Once Beowulf kills Grendel, he must then battle Grendel's mother, and later in life another dragon that ultimately wounds him fatally. It would be quite easy to confuse Beowulf with a wonder tale, since it has

many of the ingredients. One, the protagonist a hero of the Geats also known as Goths (a North Germanic tribe), travels to the kingdom of the Danes to aid the king. Two, he battles monsters with the help of a donor, and lastly, he succumbs to death after THREE battles, a significant and holy number in fairytales.

Quite extraordinary similarities both donors have in these two very individual tales, Aschenputtel and Beowulf, considering both stories come from two different cultures and were told centuries apart from one another. Yet, equally the two donors' actions are imperative to the protagonist to help them overcome their obstacles in life; and regardless of the Christian overtones in both stories, one can easily see that in many ways the donor roles are plainly functional. Although, it is clear that depending on the culture, the donor role will appear in many forms. Forms that will display the culture, such as messengers of God and so forth. However, when isolated the donor role is an important device that is necessary to aid the central character to succeed and it is essential to perceive it with a formalistic lens when reading different wonder tales from around the world.

Another interesting factor in Aschenputtel is that in many ways it doesn't even resemble a wonder tale. There is no traveling, and a monster doesn't get defeated. In some versions when Aschenputtel leaves with the prince, birds appear out of nowhere, peck out the eyes of the stepmother and stepsisters and the house they are living in caves in killing them all, giving the ending a sort of divine justice feeling. However, not in the Grimm's version. Still, despite this, all versions do hold one important component, the magical agent, which is the tree.

Function XIV example one, clearly states that the magical agent directly gives the protagonist something he or she will need to complete a task. Although going to a ball is not as glorious as some stories where the hero must slay a monster and save a princess, it is vital to Aschenputtel who's living a life of misery under her stepfamily. An everyday struggle many Germans were able to empathize with at the time. During this time, according to John Ellis who wrote an essay called *The Problem of the Status of the Tales or One Fairy Story Too Many: The Brothers Grimm and Their Tales*, he states, during the 19th century "Germany had been suffering from a cultural poverty." He goes on to explain how once before around the year 1200, Germany had a glorious period when half a dozen of the greatest figures in the history of German literature were alive and active. But after those writers died off a long period of cultural poverty had set in which lasted many centuries. Compared to France, London, and Italy, Germany was well behind its European counterparts in intellectual progress. The reason lies in the fact that until the end of the Middle Ages, Germany had no standard language, no linguistic vehicle for the formation of a national literature. Another component that added to their delay in the renaissance period was the Thirty-Year War during 1618-1648. While the rest of Europe was beginning to flourish in the Arts, Germany was having a war. Nevertheless, they caught up in the turn of the 19th century with writers such as Goethe, Holderlin, Tieck, Hoffman, Eichendorff, the Schlegel brothers, and of course the Grimm brothers. It is no wonder the Grimm brothers began collecting stories that reflected their culture and history during their lifetime. They wanted to make a statement. It is no surprise that many German folklore contain brutal everyday struggles and a rags to riches theme. Additionally, in the article Ellis mentions how as readers, "we must turn our attention away from the familiar kinds of present-day

context in which we think of them—those of children books, and German folklore—.” Or better yet just simply what is on the page, cutting away all other outside interferences. I believe when you perceive these tales from different parts of the world with a formalist point of view, you truly see what connects us all as human beings, the struggle to triumph and overcome.

Admittedly, era and cultural background will always be something to be considered when reading fairytales and/or folklore or as Propp called them wonder tales. It can be difficult to separate historical context from literature when reading these tales as a whole. For example, it is worth noting how the donor in the story of Aschenputtel screams Christianity. Trees are very significant in the Christian faith, such as the Tree of Knowledge. In the bible the Tree of Knowledge provides Adam and Eve with a new perspective, which then casts them out of paradise, changing their lives forever. Aschenputtel is quite similar in the sense that her life is also changed drastically by the gifts of the tree, which allow her to go to the ball, meet the prince and leave behind her sad slave-like servitude. However, when broken down and picked apart the elements of the donor can be and are universal. Furthermore, if context was so important in these fairytales why is it that so many of them rarely ever mention familiar names or places? Most stories take place in a land that’s never specifically mentioned. So, even when we have traced the origins of a story to a country or culture, it is not something one can simply tell just by reading it. Numerous fairytales and/or folklore rarely mention their place of origin or anything one might recognize to tie it to a country, unless of course it’s a Greek myth.

It might be argued therefore that it is precisely the specificity of locational reference, the occurrence of place names and recognizable real-world geography, that sets apart mythology from wonder tales. Unlike many wonder tales from Europe, Greek myths were

always located in real cities and places. Yet I would argue that this geographical specificity is secondary and has little impact on the structure of mythology. In fact many of Propp's 31 functions continue to form the essential architecture of Greek mythology. A good illustration of this, and the essential role of the donor character as well, is the story of Theseus, the famous hero from Athens. Theseus, although a very ancient myth, very vividly illustrates Propp's function of the donor's job extremely well.

Theseus is a much-known tale in Greek mythology. There are many versions of his tale. A popular one is from the best-selling author of Greek myths, Edith Hamilton. I will also use examples from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, translated by the equally famous Arthur Golding. Hamilton's is a bit more modern, written in the 20th century. *Metamorphosis*, on the other hand was written in Latin by famed Roman poet Ovid in 8 A.D. In Hamilton's version the author explains how Theseus while born in Athens was raised in his mother's city, located in the southern part of Greece, away from his father King Aegeus of Athens. However, before the king left his son, he buried a sword and a pair of shoes, and placed a boulder over them telling his wife if the boy grows up to be strong that he should then remove the boulder and come seek his rightful place. Theseus, as his father hopes, grows up to be strong and brave and completes his father task, plus more. After he removes the boulder, Theseus has a choice to make. He can either take a ship, sail to Athens safely or he can go by foot and travel a dangerous road full of murderous bandits. His mother and grandfather beg him to take the ship, but Theseus refuses the easy path. He wants to prove to all that he is a true hero and worthy to rule Athens. The foundation of Theseus' youth can very well tie into function XII, of Propp's thirty-one functions. Function XII states the hero is tested, interrogated and attacked, which prepares the way for

the magical agent. King Aegeus' action of burying the items for his son to find can be seen as a test of strength. Additionally, Theseus' choice to take the perilous journey to Athens, in which he is attacked by bandits he must overcome, can also be seen as a part of function XII where it states the hero is attacked, demonstrating how function XII fits perfectly in the story of Theseus.

Function XIII, also fits nicely into the myth of Theseus. Function XIII ties in with the hero's reaction to the actions of the future donor. When Theseus finally reaches Athens after slaying numerous bandits, he is welcomed a hero. The king, unaware that Theseus is his son, invites him to a banquet where the witch Medea plans to poison him. King Aegeus agrees to this since he fears this stranger, who now has the support of the people, will attempt to take his crown. However, when King Aegeus sees the sword Theseus is carrying, he recognizes his son, and immediately knocks the wine cup from his hand. Medea flees and father and son are reunited. However, the story is not done and another example of function XIII is soon demonstrated once again. It was a devastating time in Athens and unfortunately, Theseus had just arrived during a terrible crisis. He learns from his father that Minos, the powerful ruler of Crete blames Athens for the death of his only son, Androgeus. Androgeus had gone to Athens and King Aegeus did what no host should ever do and had allowed the boy to participate in a dangerous bull hunt. The young prince was killed and as for punishment every nine years Athens is to sacrifice seven maidens and seven young men to the creature Minos keeps in his labyrinth, the frightening Minotaur, half man half beast. The labyrinth was constructed by the famous architect Daedalus, whose skills guarantee that no human could ever hope to escape

the mind-torturing maze. Theseus volunteers to be one of the youths and promises his father that he will kill the Minotaur and free Athens from the horrific retribution. As Theseus and the others arrive at Crete, King Minos' daughter Ariadne beholds Theseus and immediately falls in love with him. Desperate to save him, so they can be together she goes to Daedalus for advice on how to get through the deadly labyrinth. Daedalus tells the princess to use a ball of yarn and tie it to the entrance, that way no matter where Theseus goes, he will always know how to find his way back. Ariadne quickly obtains a ball of yarn and offers it to Theseus, but only if he promises to take her to Athens and marry her. According to Propp there are several ways Theseus can respond to the princess, who is clearly his donor, but the best example is his fifth example under function XIII where it states: The hero shows mercy to a suppliant.

The suppliant is of course the princess, who Theseus does not turn away. He accepts her offer and obtains the object that will help him succeed in his mission, which also connects to function XIV, where it states the hero acquires the use of a magical agent or object. Although, the ball of yarn is not magical in any way it is still the essential tool Theseus uses to triumph. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the ball of yarn is described even more mundane. It states "a clew of linen," was what our hero used to guide himself through the labyrinth. Donors don't have to be magical, possess magical items, or act as an agent of God, or Gods (in this case). The sole purpose of the donor is to aid the hero in whatever way possible for him or her. In the Russian tale *Frolka Stay-At-Home*, the donor as well has no magical powers. Although, the story is filled with dragons, and amazing feats, no magic is present to aid the hero. The donor, a seventy-year-old man, helps Frolka by leading him past two lions. Only the old man knows the secret of how to get by them. Frolka who has already saved two princesses and on the hunt for the third

one is desperate. However, the old man is not only a source of information for Frolka but an assistant to his quest. As the old man approaches the lions, he strokes them tenderly, while Frolka cunningly cuts off the 12 heads of the last dragon, with no magic. All the donor does here is divulge some information and lead him past the two lions, not all that different from Ariadne in the Theseus myth, who goes to Daedalus to obtain the information that will help Theseus. Additionally, although Ariadne does not accompany Theseus in the Labyrinth, she does attain the object that is instrumental to his mission, and presents it to him. A thing that is not at all magical but mere, "linen," as Golding translated from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Yet, as ordinary as a ball of thread is, it is with this Theseus is able to get through the labyrinth without getting lost and confused, the very situation the Minotaur counted on to corner and kill his victims. Theseus didn't have to worry about losing his way or finding the entrance again with the thread tied to the exit. Unlike many before him, he walks into the labyrinth with confidence and fearlessness. After Theseus slays the Minotaur, because of his promise to the donor, he must take Ariadne with him when he leaves. It is very unusual for donors to marry the hero. They are there to be of service to the hero and nothing more. However, in a strange twist of fate, even an ancient myth can properly follow the laws of Propp's functions. According to Edith Hamilton's translation in her book, before returning to Athens, Ariadne got very ill and Theseus was forced to stop on an island to help her recover. Sadly, she mysteriously dies and Theseus has no choice but to leave the island, grief-stricken. There are some myths that say Theseus did not love her and abandoned her, while other say Dionysus the God of wine claimed her as his wife and took her to live with him on Mount Olympus. Either way Theseus arrives at Athens without her. Upon returning to Athens, Theseus had promised his father that if he succeeded,

he would change the black sails he had left for Crete, for white ones. But because of his distraught or matter over Ariadne, depending on the version you have read, he had forgotten to change them. When the ship was approaching Athens, King Aegeus who had been watching over a cliff for days for his son's safe return, saw the black sails and believing Theseus had died threw himself over the rocky height into the sea and was killed. The sea in which he fell in was called the Aegean ever since.

A great deal of tragedy can be found in Greek myths, yet despite it all the hero Theseus, like in wonder tales is able to triumph only with a donor. The donor is the function that unites these tales, regardless of where the story is from or the time they were told. Vladimir Propp wasn't the only scholar who believed myths were an earlier version of the folktale. In *The Russian Folktale*, edited by Sibelan Forrester Propp speaks highly of another scholar who felt the same, Fendur I. Buslaev (1818-1897). Buslaev states, "All the moral ideas of a people in the primitive era, make up its sacred heritage, its great individual antiquity, a holy bequest from ancestors to descendants," (Propp 94). Although, this view is in regard to folktales, he also applies it to myths. Myths were more connected to the people and their beliefs, which is why they tend to take place in real locations and teach the origins of certain names, like the Aegean Sea. Some scholars such as Georg Friedrich Creuzer have claimed that, "myths are invented by individuals, in part by priests, who participate in philosophical study of higher symbols that are inaccessible to the crowd and present them for the use of the masses," (Propp 89). It is not surprising that myths were most likely created by priests, who unlike royalty had frequent contact with every day people, just as folktales were fashioned by ordinary folks. But what's most remarkable is the similarities they have, which is the role of the donor. Princess Ariadne's

role in the tale of Theseus is like any other donor in a Russian fairytale. She assists the hero, the hero is victorious, and then she is gone, having done her job. It is clear Theseus is the hero who overcomes the monster and pounds him to death with his own fists (he had no other weapon), but if not for Ariadne, our hero would not have had the confidence to walk in the Labyrinth nor made it out.

The donor's role is not a large one but it is vital. It is what moves the story along and makes it thought-provoking. Another tale that has the function of the donor is the folktale Heungbu and Nolbu from South Korea. It is believed that the story originated during the Joseon Dynasty that lasted between 1392-1897. However, many Koreans believe the story took place about two centuries ago. According to Suzanne Crowder Han who published a book called "Korean Folk and Fairytales" the tale begins in a small village, where two brothers lived, Heungbu the younger one, and Nolbu the eldest. After their parents die, Nolbu kicks Heungbu and his family out of their home and takes the inheritance for himself. Heungbu's wife and three children cry, but greedy Nolbu and his evil wife don't care and pay them no mind. One day Heungbu returns to his brother's home to ask for food because his family is hungry. Nolbu's wife answers the door and screams, "No food for you! Get out of here," and strikes Heungbu with a rice scooper across his face. That year after enduring a terrible long winter, spring arrives and Heungbu walks sadly home when he sees a hungry snake about to eat a baby swallow that has fallen out of its nest. Quickly, Heungbu pushes the snake out of the way with a stick and picks up the poor swallow. Heungbu sees that the baby swallow is hurt, his leg was broken. "Oh, poor little swallow," he says, "Don't worry, I'll take care of you," and he takes the swallow to his family. Heungbu raises the baby bird until the following autumn, when the swallow is

strong enough to fly south for the winter. Another winter goes by and Heungbu and his family suffer again with hunger and cold. But spring is once again upon them and Heungbu's children scream with joy at the return of their little swallow friend. "Look dad, the swallow is back," they say with excitement. "What is this," asks Heungbu to his children. When the family look, they see a gift the swallow has left them. "He gave us a gourd seed," yell the children with glee. "Oh, how wonderful," says Heungbu, "we can plant it and eat the deliciousness inside when it grows." Heungbu then plants the gourd seed. Every day the gourd seed grows bigger and bigger to the surprise of Heungbu and his family. When it finally reaches a tremendous size Heungbu is please and says, "Now we can cut it up and eat." His family was also delighted and cheer with happiness. Heungbu then began to cut up the gourd seed, and as soon as he had cut it in half, two beautiful fairies appear. They speak directly to Heungbu and say, "Because you and your family are kind and honest, we are here to give a gift." Then the two fairies wave their arms and an enormous amount of treasure appears before all of their eyes. Heungbu and his family were no longer poor. Nolbu, hearing of his brother's good fortune and the story of the swallow becomes very jealous and angry. "What," he says to himself, "Heungbu is rich? No, this can't be!" Then he thought to himself for a while and came up with an evil plan to get rich as well. He went out, caught a swallow and broke his leg. Then with foulness in his heart, he says, "Oh, don't worry, poor little swallow, I'll care for you. Just bring me lots of seeds." Winter came and went. It was spring again, and the swallow returns to Nolbu. As soon as Nolbu saw the swallow he demanded the seed he thought he deserved. "Hey, give me the gourd seed," he told the swallow. The swallow dropped the seed in Nolbu's hand and quickly flies away. Nolbu went to plant the seed. The gourd seed grew bigger and bigger every day, just like Heungbu's seed, and

every day Nolbu smiled with greed. Finally, when Nolbu couldn't contain his greed any longer he decides to cut the gourd seed up. "It's time to cut, cut, cut it in half," he sings to himself. When the gourd is cut in half it makes a loud abrupt sound. Nolbu was taken back for a moment. The gourd seed came apart and suddenly a cluster of vile creatures appear and shout angrily towards Nolbu and his wife. Goblins and monsters of all kinds chase them, frightening them almost to death, until they then disappear. Nolbu ran to his brother immediately and begs for forgiveness. "I'm sorry Heungbu! Please forgive me for everything I've done to you. I promise to be a good brother from now on." Heungbu was very happy to see his brother and greets him kindness. "Of course, I forgive you, Nolbu, we are brothers." The two brothers hug and laugh happily.

It is a happy tale where the younger brother forgives the older brother for his cruelty. Unlike other tales where the villain is either killed or just simply disappears from the life of the hero. In Heungbu and Nolbu there is reconciliation. The need to make amends, and live happily, instead of just getting rid of the evil doer, is an interesting element of the tale. Nolbu, does get punished but his punishment isn't permanent like in other stories. The donor, a swallow, behaves more like the personification of morality and justice, than just a guide like many other donors; the tree in Aschenputtel comes to mind. Yet, even despite its righteous role, the sparrows in the story still have all of Propp's qualities of a donor. In the beginning of the story when Nolbu throws Heungbu and his family out on the streets to live in poverty, it is here where our hero is being tested, demonstrating function XII. Instead of behaving like his brother, Heungbu maintains his kindness and good nature by enduring the pain of being left out in the cold to starve by his older brother who should be caring and protecting of his younger sibling.

Heungbu even returns to his home again, hoping to find some generosity in his brother and his sister-in-law. Sadly, that doesn't come to pass when his sister-in-law answers the door and beats him with a rice spoon. When Heungbu leaves it is then he encounters the donor who is endanger. Function XIII states, the hero reacts to the future donor. The tale of Heungbu and Nolbu can fall into example one and five, which says the hero withstands a test or the hero shows mercy to a suppliant. When Heungbu sees the snake is about to eat the poor little hurt swallow, one can easily agree it is a test of courage and morality, to see if Heungbu will do the right thing and save the swallow or perhaps the reader of the tale might interpret the swallow as the suppliant in need of mercy. It is all up to the reader to decide. Either way both fit well. Again, here our hero is being tested, and when he passes the test, it is then he paves the way to the magical object. Showing mercy to the suppliant, by caring for him throughout the winter until his leg heals can also be seen as part of the test. Heungbu's actions from the start clearly lead him to the magical object, which he obtains the following spring when the swallow returns with the gourd seed to show his appreciation. Bringing us to function XIV, the hero acquires the use of a magical agent and object. The swallow can be seen as the magical agent and his gift can be considered the magical object. However, the reader is not aware of this until Heungbu plants the gourd seed and it is revealed what's inside.

It's amazing how the Korean folktale, Heungbu and Nolbu can effectively fit into Propp's functions, which he solely based using Russian fairytales. Although, many scholars still argue today whether Propp was a formalist, according to Svatava Pirkova-Jakobson, who wrote the introduction to *Morphology of the Folktale*, he was. Not only does Pirkova-Jakobson claim Propp, "was an outstanding member of the Russian formalist group," but his book is also a

testament to that belief since it “presents a brilliant example of the orthodox formalist method,” which Propp himself applies “to the structural analysis of the fairytale,” (Pirkova-Jakobson XXI). Pirkova-Jakobson also goes on to say how Propp’s aim was to give a “description of the fairytale,” genre and define “motifs in terms of their function,” which in turn demonstrates “what the dramatis personae do, independently of by whom and in what way the function is fulfilled,” (Pirkova-Jakobson XXI).

It is difficult to argue with Pirkova-Jakobson’s perspective here. Although, we will never be sure of what Propp’s true intentions was with these functions, it is quite evident that the donor’s role can be applied to endless folktales from around the world. Tales as far to the east like Heungbu and Nolbu, and the west with tales such as Elena the Wise, and Aschenputtel. The donor is merely a device that can be found in many tales and although we’ve established that at times it takes the form of God or a holy messenger, which most likely reflects those cultures beliefs, it is a mechanical tool in the structure of a fairytale. Heungbu and Nolbu is a popular Korean tale that began its circulation over 100 years before Christianity was introduced into the Korean culture. It is a simple story of good versus evil with a clear moral lining, yet, without the donor’s role the story wouldn’t work.

Vladimir Yakovlevick Propp’s discovery of the donor role succeeded in achieving something that Propp himself may not have been aware of. He succeeded in universally connecting fairytales from across different cultures and era. His love of fairytales and stories drove him to recognize these patterns and allow the world to look at fairytales from a formalist perspective. Elena the Wise, a well-known Russian fairytale was only the beginning of this

formalist scope, followed by the famous German tale Aschenputtel that many know today as Cinderella. Although both stories display a vastly distinctive donor, one an evil spirit and the other a mother beyond the grave in the form of a tree, their functions are equivalent. Both help the protagonist in a predicament and both help them obtain a happy ending. Both end in a wedding which reflects its strong Christian roots, but no matter because it is irrelevant to the clear function of the donor that screams formalism. The function of the donor when perceived alone has no clear ties to culture, beliefs, religion or country. Even the story of Theseus, a Greek myth that was told centuries before Christianity incorporates the function of a donor, exhibiting how important it is in the genre of the fairytale.

The distinction between formalism and sociology has organized much of this essay, but on reflection one can see that the distinction is heuristic—a kind of lens or filter that enables the scholar to highlight or isolate some elements and ignore other elements. Propp's morphology of the folktale studiously ignores sociological realities and details. Propp says nothing about the Soviet Union during the years when he wrote his *Morphology of the Folktale*. Critics rightly praise Propp's strategic decision to steer far away from any allusion to Soviet society. He needed a way to evade censure and punishment in a society that officially approved only of literary work that explicitly supported communism and specifically introduced facts about the Soviet Union. His invention of an extreme version of formalism was a supremely effective way to evade the whole issue of political messages. The distinction between this sort of Communist-approved work versus formalism, has been useful in showing that folktales and all their variants (myths, wonder tales, fairy stories) are not at all dependent on specific times,

places, cultures, or religions. The Korean tale of the two brothers might easily be transplanted to the late-medieval world of England or the Germany of the brothers Grimm.

But the distinction between sociological analysis and formalism is by no means exhaustive or absolute. The donor is part of a structure, a building block that is formally required and found in the folktales and myths everywhere. But at the same time, one can easily find specific social meanings in the figure of the donor. A graduate student's thesis advisor is a donor, for example, requiring her advisee to pass a test (writing a thesis) before giving her a magical agent (a master's degree that ensures jobs and more money). Donors exist in the real world, whether as credentialing bodies in all the professions or rich uncles who, in return for regular visits, put their nephew's names in their wills. In other words, the formalist universality of the donor in many kinds of folktales is mirrored by the presence of real-world donors across a wide variety of actual societies. Real-world donors are of course tied to their sociological conditions. No rich uncle exists in a communist society that outlaws financial accumulation and inheritance. But other forms of the donor—perhaps a sympathetic boss at the worker's commune—might give a favorite worker an easier job and in that way qualify as a classic Proppian donor. One thing has emerged clearly from this thesis. It is that the folktale and its cousins—myth, fairytale, Beowulf—model the hopes and fears of an exceptionally wide swath of human beings of the most different cultures, and geographical locations. They confirm the universality of basic human suffering and needs across the whole face of human society and as the donor demonstrates, alone we cannot succeed. So, who is the donor in your life?

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