DOI: 10.2478/aa-2019-0012

The typology of backstory inter-character conflicts as a core action in the plot

Mariana Čechová

Mariana Čechová studied Slovak language and literature and aesthetics at the Faculty of Arts at CPU in Nitra where she currently works as an assistant professor at the Department of Semiotic Studies at the Institute of Literary and Art Communication. Her research focuses on existential semiotics and the anthropology of arch-narratives (myths, fairy tales) from the perspective of wider sociocultural (historiographic, psychological, symbolic, semiotic and philosophical) connections. She is also interested in literature for children and young adults. Dr Čechová is the co-author of several monographs – *Osnovné tematické algoritmy v slovesnom umení (s intersemiotickými a interdisciplinárnymi presahmi)* and *Tematické algoritmy a existenciálne stratégie v Oceáne príbehov (2016)* and the author of the following studies: "The Rhizomatic Character of the Transcultural and Transtemporal Mode of Literary Communication" (2014), Nomina propria v sužetnom tipe skazok 510 A (2014), Opowieść o Yexian jako punkt przecięcia uniwersalnych algorytmów tematycznych (2015), etc.

Abstract: *Using material from classic fairy tales, the author defines three fundamental types of conflict between literary characters in the text model of the fairy-tale world: overt, covert and potential. Their attributes are evidenced and demonstrated via specific texts and their universal (transcultural) analogues are shown in the archnarratives, which go beyond the classic fairy tale genre. At the end of the interpretation, the author proposes a (hypo)thesis that the presented typology could be a starting point for creating a backstory of conflicts as an action-formative factor also in other art genres, and that it can be used as a source for a much broader and modern (and current in contemporary art) diapason of "dramatic" storylines.*

In technical terms, an existential problem situation (Mathauser In: Šabouk, 1976) is the "generator" and "catalyst" of a narrative theme, and more specifically, its plot core. The problem situation is a source of escalating tensions and dramatic expression (Plesník et al., 2008) in the plot. The problem situation is based on contradictions and oppositions, i.e. a conflict between two plot-formative factors – most commonly, literary characters. The classic fairy tale is no exception: it ultimately belongs to the backstory and constitutive genres based on this concept of dramatic expression.

It is well known that the plot of classic fairy tales portrays conflict in a seemingly "distilled" and clear-cut way as a clash between good and evil. This presupposes a clear distinction between the two rival parties. The central "antagonist" characters, modelled on a black-and-white backdrop, are standardized through clear opposites with symptomatic manifestations. These include the very origin of literary characters (human – nonhuman: e.g. prince – dragon), their character and nature (fair, righteous – sly, unrighteous etc.) and appearance (nice – ugly). Such a polarization may not always be evident from the beginning of a story: the hero may initially be unsightly (e.g. the fairy tale *Bearskin, Ugly Face*), the antagonist may first act friendly (e.g. the witch in the fairy tale *Gingerbread House*), and the helper may harm the hero even later in the story (the hawk in *Železník*). However, none of these cases undermine the principle of schematic characterization because they are governed by the settled sujet rules of a fairy tale sui generis.

Both in the real and fictional world (and not just the fairy-tale one), a conflict (lat. *conflictus* – 'clash') is an event in which an individual or a community impedes another individual or group in achieving their objectives (satisfaction of their needs, promotion of their interests). Thus, conflict is built on the collision of conflicting efforts, forces, feelings, values, etc., which causes tension. An interpersonal conflict is a traditional type of conflict in fairy tales (a conflict between two individuals – most often the protagonist and antagonist[1]), but we also encounter intrapersonal and inner conflicts.

Regarding the manner in which the protagonist is confronted by the antagonist in classic fairy tales, there exist three types of conflicts, and therefore three ways of dramatization of the plot.

Overt conflict

This is an open dispute between two parties. One of them (mostly the antagonist standing against the protagonist) acts in the way to harm the protagonist, or shows his/her clearly negative attitude towards him/her. This is how he/she engages in an open confrontation with the "opponent". Usually, it involves physical or mental harm. The protagonist and antagonist usually either get into a direct fight (e.g. a clash between the hero and the dragon, devil, giant, witch, enemy troops), or their dispute takes the form of mutual subterfuge (one slyly outwits, deceives or blackmails the other, often with the help of magic), or the antagonist's animosity and hostility towards a defenceless hero is openly manifested (e.g. the stepmother in *Cinderella* or Maruška in the tale *About Twelve Moons*). This usually happens in a family: an irreproachable girl or boy is harmed by his/her blood relatives or kinship (sister, stepmother,

mother-in-law, father etc.). For example, this pattern can be seen in the fairy tales *Beauty and the Beast*, *Goldilocks*, *The Salt Prince*, *Jack Frost*, *Gingerbread House*, *The Princess With The Golden Star*, *Gold Spinning Wheel*, *Rose Anne* or *Laktibrada*.

In this type of fairy tale, conflict most often unfolds between the main character and the stepmother as an antagonist, and not just in one episode of the story, but all throughout it:

1. The stepmother abuses her step-child/children.
2. She gets rid of it/them (banishes them, takes them to the woods, curses them, kills them).
3. The child/children finds/find help.
4. Granted it, he/she/they returns/return home.
5. The stepmother is punished (exile, death).

This plotline is intertwined with the Cinderella[2] backstory:

1. The stepmother treats the girl with cruelty (forcing her to perform menial work).
2. The girl is helped by a supernatural being and/or animals.
3. She meets the prince, or he indirectly learns of her beauty and uniqueness.
4. The girl receives a new look.
5. She marries the prince.

According to Aarne-Thompson-Uther's international classification of fairy tale types, this plotline structure belongs to fairy-tale type 510 A – persecuted heroine. The English scholar Harold Bayley, who focused on an in-depth interpretation of the Cinderella story in his work *The Lost Language of Symbolism* (1912), sides with the view that the modifications of the Cinderella story form the basis of half the world's fairy tales. In Bayley's view, the second half of classic fairy tales can be considered a more liberal variation of the Cinderella cycle, i.e. stories about a devout outcast who finally breaks the chains of his/her agonizing situation and achieves a higher state. This transformation, in which the heroine rises from the "ashes" of humility into an exalted state, according to Bayley, can be found in many ancient myths – Sumerian, Egyptian, Gnostic and/or Christian-Jewish. The predestination of their main protagonists, for example, the Gnostic wisdom Sofia, Assyrian Ishtar, Summerian Inanna, Greek Psyche or biblical Sulamit, necessarily requires a contact with the lower spheres of the life-world. It can be characterized by darkness, abysmal emptiness, chaos, desolation, grief, pain and suffering. After enduring this agonizing phase, the character experiences a significant twist and ascension – to the noble (divine) state of fulfilment and ideality.

The stepmother's hostility towards the heroine, which is openly expressed through humiliation and suffering, is the most decisive and dramatic theme in the Cinderella story.

Cinderella happens to find herself in this situation after her mother's death, when her stepmother and stepsisters come to her house. After this twist, the little girl is forced to undergo unbearable trials, do the most humiliating work, and carry out vexatious and bullying tasks (the well-known separation of wheat from chaff or lentils from ashes). She, however, carries them out with humility and determination.

In this type of story the conflict is resolved by the classic fairy tale *prevalence* of the hero (gain – loss): Cinderella comes out of the conflict with a gain: thanks to the supernatural help of her dead mother, fairy godmother or animals (e.g. the pigeons), she changes her "ash-like" state into a triumphantly royal state. The stepmother is defeated: she loses all power over her stepdaughter; and her own daughters, who are trying to prevail at the expense of Cinderella, fail to marry into high society.

Covert conflict

Classic folk tales also present a hidden, covert or masked conflict between the protagonist and antagonist. Neither the surroundings nor the hero himself/herself is initially aware of it. In other words, the hero does not know that he/she has an enemy who is trying to hurt him/her, or is not expecting an attack.

The backstory in many fairy tales, as we have mentioned earlier, is mainly shaped by a stepmother's (but also witch's or old woman's) deceit toward her stepchildren. The vicious and often deadly traps are secretly set by the stepmother herself in disguise while attempting to win the hero's trust (e.g. Snow White in the eponymous Grimms's fairy tale unwittingly succumbs and falls for the pitfalls and deceit of her evil stepmother).

A similar narrative scheme (with the figural opposition adult – child, and/or old – young, old – new) can also be found in the Slovak fairy tale *Vratko and the Ferryman Dry All the Tears of the World* from the collection by Pavol Dobšinský. Let us briefly outline the plot: The king loses his way in the woods and chances upon the house of a subject – a lumberjack. The lumberjack's wife gives birth to a son at night during the king's visit. The king hears a prophecy being pronounced according to which the lumberjack's son will become his successor and son-in-law. The king asks the parents to hand over the child to him with a false promise to turn him into a noble. In fact, he decides to kill the new-born. His efforts are, however, marred by his servant who disobeys the king's order and places the child instead into a basket and on the river, which carries him to a mill. The boy is rescued and remains in the miller's custody until adulthood. The king finds that the young man is alive, and once again enrols him into his service under an insidious promise. The unsuspecting boy is sent to the queen as a messenger with a

letter stating that he must be killed. While on the journey, a supernatural being (a fairy godmother) changes the content of the letter, which now says that the queen has to marry him to the princess. This indeed happens. The king cannot cope with the situation and sends the boy to a demonic being – Vratko – to steal his three golden hairs. The king thinks that this is mission is impossible and the young man will surely die. The hero, however, successfully carries out the trip to the "other world", gets Vratko's three golden hairs and victoriously returns home. The king finally accepts predestined fate and the young man becomes his son-in-law – and the future king.

The central theme of this fairy tale is the effort of a high-ranking, superior and powerful man to kill one who, according to a spell/prophecy, is to become his successor. This theme not only appears in fairy tales (e.g. in the collection *Christ with St. Peter as Mentor* by Božena Němcová or *Three Golden Feathers*, Erben's *Three Golden Hairs of Old Know-All*, Afansjev's *Marko bogatyj and Vasily bezcastnyj* and *Der Teufel mit den drei goldenen Federn* by the Brothers Grimm), but also in old Buddhist texts (*Tripitaka*, *Dhammapada*), Christian legends from Egypt and Abyssinia (*Thalassion*) or the pseudo-historic tales about the Byzantine Emperor Constantine, the Spanish king Florindas or Emperor Hannibal .We are probably dealing with an ancient story that criss-crossed several continents (Asia, Africa, Europe).

The "persecution of the babies" theme can also be found in the biblical story of King Herod who was visited by three Magi from the east who brought him a message about the birth of a new king. Herod issued an order to kill all new-born baby boys to eliminate his rival. The fate of the new king, however, is divinely predestined.

Both the fairy-tale and biblical kings see the new-born baby as a rival and a threat. Fear of power, which is prophesied to the child, and fears of the overthrow that this child could cause lead the king to deploy a ruse. The old king accepts no changes – no one can replace him.

The theme of the boy's rescue has an analogy in the Old Testament narrative of the infant Moses whose mother floats him down the river in a wicker basket. The child is adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter and the boy's sister offers the Pharaoh's daughter her mother (the boy's real mother) as a nurse.

The king in the fairy tale *Vratko and the Ferryman Dry All the Tears of the World* seeks to take the life of his successor three times (at birth, by letter, and by sending him to a dangerous being). However, not a single time does he outwardly show his hostility to the boy. On the contrary, he tries to convince his parents of his generosity and affection for him.

Paradoxically, it is the very "efforts" of the earthly enemy that make divine favour materialize for the chosen one. The tension between the old king and the young hero is thus

eliminated by the hero fulfilling his royal destiny and prevailing over his opponent, and the opponent showing his recognition to the successor and not being punished for his actions.

Potential conflict

The two backstory performative modes (modalities, methods, forms) of the conflicts we have been dealing with so far concern the conflict between opposing factors (characters) in the unfolding story. However, even the very threat of a conflict, which is only present latently and does not break out in the fictional world, can be the source of dramatic tension in the story – and a very intense one. It is noteworthy that already in the classic fairy tales we can encounter the interaction between the protagonist and antagonist, which does not result in an open dispute or clash between the central characters, however, both characters are aware of a possible collision.

This type of conflict is usually associated with an ambivalent relationship between the hero and his opponent. It should be noted in this context that although the characters generally tend to have a conventional and one-dimensional character in classic fairy tales, Baba Yaga (a character in Russian fairy tales) is an exceptional phenomenon just because of her ambiguity (or ambivalence), which makes her significantly different from the prevailing and clear polarization (on the semantic plane "good" – "bad" or "helper/donor – evildoer/opponent") in the figurative "pantheon" of the genre.

The role and tasks that Baba Yaga carries out in the fairy tales are considerably variable. According to Propp, she usually has two functions in a fairy tale: 1. evildoer (she harms the hero/his loved ones and persecutes him/them) and 2. donor[3] (she tests and rewards the hero).[4]

The Baba Yaga character often plays both roles in the same story. (Marauder – Donor). Therefore, some researchers have likened her to the Great Mother archetype, which is characterized by ambivalent properties (dangerous and kind, terrible and loving, cannibal and wise counsellor). On the one hand, this peculiar character embodies something threatening and frightening in its mystery, and on the other, it enters the story as a benevolent, giving and beneficial character (Baba Yaga's visitor either dies or undergoes a favourable magical transformation).

As highlighted above in the model stories representing an overt and covert conflict, we should mention that the variety and multiplicity of Baba Yaga in the plots of classic fairy tales is rooted in the ancient archnarratives from different cultures and nations also in the case of potential conflicts. What is noteworthy is the value shift on the West-East civilization and cultural axis: from the strongly negative presentation/rendition of a hag in the Western

European model, through the ambivalent function of Baba Yaga in Russia (anthropofagous evildoer and giver of life) to (while maintaining this ambiguity) the strongly positive approach to its typological counterparts in the pantheon of eastern mythological deities (Indian Kali, Balinese Rangda or Sumerian Ereshkigal).

Let us now illustrate a potential conflict (and its relation with the ambiguity of the antagonist) in the story *Beautiful Vasilisa* from the collection of fairy tales by the Russian collector A. N. Afanasjev. This fairy tale tells the story of the eight-year-old girl Vasilisa who is sent to the dark forest by her wicked stepmother and stepsisters to bring them the lost light, and meets the dangerous Baba Yaga. Vasilisa enters Baba Yaga's service. When performing unmanageably difficult tasks, she is helped by a magical doll that was given to her by her mother on her deathbed. The little girl stands strong during the witch's trials and returns home with a burning lamp, hidden in a human skull. Its sharp glare burns the stepmother and her daughters to death, and Vasilisa eventually marries the czar.

The conversation between the heroine Vasilisa and the dangerous Baba Yaga, which determines Vasilisa's life, is the key passage and dramatic "link" in the fairy tale. The witch is irritated because Vasilisa is not asking her anything: "Why aren't you talking to me? As if you were mute! Ask me something!" (Afanasjev, 1932, p. 49-50). So Vasilisa asks her three questions. They are about three mysterious riders (a white rider on a white horse, red rider on a red horse and black rider on a black horse), who she saw enter the witch's hut. Baba Yaga tells her that the first rider is "my bright day," the second rider is "my red sun"" and the last one is "my dark night" (Afanasyev, 1932, pp. 49-50).[5]

The other question on Vasilisa's mind (what is the meaning of the three magical pairs of hands without a body, which serve and carry out Baba Yaga's orders in the cottage) is never asked. The witch says: "It is good that you only ask about what you saw outside the house and not inside – I do not want gossip to spread from my house" (ibid., p. 50). This formula reminds us of the saying: dirty clothes should not be washed in public.

The mystery of Baba Yaga, a magical and enigmatic creature, thus cannot cross the threshold of her home. But something very essential depends on it. Had the girl even touched on what should remain shrouded in mystery, Baba Yaga would have surely punished her, as is clear from her reaction.

Yet, both participants in this *partie remise* mutually respect the magical powers of their opponent. Vasilisa does not ask her last question concerning the witch's mysteries (three hands without a body), and the witch does not "analyse" the girl's secret (help from the magical doll). When Baba Yaga asks her how she managed to do all the chores that she was commissioned to

do, she is satisfied with an abrupt and vague answer that it was a "blessing of my mother" (ibid., p. 51).

Baba Yaga then gives away the "light of death" to Vasilisa, which frees her from the tyranny of her stepmother and stepsisters (it destroys them) and ultimately makes her the czar's wife.

The Russian fairy tale about Vasilisa is reminiscent of the story *Mrs Truda* by the Brothers Grimm. A fundamental difference between these narratives is that the protagonist in the German version enters the witch's house driven by sheer curiosity and infantile audacity (she is not looking for anything and she has no need, no one has sent her to the mysterious Truda) while Truda, upon discovering that the visitor has violated the mystery of her dark secrets, changes her into a piece of wood and burns her.

In the fairy tale *Beautiful Vasilisa*, life or death and reward or punishment are all decided upon in a rather short conversation. For the heroine to stand up to the challenge, she has to "teeter on the razor's edge": hide something, or conversely, admit to something else, respond appropriately in the crucial moment, because the course of the whole situation depends on her response.

The result of the "conflict" between Vasilisa and Baba Yaga is a matter of *consensus* (gain – gain): neither party has to give up something important (Vasilisa her life, Baba Yaga her mysterious nature), their confrontation is resolved to their mutual satisfaction because they mutually respect each other's *taboo*.

The "taboo" theme concerning the dark side of a higher (divine) being is very popular in folk narratives. For example, there are fairy tales in which the girl serves the Black Lady (e.g. in Dobšinský's *Goldilocks* or Němcová's *About Mariška*). She forbids the girl to enter one of the rooms in the house. The girl, however, violates the prohibition and opens the door to the forbidden chamber. In the room, she finds a witch, a skeleton swinging above the fireplace, or a petrified woman surrounded by gnomes etc. The Black Lady discovers the breach of the taboo and asks the heroine a question: "Did you see anything in the chamber?" The girl lies and denies it. She evades an answer until the Black Lady says: "Because you have lied so convincingly and not revealed my dark side, I will reward you" (von Franz, 1995, p. 200).

What seems to be a lie in the real world is rather an expression of sacred reverence and respect for transcendent otherness in the context of the fictional world of these stories, as if we were dealing with a fear-inducing intangible mystery, which mortals should not interfere with, circumstances allowing.

Due to the fact that the classic fairy tale belongs to the class of culture-formative stories (i.e. archnarratives), one can assume that the basic conflict modes we have just introduced represent the basic typological outline of conflicts as a vital source of dramatic expression even in other art forms and genres (so long as they have a theme, i.e. they mediate certain aspects of the fictional world). This would mean that it is possible to derive a much broader, more modern (current in contemporary art), and therefore more sophisticated and, in its relativistic ambiguity, a more complex and structured diapason of "dramatic" storylines. The verification of this hypothesis, however, goes beyond the competencies and objectives of our paper.

Works cited:

Afanasjev, A. N. 1932. *Ruské rozprávky (Russian Fairy Tales)*. Bratislava: Academia, pp. 44 – 53.

Bayley, H. 1912. *The Lost Language of Symbolism*. New York: Barnes & Noble, pp. 196 – 231.

Franz, M.-L. von. 1995. *Shadow and Evil in Fairy Tales*. Boston – London: Shambhala, p. 200.

Plesník, Ľ. et al. 2008. *Tezaurus estetických výrazových kvalít (A Thesaurus of Expressive Aesthetic Qualities)*. Nitra: Constantine the Philosopher University, pp. 217 – 221.

Propp, V. J. 2008. *Morphology of the Folk Tale and Other Studies*. Jinočany: H & H.

Šabouk, Sáva (ed.). 1976. *Umění a skutečnost (Art and Reality)*. Prague: Československý spisovatel.

Endnotes

[1] The terms "helper" and "evil-doer" were introduced into fairy tale analysis by the Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp.

[2] For example, from the collection of fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm or Charles Perrault.

[3] Fairy-tale characters such as the witch, "babushka – zadvorenka", widow, old woman or old man, shepherd, woodsman, angel, devil, three virgins, czar's daughter etc., can be considered substitutions for and variations of this literary character (Propp, 2008, p. 139).

[4] The Baba Yaga's actions fall into the evildoer/*antagonist* category: A = evildoer, H = fight or other forms of struggle with the hero, Pr = persecution, as well as into the *donor* category: D = preparation for the handover of a magic item, F = equipment of the hero with a magic item (Note: Propp uses these capital letters to label the various fairy-tale elements).

[5] Baba Yaga reminds us of the goddess of nature (i.e. Great Mother Nature) in this context. The words "my clear day" or "my dark night" imply that she controls these phenomena.

Acknowledgment

This study was made possible thanks to the APVV-17-0026 project entitled *Thematologic interpretation, analysis and systemization of arch-narratives as the semiotic models of world and existential strategies*.

Mariana Čechová

Department of Semiotic Studies

The Institute of Literary and Artistic Communication

Faculty of Arts, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra

Slovakia

mcechova@ukf.sk