

# STRUCTURAL-SEMANTIC ANALYSIS AND SOME PECULIARITIES OF LITHUANIAN NOVELLE TALES

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**Abstract:** The genre diversity of narrative folklore is represented in internationally accepted classification of tales and legends proposed by Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson. However, the preparation of national catalogues based on Aarne-Thompson system encounters problems, given that there exist narratives with contradictory genre particularities and they do not easily fall into the limits of one genre group. In her search for more objective criteria for classification, the compiler of the revised “Catalogue of Lithuanian narrative folklore” Bronislava Kerbelytė has taken the above-mentioned imperfections into consideration. She has worked out an innovatory structural-semantic analysis of folk texts, based on the investigation of structural traits and on underlying semantic features of folk narratives. We will base our investigation on the principles of this analysis, as it seems to have prospects. The article aims at disclosing the main structural and semantic peculiarities of Lithuanian novelle tales by means of structural-semantic and comparative method of research. The theoretical statements are illustrated by the so-called “Tales of Fate” / “die Schicksalserzählungen” (AT 930–949), which define some aspects of an attitude towards fate and death in Lithuanian traditional culture. The assumption is proposed that structural-semantic analysis enables to define the function, the boundaries, and the development of folklore genres more precisely.

**Key words:** death, fate, Lithuanian novelle tales, narrative folklore, semantics, structure, tales of fate

## INTRODUCTION

The genre diversity of narrative folklore is represented in internationally accepted classification of tales and legends proposed by Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson. However, the preparation of national catalogues based on Aarne-Thompson (henceforth AT) system encounters problems, given that there exist narratives with contradictory genre particularities and they do not easily fall into the limits of one genre group (Kerbelytė 1998a: 145).

Lithuanian folklorist Jonas Balys perceived these imperfections of Aarne’s system while he was preparing the first motif-index of Lithuanian narrative

folklore (Balys 1936), which was published in 1936. The researcher noticed that not all Lithuanian narratives have place in Antti Aarne's classification and that *the inclusion of new motifs is, more or less, a subjective matter* (Balys 1936: XIII). Nevertheless, J. Balys did not revise the principles of Antti Aarne's systematization radically.

The compiler of the new analytical *Catalogue of Lithuanian narrative folklore* (KLPTK I, KLPTK II, KLPTK III) Bronislava Kerbelytė in her search for more objective criteria for classification, has taken the above-mentioned imperfections into consideration. She has worked out an innovatory structural-semantic analysis of folk texts, based on the investigation of structural traits and on the underlying semantic features of folk narratives, while external similarities are considered secondary. B. Kerbelytė substantiated the structural-semantic analysis theoretically in her books (Kerbelytė 1991; 1997), and the efficiency of this methodology in defining stricter genre boundaries of narrative folklore is proved in her articles (Kerbelytė 1998a: 145–152, 1998b: 75–82). Several articles are dedicated to the genre of novelle tales (Kerbelytė 1996: 49–53, 1998b: 75–82). We will base our investigation on the principles of the analysis proposed by B. Kerbelytė, as they seem to have prospects.

## **METHODOLOGICAL PREMISES OF INVESTIGATION**

Structural-semantic analysis shows that complex narrative plots are made up out of structural segments, the so-called elementary plots (henceforth EP) (Kerbelytė 1991: 23–28). The structure of every EP is distinguished by three compulsory elements: the initial situation, the hero's act (that is, the acts of the hero and the antipode), and the result. When the hero's trail is portrayed, the fourth structural element – the command act (the antipode tells the hero to perform a certain task) – is mandatory to the structure of EP (Kerbelytė 1998a: 146). The hero is the character whose fate is of interest in the EP while the character, which collides with the hero, is the antipode. Thus, the elementary plot shows a collision of two characters (or two groups of characters) when the hero strives towards a certain goal.

The goals of the heroes' are grouped into five classes. The hero of the first class seeks to be free from the alien or to control them. The hero of the second class strives for life's material necessities or comforts. The heroes of the third class search for the equal rights or the significant status in their family, tribe or community. They are tested by the socially superior or older antipodes (Kerbelytė 1991: 94–95). These goals of the first three classes are the most archaic ones. The goals of both the fourth class (the search for the ideal marriage

partner) and the fifth one (the interpersonal relationship among the members of community) occur less often (Kerbelytė 1998a: 146).

The result of the hero – antipode collision depends on the nature of the hero's behaviour, which can be of three kinds: correct, incorrect, or neutral. The correct and incorrect conduct points out how the hero should or should not behave, while striving towards a goal. When neutral conduct is depicted the hero accidentally observes strange manifestations of outwardly phenomena and draws conclusions about their origin. The latter conduct is characteristic of the heroes of belief legends most of all (Kerbelytė 1992: 14), however, it is rare in the elementary plots of etiological legends and folk tales.

The structural-semantic classification is common for all the genres of narrative folklore. Therefore, the elementary plots of the same type are characteristic of the narratives of different genres, though undoubtedly their popularity is not the same. Even more, the same abstract type of EP encompasses outwardly different narratives. So, it becomes apparent that correlated texts are not necessarily similar externally, and externally similar texts are not necessarily correlated. This provides new possibilities for a comparison of single genre works and inter-genre comparison. In addition, based on structural-semantic methodology, a more precise definition is given in regard to the comparative criteria of narrative folklore and non-narrative folklore (that is, beliefs and customs). For example, a situation illustrated by a belief legend can be generally put into words by a belief statement or compared to a custom expressed in words; only their structures will be different respectively. Folktales have also partially maintained the reflections of beliefs and customs.

It goes without saying that the elementary plots, which are distinguished in several genres, may possess semantic differences, since they are adapted to the specific requirements of concrete genre systems (Kerbelytė 1991: 184–190, Kerbelytė 1998b: 75, 81). Therefore, there might differ the results or the means to achieve them, the characters or their features. These enumerated components will attract most of our attention, while analyzing the structures and semantics of the chosen genre.

## **STRUCTURAL AND SEMANTIC PECULIARITIES OF NOVELLE TALES**

We have chosen Lithuanian novelle tales as the subject of our investigation deliberately, since there have been very few folkloristic studies of this genre in Lithuania. So far, Lithuanian researchers have merely proposed common re-

marks upon these tales. The article aims at disclosing the main structural and semantic peculiarities of Lithuanian novelle tales, employing the results of the structural-semantic analysis and comparative method of research. The theoretical statements are mainly illustrated by a cluster of novelle tales – the so-called *Tales of Fate* or *die Schicksalserzählungen* (that refer to AT tale types 930–949). The latter narratives are distinguished for their subjects related to the issues of fate, that is, the predestination of one's fate and the inevitable fulfillment of the given destiny. In these tales an emphasis is laid on that attempts to change a given destiny mostly do not make a good outcome. It is almost impossible to avoid a destined spouse and to escape the predestined death.

It was stated by a well-known Lithuanian folklorist and mythologist Norbertas Vėlius that the tales of fate have much in common with folk mythology and their content resembles the notions of beliefs quite a lot (Vėlius 1977: 56). To the opinion of researchers, belief legends and beliefs are particularly interdependent, since belief legends about personified fortunes have directly originated from corresponding beliefs and they serve as illustrations of the latter. This peculiarity is also characteristic of a variety of European folk narratives that focus on fate and mortality (Brednich 1964: 81–82). Therefore in order to better explain the notions of human destiny and death, respective novelle tales should be explored in a wider mythological context.

The card index of Lithuanian narrative folklore at the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore in Vilnius contains about 4,000 systematized novelle tales, which are ascribed to 116 types according to the Aarne-Thompson system. However, the classification of Lithuanian novelle tales in the updated *Catalogue of Lithuanian narrative folklore* (KLPTK II) is slightly revised if to compare with the international Aarne-Thompson catalogue. Few narratives, regarding their structural and semantic particularities, have been transferred from the other genre chapters. Even more, 16 new plots of Lithuanian novelle tales, which had not been listed in the international AT classification, have been added. In accordance with the structural-semantic classification, all these narratives are ascribed to 109 types of elementary plots (KLPTK II: 125–228).

In Lithuanian novelle tales the main characters are a hero and an antipode (to briefly remind, the hero is the character whose fate is of interest in the EP while the character which collides with the hero is the antipode). But there may also appear other secondary personages, for example, the hero's close one, the antipode's close one and a neutral character. It is worth mentioning that the heroes of Lithuanian novelle tales are exclusively humans. Mostly they are interrelated with other personages as members of one family or kin (for example, daughter/son, sister/brother, mother/father, wife/husband, daugh-

ter-in-law/son-in-law). Sometimes their low social standing is emphasized (for example, beggar, dismissed soldier, servant, poor fisherman or impoverished farmer, serf). On the other hand, the characters of exceptional social status or high estate (rich man, merchant, bishop, king) might be heroes, too. In Lithuanian novelle tales there becomes apparent the tendency to portray poor or impoverished persons as the heroes of the positive EP, and the heroes of negative EP are mostly pictured as rich people or enriched former destitutes, who have puffed up and started behaving improperly (Kerbelytė 1998b: 77).

The antipodes are typically close to the hero in terms of territory; however they are alien in terms of kin or family. In most cases, antipodes are of high standing (gentleman, king, princess, judge). Nevertheless, the antipodes may possess a low (beggar, robber) or uncertain (neighbor, old man) status. The antipodes are usually human beings but they might be mythological beings, too (for example, devil, hanged man, dead man, personified fortune (*laimė*), Jesus Christ, angels) or mythical impersonalized powers (a voice at the window, the abstract power of fate).

So, the interrelations between the characters of Lithuanian novelle tales are based on the different status of the hero and the antipode respectively (Kerbelytė 1998b: 81). The emphasis is quite often laid on the fact that the heroes of low standing have an advantage over the rich, since the former are cleverer and more ingenious. Meanwhile the characters of high status (both when they take a part of the hero or that of the antipode) are portrayed as of little intelligence.

A new feature characteristic of Lithuanian novelle tales is a situation when at the beginning of narration neither the antipode, nor the hero comprehends the each other's true status. It becomes evident only from the EP's result. This situation is characteristic of tales of fate, too. For example, in the Lithuanian variants of novelle tale *Edipas* (Oedipus, AT 931) the assumption is followed that both father and his son do not know about the proximity of blood that bonds them when they meet. It turns out this way, since the father believes that he has avoided the prophesized destiny while abandoning his child outdoors. However, he does not forebode that he has thus exactly underlain preconditions for future tragic events, given that the abandoned child cannot remember how his parents looked like. Therefore, the interrelations between the personages are revealed too late, and both patricide and incestuous marriage take place.

Besides, in Lithuanian novelle tales of fate the true reasons behind the status of the character portrayed are not always clear to the other personage at the beginning of elementary plot. It also becomes evident only from the EP's result. For example, in one variant of a tale *Laimė lemia žmonią likimą*

(that is *Laimė* (personified fortune) Alloting Fate to People, AT 947 B\*) an attractive maidservant wonders how and why her master is so in love with his ugly wife. The wife invites the maidservant to observe what their personified fortunes do: the maidservant's fortune is idle and at every meal it manages to eat the meat of two oxes, while the fortune of the ugly lady just tastes some biscuits and leaves a pile of jewels for her (LTR 3783 /821/). Thus, the baffled maidservant is given an explanation in the language of metaphors why both her and her mistress' destiny is like that. Thereby, in Lithuanian novelle tales it is induced to evaluate other people not merely according to outer features of their appearance but according to the inner traits of their being. Even more, these narratives prompt that the nature of human existence as well as his/her social standing are conditioned by fate. The idea is substantiated in these tales that individual destiny depends on the state or activity of one's personal personified fortune (*laimė*).

The elementary plots of the first class prevail in the genre of Lithuanian novelle tales. This confirms that the EPs which picture the hero's striving to be free from the alien or to control them dominate in the genre of novelle tales. The particular narratives reveal how the hero succeeds to maintain his freedom or in what situations he loses his independence.

In Lithuanian novelle tales, the elementary plots of the first class also illustrate the theme of a predestined spouse. In traditional culture, marriage has been considered inevitable in a same way as the very death is. Such an approach towards matrimony is substantiated on the grounds that in the Lithuanian rural community almost until the middle of the 20th century, intermarriage was one of the main factors in an individual's process of socialization. People were not considered full members of their community if they had reached an appropriate age but were still unmarried and consequently they were as if displaced from the normal social environment (Račiūnaitė 2002: 99–100). The awareness of the importance of this social transition is also revealed by the custom to bury unmarried girls and lads dressed in bridal garments and to perform certain elements of wedding rituals at their funeral (Baiburin & Levinton 1990: 54–99; Eremina 1991: 83–101, 121–136). In such a manner, it was sought to symbolically perform the events of normal life that were not experienced by the dead young people and, thereby, to “fill” at least in this way the missed gaps of usual existence (SD I: 450).

To folk people, the significance of matrimony is also grounded by the other mythical laws, since it has been widely believed that a future spouse is predestined by mythological beings. The latter belief is illustrated in the Lithuanian novelle tale *Nulemta žmona* (The Predestined Wife, AT 930 A). The narrative is comprised up of two elementary plots: the main one and the explanatory

one. The latter elementary plot belongs to the type *The Hero Observes the Antipode when the Latter Uses his Freedom to Act* (KLPTK II: 198). On the whole, in Lithuanian folklore there has prevailed a belief that human destiny is foretold by one or three personified fortunes (singular – *laimė*; plural – *laimės*) at child's birth (Vėlius 1977: 1956) and a midwife or other members of a baby's family hear their prophecy. However, in the novelle tale analyzed another mythological being – an old man – destines the future spouses. For example, the youngster observes how the old man hangs small hooks onto the fence (LTR 409 /70/); binds blades of grass or flower stalks together (LTR 1825 /29/); sorts a pile of berries, picking them out in twos (LTR 4724 /96/); ties hair in a knot (LTR 811 /437/, 953 /35/) and so on. The strange actions are explained to the youngster: in this very way future spouses are allotted. For instance, two hooks signify marriage and one hook means singleness; withered flowers symbolize the oncoming death of the newly married, and so on. In this way the youngster finds out that his future spouse is ailing. Therefore he is not willing to take her as his wife and tries to avoid the predestined marriage. However, he does not succeed.

It is interesting to notice that such metaphors, in which insignificant tiny objects or plants stand for a human being, are characteristic of Lithuanian folklore in general. Such images are common to belief legends and other genres of folklore that are related to rituals and customs, for example to wedding orations, lyrical wedding songs, funeral lamentations and so forth. Even more, the resembling scanty objects have been manipulated in prognostic marital sorcery. For instance, at Christmas Eve an unmarried maiden took a handful of rye grains (Mishkinis 1926: 463) or a tuft of hay (Elisonas 1925: 349) and if the grains or the nibbles counted in couples it meant the oncoming matchmaking. The stability of the notions discussed in Lithuanian mythology is confirmed by fragments of wedding folklore of similar content in historical sources of the 17th century (BRMŠ III: 21).

Similarly, it is worth to study prognostic marital sorcery and mythological beliefs that are connected with hair. It is believed that if you loose your hair, someone loves you secretly (Krėvė-Mickevičius 1926: 501) or someone loves you but does not dare to confess (Elisonas 1925: 363), and so on. During a Belarusian wedding party, matron of honor rolled up some hair of the newly married into a bundle and burned them in order to unite the couple for the rest of their life (SD I: 423). In Lithuanian lyrical songs, wedding intentions might also be symbolized by a metaphor of a young girl's hair: the girl floats down the river hanks of her hair to the beloved lad; he plaits rope out of the girl's hair and takes the girl herself (LTt 1: No. 230, 231).

So, both in the novelle tale *The Predestined Wife* and in traditional belief statements tiny objects stand for the very spouses and the actions that are performed with these objects symbolize matrimony. This proves that it was believed that the events of human existence have developed not in coincidental sequence, but they are predetermined.

However, when comparing tales and beliefs, the purpose of such notions in the respective genres is different. In a belief statement or in a sorcery account there is only the affirmation that such-and-such actions bring about such-and-such consequences. Meanwhile the tales (in our case, novelle tales) are mostly comprised of more than one elementary plot, which disclose not only the situation of predestined future events, but also the fulfillment of the allotted destiny. Consequently, the tales ground the reliability of corresponding beliefs more firmly.

Therefore, it is possible to conjecture that Lithuanian novelle tales have not only the characteristics of artistic narratives, but also perform a pragmatic function, i.e. they indirectly inform, explain and instruct in a didactic way what traditional beliefs and customary actions are to be put into practice.

Lithuanian folklore contains a pronounced conviction that it is nearly impossible to change death-related prophecies. It is worth mentioning that linguists have come to the conclusion that death has been approached as irrevocable, predestined disaster since the times of Indo-European mother tongue (Javorskaia 1994: 117).

In novelle tales the attempts of a character to protect someone close from predestined death are usually unsuccessful. Let us compare two novelle tales, namely, *Išpranašauta mirtis* (Foretold Death, AT 934 A) and *Likimo skirta mirtis* (Predestined Death, AT 934).

The first tale is made up of only one elementary plot, in which it is narrated that a prophecy is told that a boy will die by drowning in a well at a specified time. The well is shielded tightly, but the boy drowns on the hollow of the well-cover (LTR 1250 /38/). In the other variant of the same tale, a king is warned beforehand that his son will die as a result of a snake bite. The king builds up a marble cellar, but the boy draws a snake on a wall, and it suddenly comes to life and cuts the child to death (LTR 3565 /30/). So, all the efforts to avert the calamity prove futile and the failure only stresses the inevitability of death.

The second tale (Predestined Death, AT 934) is made up of two elementary plots and it provides a wider discussion on the idea that it is possible to escape a predestined death, namely, the loss of life caused by thunder. The prophecy is made that a king's son shall be struck by lightning. An iron hut is built for him. Lightning strikes the hut, but the prince stays alive (LTR 552 /816/). The second elementary plot explains how it could have happened: it is told that the

prince has left the hut during the storm. So, it seems that the prince uses predestination by adjusting it in a personally suitable way. However, the bigger part of variants emphasize, that the prince prayed to God and, apparently, God protected him (e.g., LTR 768 /517/, LMD I 813 /3/). In fact, people prayed to escape lightning. It was believed that protection may be instigated both by Christian prayers and appeals to the very Thunderer (*Perkūnas*). Rolf W. Brednich, the researcher of European notion of fate, states that in the tales of fate the possibility to escape the death from lightning is apparently connected with the influence of Christianity upon vernacular mythological perceptions. In his words, these tales prompt to trust in the power of Christian God (Brednich 1964: 82). So, folk narratives about fate unify pagan notions about inborn destiny that is not connected with justice and the idea of Christian God who embodies the highest truth (Nikitina 1994: 130).

The content of the prophecies about the way of dying could be compared with the formulas of traditional curse, for example,

*Kad tu balom nueitum!* – ‘I wish you were gone to the bogs/wetlands!’;

*Kad tu priburbuliuotum!* – ‘I wish you were drowned!’;

*Kad tave gyvatė!* – ‘I wish you were stung by a snake!’;

*Kad tave griausmas trenktsų!* – ‘I wish you were struck by lightning/by thunder!’,

and so on.

These resemblances of content enable to draw a conclusion that the narratives discussed might in a particular way reflect the archaic belief in the power of word: that is that the things said/pronounced are certain to come true. Accordingly, these narratives reveal the belief that predestined fate is practically irrevocable.

By comparing different interpretations manifested in the analyzed Lithuanian novelle tales on prophesized death, an idea could be posed that narratives showing the possibility to avoid predestined death emerged later than the works illustrating the loss of life. Perhaps the inevitability of destiny was started to be questioned; however, a non-motivated possibility of changing the predicted fate yet seemed not entirely convincing. Therefore, in several novelle tales the achieved positive outcome was substantiated by the power of Christian faith. In other novelle tales, on the contrary, it is possible to trace the reflections of the beliefs in the destructive power of curses.

## CONCLUSION

Though novelle tales are supposed to be of not so archaic origin and more of artistic nature and character, they have nevertheless sustained reflections of vernacular Lithuanian world outlook. The content of Lithuanian novelle tales resembles the plots of belief legends and the statements of beliefs quite often.

It is quite possible that such semantic parallels with mythical narrations have also influenced the structural particularities of novelle tales of fate, since their structure is rather simple, similarly to the structures of belief legends. In most cases, these tales are constructed of one or of two elementary plots: the principal elementary plot and the explanatory, motivating or detailing elementary plot. On the other hand, there exists a number of novelle tales with more complex structures. The comparison of the narratives of different complexity discloses the peculiarities of novelle tales' development, that is, the approaching of these narratives to the texts of artistic purpose.

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