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SELF AND CULTURE IN THE FOLKTALE PROJECT: International and cross-cultural levels in the literary response

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In this article we shall discuss the thinking behind the «Folktale»-project and focus especially on the different layers in the literary response.

The «Folktale»-project is interdisciplinary and combines methods from psychology, literary criticism, statistics, and translation studies.

It is our basic assumption that in any culture, the response to literature comprises three layers:

- one referring primarily to the reader's personality (individuality)
- one referring primarily to the reader's culture (in a broad sense and including religion, education, financial status etc.), and
- a cross-cultural layer.

These layers overlap, but we also think that by careful planning and detailed questioning in a systematic fashion, that is, by means of a questionnaire, it is indeed possible to probe the nature of the complex individual literary response and, by means of subsequent statistical analyses, to identify factors which determine the literary response both at the personal as well as at the intersubjective level.

In planning the project, we decided to make a study which could be carried through to a successful end within a reasonable time limit, that is, ten years. Furthermore, participation for individual readers must be limited to two hours or less, because we have previously found that this is a manageable time period.' We decided to have a set-up comprising

- a) three literary texts (in rotated order), each with a questionnaire;
- b) a questionnaire on the general background of all readers in terms of societal background, education, and literary schooling;
- c) and one questionnaire in which we probed their personality. ...// 3 ...

Our cooperation in the field of reader response has been going on for more than 25 years, but the «Folktale»-project is the first one which attempts to take into account personality features. In a volume which is concerned with mostly psychoanalytic approaches to literature and Norman Holland's achievements, it is appropriate to mention that it was a visit by Norman Holland (in 1981) where he discussed another study with us, that we started to consider the possibility to chart reader

personality.

SELECTION OF TEXTS

The literary genre chosen was the folktale. The folktale is an old type of simple prose narrative found in virtually all cultures. Unlike «literature» with capital letters, the folktale is not tied up with specific elitist social mores in the societies in which it is told. It adapts to the time and space in which it is narrated, it is part of the «collective narrative tradition» in a culture and reinforces the cultural norms of the societies whose indelible imprint it bears. (Dollerup, Holbek, Reventlow & Rosenberg Hansen, 1984). In addition, its «adaptability» allows narrators to change a folktale to suit their own personality and their perception of the wishes of specific audiences. In terms of methodology, these last features were important for setting up the folktales in the «same» form in different languages.

It was unexpectedly hard to find authentic folktales.² Yet we did succeed in identifying short folktales recorded by acknowledged and reliable collectors from narrators known as ((good tellers>) in their own societies. The folktale collections finally identified were from Greenland (= an Arctic (Inuit) hunting culture with shamanism), from Denmark (= a European, largely irreligious, peasant culture), and from Turkey (= a Muslim culture). We finally ended up with 3 tales from Denmark and Turkey - and with 4 stories from Greenland - for we were uneasy with the Greenlandic stories: they seemed too alien to us.²

READER RESPONSES AND SELECTION

These stories were handed out to two classes of Danish college students. At this level 25 readers suffice for reliable information, but in fact there were nearly 40 readers in each group. Classes at different institutions were given the stories from one country/culture and asked to prepare them for class one week later. At the day appointed, the students had to answer five questions in writing, such as “Which story did you like best?” and “Does one or more of them have any “deeper meaning“?”. Of course we did not expect all legitimate responses to be generated in such a simple set-up. Even so, the responses might be complicated in so far as readers might refer to all stories, compare them and distill a common lesson:

Thus one reader found that all the Greenlandic tales were found to «deal with ethics») and another reader that these stories were about «crises between men and women at a very primitive level». About one third of the readers had discussed stories, but few had changed their minds. Our misgivings about the Greenlandic tales proved unfounded: one of the four Greenlandic tales generated substantially more legitimate aspects in responses than the others, and although many readers did find these Greenlandic stories strange, odd, alien, macabre and the like, only five out of 41 readers did not like any of them. ...// 4 ...

The response to the best Turkish story gives an impression of the breadth:

- You should not take everything you are told seriously - Women are not inferior to me, better than men, etc. –

The fair sex proves its strength –
It pays to be good to one's parents –
One should honour one's parents –
Wise men deceive fools -
Don't judge by appearances –
The last laugh is the best -
If you mock others, things will take a bad turn for you.

Conversely, one of the two other Turkish stories had generated only two responses:

- It is not far from poor to riches. And
- It is not always bad to act on instinct.

The last response actually borders on being «illegimate» , that is a response which can by no means be found intersubjectively acceptable with reference to the text. This operative definition was introduced at this stage and is - we suggest - crucial to reader response research with pretensions to be taken seriously by literary people.

READER RESPONSES AND TALES

At all events, we had identified three good texts for our work from then on:

The Greelandic story deals with a woman who, after having been beaten up by her husband, is given refuge by a polar bear. She returns to her husband, and reveals the bear's proximity, thus making the men go hunting and causing the death of the bear cubs. A polar bear comes and kills her, and her head is flung unto the sky.

The Danish tale is about an old man at an estate who is cuckolded by the steward of the manor who tries to make him run away by setting him impossible tasks. Helped by an old woman and magic that makes people stick together, the old man is righted.

The Turkish narrative is about a girl who, disguised a boy, goes in quest of a golden apple for her father in order to defend the family honour. Thanks to some protective gifts, she vanquishes difficulties and eventually finds the owner of the apple: a handsome young man who falls in love with her. After she has thwarted various traps to have her reveal if she is a girl, she succeeds in bringing the apple home to her father. But in sleep she herself is taken back to the young man who marries her.

In this discussion, we shall limit our examples to the Turkish story.

In a dynamic translation process involving 3 translators, editing and intensive collations, we set up «identical» versions of the three stories in Danish and in English (Dollerup, Reventlow & Hansen, 1993).

University graduates did literary interpretations of the stories. These were mostly structural although there were also Freudian features in some of them.

We succeeded in rounding up ten Danish-speaking and eleven English-speaking undergraduates or graduates (all told: seven Danes, three Greenlanders; 8 Americans, 1 Australian, Welshman, **and** 1 Australian). They were asked to read the stories, and in the course of the reading process, to report on their response. ... // 5 ...

At the same time, the stories were also given to groups of readers in Greenland, Denmark, England, Nigeria and India. Each reader was given only one story, but all stories were handed out in all groups, thus securing an equal distribution. The students were asked to answer six set questions in writing. The groups interviewed varied from 17 Greenlanders to 132 Indians.

In order to give an impression of the data we got, we may follow, in the barest (and highly edited) outline, respectively, a Danish and an American reading of the Turkish story, The Golden Apple:

A Danish male reader (1M) goes

(The title:) "There are gold apples in folktale and mythology"-

(Two fathers refer to one another's female and male children as "bitches" and "curs", respectively):

"The real problem is marriage" -

(The youngest child is always the one to give advice.) -

«They believe in Allah.» -

(The youngest girl disguises herself as a man at the outset:) «Bright girl» -

(She is about to meet the owner of the apple: following European folktale ideas, the reader thinks this is an ogre:) «I have never seen similarly liberal treatment of old men's lust for young people.» - (The disguised girl buys a knife:) "She "proves" that she is a boy. She gets a weapon." - (The young man feels he may have treated the girl badly:) «Perhaps he feels embarrassed - (After the end:) "She really wanted to marry him." – "A typical folktale. The story has several plots. It is a family feud and involves romance and love."

An American female reader (107F) reports

"It is a non-Danish setting" -

(Girls are equated with bitches:) "It is an insult." -

«Perhaps marriage is different in that part of the world" - (Curs):

"Curs is an unfamiliar word." -

(It is decided that the ability to steal the apple will prove whether girls are inferior to men or not) "Surprising. What has this got to do with the story?" – "'A call of nature". This is an old-fashioned expression." -

(A horse is beaten to death:) "This is not fairy-tale stuff." -

(The girl is given some yeast for her travels:) «Is she to make bread?» - (It is used

for parting waters:) "It must be a strong variety" –

(The reader notes that the young man falls in love with the girl.) -

(Rose petals wither if a girl sleeps on them) «I never heard of that: the story has its own laws.» -

(The young man knocks out a tooth on the girl to test her boyhood:) «He really knocks out a tooth!» -

(The girl outsmarts the young man by claiming her dress is tight:) "How did she get the coat on in the first place?" -

(Back home she is received by a music band:) "'Bands" sounds anachronistic." – "This is the ending of the story with the father of the girls." -

(The girl's message to the boy:) "Now he knows she is a girl." -

(A witch riding on a water jar helps the boy:) "It is magic. I would have expected a broomstick." -

(The girl is given a prohibition:) "A strange order." -

(She is taken back to the young man who has procured "priests": «He is smart.» - (The young newly-

weds are given a«shop») “Funny change of style.” -

(After the end:) «I found her use of disguise, the sorceress, the jar, and the apple strange. The characters are not developed, although the young man needs his mother for help. The rose petals have a symbolic meaning, and the apple is a means of mediation. ...//6 ... There is a confused moral, namely that happiness comes to you when you work sufficiently hard for it. I liked the story because in small ways it was different from the usual fairytales.»

In these introspection responses during the reading process, there are comments on the language, we also find evaluative comments referring to «genre», to «realism», and there are also anticipations as well as information about the immediate response. But it is much too close to allow us to distinguish any cultural features.

Conversely, in the responses in writing, participants would read the stories before they answered the six questions. So here we used retrospection and a holistic response. There are cultural dissimilarities. As far as «the moral in the story» was concerned there were culture-specific statements like the following ones: «Money brings happiness» (from Denmark) - «Listen to people in authority» (UK) - "Modesty prevails" (Numerous readers in India) - «A parent cannot speak up for a child's attitude or behaviour.» (Nigeria). On the other hand, statements like: “Don't underestimate girls” and “Boys are not superior to girls” are found in all cultures, as is the moral «Don't boast».

CONSTRUCTING THE QUESTIONNAIRES

The literary interpretations and the reader responses just described were edited by assistants. Subsequently we used them for our questionnaires. One for each story and then a series of questions covering the response to the three stories.³ We deliberately made far too many questions in the first rounds, so that we could easily discard about half of them without any qualms for the final data collection; this was because many studies suffer from having poor questions made in the last minute or from disregarding relevant aspects. Of course we did not wish either of these weaknesses to surface in our study.

We also developed a questionnaire on reader backgrounds and tested it in two rounds in which readers were exhorted to point out ambiguities and inaccuracies (in Denmark, the USA, England, India, and Nigeria).

And finally, we constructed an attitude test. As mentioned it was ultimately inspired by criticism by Norman Holland. We took the criticism into account, but, at least originally, thought that it would be impossible to include traditional tests (Rorschach, the Minnesota test, etc.) in our set-up, both because of their comprehensiveness (they would take up more questions than our real objective) or could not be collected in a way which was easy to systematise. We finally settled on a modification of the Eysenck questionnaire which was limited to parameters which we considered relevant, namely:

Extraversion - Introversion

- 1 . Impulsiveness
2. Risk-taking

3. Inhibition

Toughmindedness - Tenderness

1. Aggressiveness
2. Assertiveness
3. Dogmatism

Emotional instability - Adjustment

1. Feeling of inferiority
2. Emotional lability
3. Autonomy
4. Feeling of guilt/ self reproach

...// 7 ...

5. Authoritarianism
6. Attitude to cruelty to animals
7. The question of grown-ups' authority over children.

Like all the others, this questionnaire was tested out separately in Denmark and the USA.

The component questionnaires were checked one by one - including for time - and the number of questions reduced before the questionnaires were joined together and tested out under field conditions.

EXPERIMENTAL SET-UP

In the experimental set-up, readers were given a little booklet of 42 pages and with a total of 480 questions. After the instruction, participants read the first story, the questions concerning the response to it, proceeded to the next stories. The readers answered questions about all stories, their own background, and finished with the attitude questions.

THE QUESTIONS

The questions on the responses immediately after the reading of each story, take up many of the issues raised in the above discussion, and there are, as it were, usually not one «right» answer to them, except for three questions at the end of each story questionnaire which are used to check on whether readers have actually read the stories:



24. Finally we would like

Clouds forming above southern Sweden

 y:

Who or what helps the girl get through the water?

- a. the little dog

--
- b. the yeast

--
- c. the boy

--
- d. the doves

--
- e. I don't remember

--

Some questions probe the evaluative factors in the literary response, e.g.:

4. Did you find the story (one mark for each pair)

entertaining	1	2	3	4	5		boring
repulsive							pleasant
very poetic							not at all poetic

We have asked readers about their views on the characters - as we met with it in the American introspection report quoted.

9. What is your attitude DON'T KNOW
 ... to Beyoglu's mother

1 2 3 4 5

sympathy antipathy

... to the father of the sons

antipathy sympathy

... to Beyoglu

sympathy antipathy

... to the father of the girls

antipathy sympathy

... to the girl «Ali»

sympathy antipathy

Was there anyone with whom you could identify – even for a brief moment.
 Please write who: _____

We have tried to assess the immediate response during the reading process, for instance in the following questions on the recreation of the owner of the «golden apple»:

11. What did you think Beyoglu was when first mentioned?

	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
a. evil	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. good	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. old	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. young	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. a man	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f. a woman	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
g. a supernatural being	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
h. a rich person	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
i. a powerful person	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
j. I don't remember	<input type="checkbox"/>		

We also checked the views of our literary interpreters that the narratives are concerned with culture-nature oppositions:

7. How would you place this story on the following axes:

nature	1 2 3 4 5	culture	DON'T KNOW
	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>

	1 2 3 4 5			DON'T KNOW		
the past	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	the present
humaneness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	inhumanity

And the responses from the introspection and retrospection studies which could not be phrased into more detailed questions were posed as direct questions:

22. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the story?

	AGREE	DISAGREE	MAYBE	DON'T KNOW
a. Children must show respect of their parents	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. It is about self-confidence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Children may give parents advice	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Girls/women are more competent than boys/men	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. It is about intelligence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f. It is about family feeling	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

The questions on the readers' backgrounds are more or less like those of other sociologically oriented studies and need hardly bother us. But those on the reader attitude deserve mention. The following questions (to be answered «Very much»/«Somewhat»/«Not much»/«Not at all») are typical:

Extraversion-Introversion

«I often suppress my views in a discussion»

Toughmindedness-Tenderness

«The sight of blood makes me sick»

Emotional instability-Adjustment

«I become nervous easily».

Partly because we believed that our readers could handle direct questions, and partly because we feared they might not have the time to answer all question, we decided to supplement these questions with point-blank ones: e.g.

29. How would you characterize yourself?

	1 2 3 4 5			DON'T KNOW		
very aggressive	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	very peaceable
very introverted	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	very extroverted
very weak	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	very firm
very daring	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	very cautious

30. Which child would you like to have?

a girl	<input type="checkbox"/>	1
a boy	<input type="checkbox"/>	2
It would make no difference	<input type="checkbox"/>	3
I don't want to have children	<input type="checkbox"/>	4
both boys and girls	<input type="checkbox"/>	5

Let us add that in the final experiment many readers were obviously absorbed with these questions, and that quite a few have thanked us for illuminating their own personality.

CONCLUSION

We suggest that the study does indeed explore culture and self as part of the response to literature. There are already indications that there are fairly universal aspects in the literary response. There are strong indications that culture is a major determinant. All our findings so far substantiate that gender is by far the most important divide between humans, and yet there are also other intimations that there are other aspects individual and personal.

We can predict that our definition of «universal» vs. «individual» aspects of the response to literature must necessarily be pragmatic, situational, and based on our judgments of how specific figures are to be interpreted: after all, we are those who best know the implications - or non-implications - of our findings. And if we do not make interpretations, it will be hard for others to see what we have found.

Did we end up with the perfect experiment? The answer is «no» - and yet still a cautious “perhaps yes”: We did not get the «ideal» 200 readers in each cell - but the approximations are not bad: 126 Americans, 199 Irishmen, 205 Indians, and 446 Danish readers (The latter reading the stories in either Danish or in English to allow us to study the influence of the use of non-native languages). Of course there have been disasters on the way: the worst one being that after we had proofread the whole questionnaire and joined all components, the assistant in charge of this operation did not know that all files imported on the university computers were deleted once a month. So the questionnaire was lost and, in the process of gluing together whatever remains we had under time pressure because the questionnaires must be sent to India, 5 misprints were introduced, making, presumably for so many lost questions. In addition, it appeared in the course of the first real collection session - in India - that quite a few readers could not do the questionnaire in the time actually allotted (which, in practice, turned out to be less than the two-hour period we had counted on). It was necessary to introduce a «jump-command», telling readers to stop ploughing through the tales/completing the questionnaires and proceed straight to page 32 which posed crucial questions about age, gender, and the like. It means, of course, that we have full data on only, perhaps, half the readers. But in this respect, the data is, presumably, all right because we rotated the order of the stories in each class and all stories have therefore been the first, the second, and the third one read everywhere.

The data has now been collected and is ready for being entered in computers for statistical analyses. These analyses will provide us with much more information. To be true, information which we have influenced in the sense that as analysts and as researchers, we have had to make decisions and to make up our minds on many things. Yet we also argue that, more than any other study that we know of, ours are open to control, and, we hope, to little falsification. ... // 11 ...

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...// 12 ...

1. The study has been supported by e.g. the UNESCO Participation Program.
2. Most collections of folktales, including those of the brothers Grimm (German: originally 1812-15), Asbjørnsen and Moe (Norwegian: originally 1841-1871), and Afanaséev (Russian: originally 1855-1864), have been edited by the collectors and are therefore, strictly speaking, not authentic.
3. Another demand was that no story must be of more than 3,000 words - another limitation imposed by our wish to carry through the experiment in the course of two hours.
4. One question was “Have you discussed the story with others?”

