



The interior of baroque church in Copenhagen

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It was dedicated to the late dr. phil. Iven Reventlow.**

**CHANGES IN READER PERCEPTION OF CHARACTERS
IN THE COURSE OF READING:
statistical findings from the ‘Folktale’ project.**

*Cay Dollerup, Iven Reventlow, (psychologist, methodology), and
Carsten Rosenberg Hansen (psychometrics, statistics), Denmark*

The present article reports about one set of findings in the ‘Folktale’ project. The ‘Folktale’ project explores the response to literature on a cross-national and interdisciplinary basis. Its main emphasis is on developing methods for empirical studies within the humanities, notably literary criticism and Translation Studies. Nearly 1,000 readers from India, the US, Ireland, and Denmark have answered more than 500 questions about their response to folktales from Denmark, Greenland, and Turkey.

The data were collected by means of questionnaires carefully set up in both Danish and English in which the stories were presented to readers in a rotated order (Dollerup, Reventlow, Rosenberg Hansen 1995). Out of the 1,000 readers, 565 fulfilled the crucial criteria of answering two out of three control questions at the end of each story correctly. These readers are the ones whose answers have been subjected to a high number of analyses.

The reliability of these data is high. Only 5% of the readers have answered four questions in a way which was self-contradictory.

In the study, we posed some questions concerning the response to characters in the stories and the way it changed in the course of the reading. The present article discusses these findings.¹

Culture-bound differences

The Turkish story ‘The golden apple’ tells about a young girl who, disguised as a boy, sets out to ‘steal Beyoglu’s apple’. Beyoglu turns out to be a young man who marries her in the end.

In this story we asked some ‘yes’, ‘no’, and ‘don’t know’ questions concerning the readers beliefs about Beyoglu when his name was first mentioned.

There was consensus among readers of all nationalities that he was a powerful and rich man. It was clear to most readers that he was powerful (with variations from 83.5% to 92.1% between different nationalities). Since it is not mentioned early in the story that he is a man, it is curious that more readers believed he was male (80.0%-89.8%) than that he was rich (73.0%-83.7%) although the story explicitly states that he has “a golden apple”.

The waters divided significantly concerning the perception of Beyoglu’s age. Although Irish and American readers were inclined to believe he was old, the significant difference was between Danish and Indian readers:

67.6% of the Danish readers, and
30.9% of the Indian readers believed he was **old** (N= 539).

Furthermore,
81.0% of the Danish readers believed he was **evil** and only
51.5% of the Indians thought so (N= 550)

or, conversely,

7.2% of the Danes surmised he was **good**, as opposed to
38.7% of the Indians. (N = 539).

Discussion

These differences appear to be based on differences in tales told to children in India and in Denmark.

Indian tales do not necessarily take a stand for or against characters in tales and therefore readers and listeners have few preconceived ideas – or prejudices – about characters.² Consequently, the Indian readers were less inclined to take a dim view of ‘Beyoglu’ at the outset.

However, in Denmark, it is a stereotype in the popular genres of children’s literature and especially fairytales that young protagonists will meet with old men and women who

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are ogres and witches. Therefore we may safely assume that these Danish genre stereotypes prompt Danes into the belief that ‘Ali’ will meet a wicked old person.

This means that culture-bound stereotypes in given literary genres will affect responses to that type of literature. In this genre, there are, at the beginning of the reading of the story, different expectations among readers in different cultures about the outcome.

Changes in the view of one character

‘Per Smed’s whip’ is a Danish folktale recorded in 1874. In this story, an old man, Per Smed (Smith), who lives on an estate, has married a young woman. He is cuckolded by the steward on the estate. The steward also tries to make Per run away from his wife by posing impossible tasks. These are nevertheless fulfilled thanks to the help Per receives from an old woman he meets in a wood. The third time the old woman tells him about the steward’s machinations and provides him with a magic whip. Per uses the whip to make a chamberpot, his wife, the steward, his maid, the squire and eventually the squire’s wife stick together in a ‘pertegoj’ (an ad hoc word) so that they become the laughing stock of the manor. The magic is lifted when the squire promises to sack the steward or have him shot.

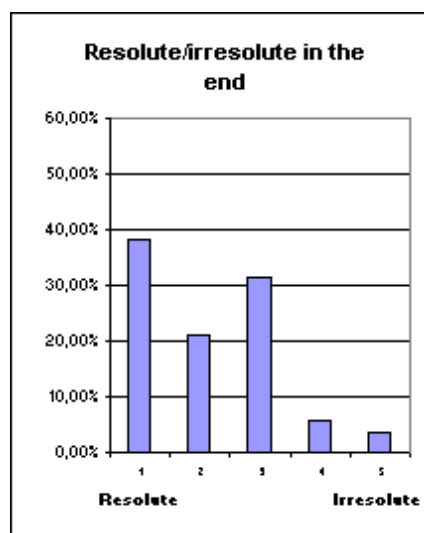
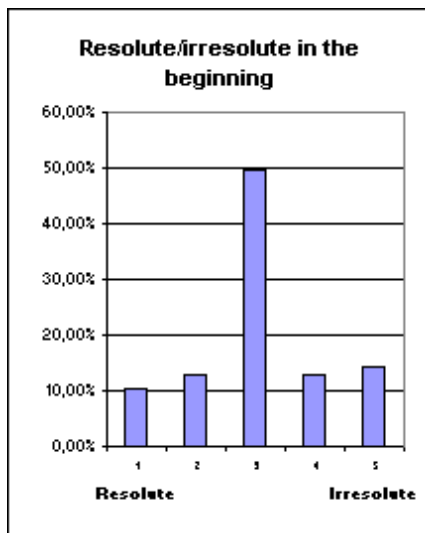
In this story we explored the readers’ response to developments in the protagonist’s relationship with his wife and in the power hierarchy in the story.

We charted the view of Per by means of five questions, all of them five-graded semantic differentials with the extremes:

‘Good’-‘bad’, ‘inconsiderate’-‘considerate’, ‘resolute’-‘irresolute’, ‘passive’-‘impassive’, and ‘weak’-‘powerful’.

The ‘good’-‘bad’ and ‘inconsiderate’-‘considerate’ showed no massive change.

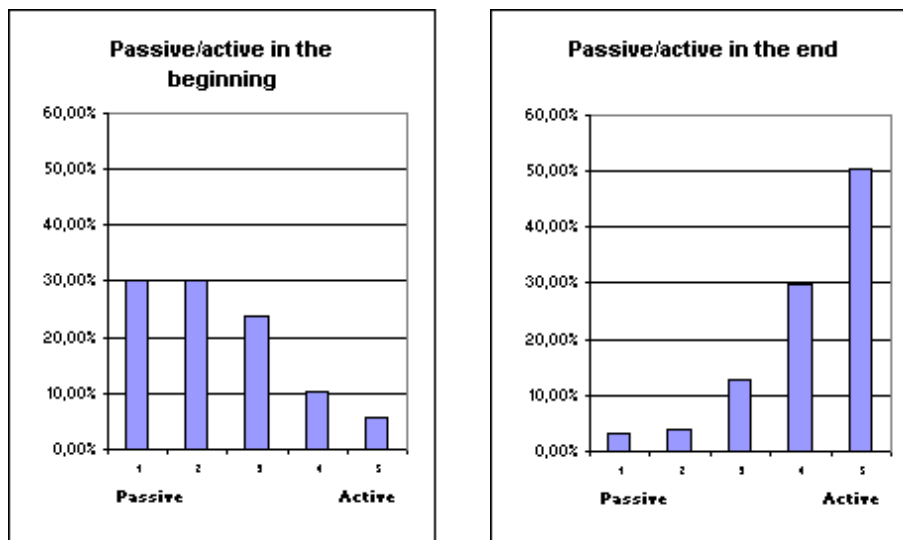
As for the other three, the shifts are shown in the graphs:



In the beginning readers do not have a clear view of Per's resoluteness. This is not hard to explain. There are few actions that point towards a resolute character. Per has challenged conventions by taking a young wife, and he also challenges the powers that be by the (cowardly) method of running away. There are, conversely, no indications about his attitude towards others. He is ignorant of his wife's affair, he is ignorant of the steward's exploitation of his superior status, and – from a negative angle – even the old woman in the wood can make him change his mind. Without being aware of it, he is being manipulated by others. Readers prefer to be neutral.

At the end of the story, Per has received the magic whip without any hesitation and applied its power without questioning it, publicly humiliated everybody who has hurt his pride, exposed them – and, since they represent a cross-section of his society – been 'resolute' in restoring order. On the other hand, both the squire and the old woman have had more real power.

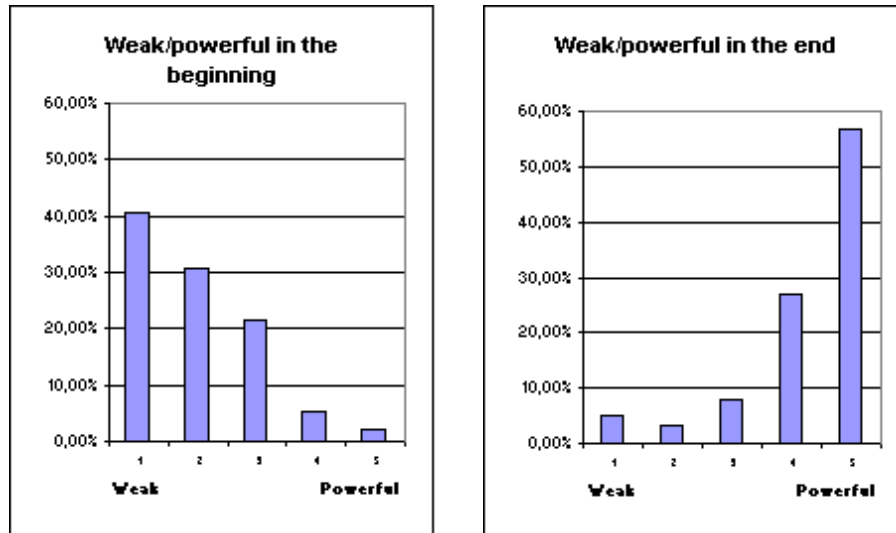
In the course of the reading, readers have therefore got a much clearer idea of the nature of Per's resoluteness, and this is what we see: the increased insight, the augmented realisation about character that is part of the reading experience.



The axis 'passive – active' also changes in the course of the reading. This corresponds to what a group of critics said in the pretests. The distribution in the beginning seems to reflect several factors: Per is active in that he takes a young wife and runs away. Conversely, although he is not aware of his wife's adultery, he is passive in that context; he also takes advice from her (to run away) and, later, the advice of the old woman in the

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wood. Per's general behaviour thus amply explains why most readers consider him inactive in the beginning. Although the making of the 'pertegoy' is due to magical powers, Per does not only passively use it, but he decides who is to get stuck to it. He also drives the members of the 'pertegoy' through areas where they are displayed in their nakedness, and in the end, he determines the ultimate fate of the steward (although this has to be executed by the squire): in other words, Per has become a decidedly more active character in the end in the readers' view.



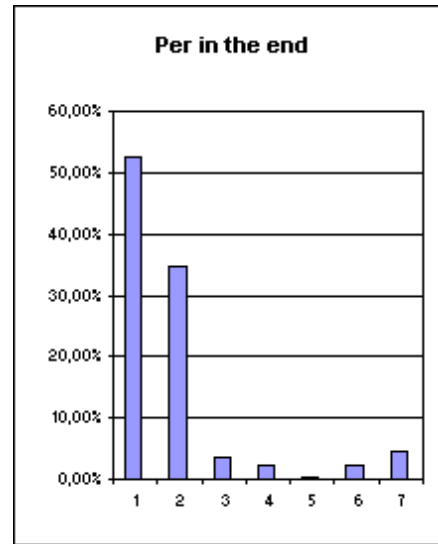
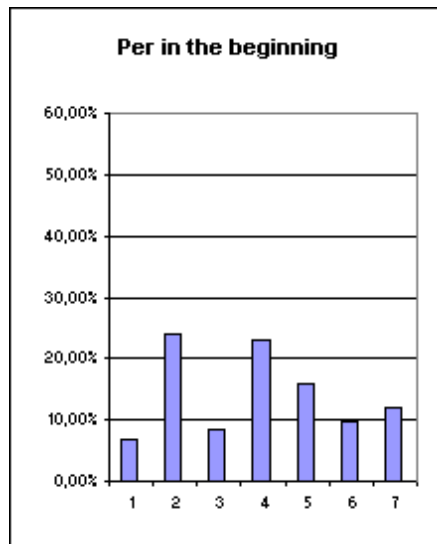
The largest change concerns Per's power as a husband. In the beginning, he is weak in that his wife can have an affair without his knowledge, in that she is willing to let him down, and in that he is obliged to take her advice to flee. This essentially amounts to handing her over to another man on a silver platter. After he has meted out a relatively mild punishment, he has, however, also demonstrated his superiority and thus become very powerful in relation to her. This is reflected in the final words of the story: "So ever afterwards Per Smed had his wife all to himself, and the two of them got along very well indeed."

Changes in the power hierarchy in the story

In our preparatory data collection, which formed the basis for our questions, we had interviewed readers by introspection, retrospection (by having them write essays), and also involved critical analyses. These latter in particular had focused on the power relations.

Accordingly, we charted the development in the power hierarchy by asking readers to indicate what position in the hierarchy they would assign each character in the story, first in the beginning and then in the end.

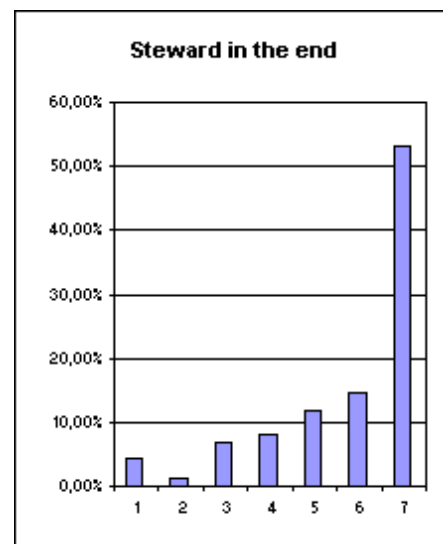
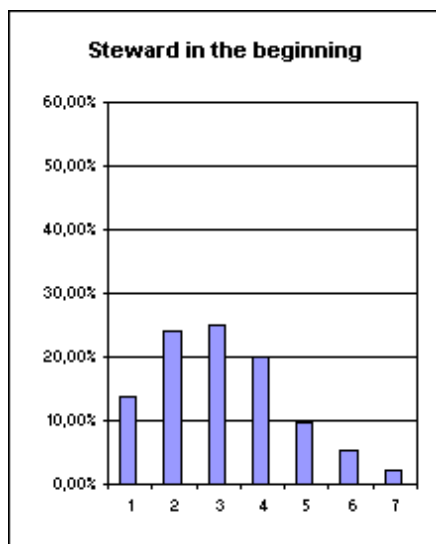
Per's power in the end and the beginning was looked upon as follows:



First, we call the attention to the readers who consider Per the weakest character in the end. In our check on the completed questionnaires, we found that some readers seemed to have misread the instruction and used the figures in another way than we had intended (namely with 1 at the top and 7 at the bottom). We are inclined to believe that the last group represents such readers. We find confirmation of this in the high reliability already mentioned and will therefore not refer to such anomalous answers below.

Overall, it is noted that there is a radical change in the view of Per: readers have no clear-cut idea of his power in the beginning, but in the end, they feel he is powerful.

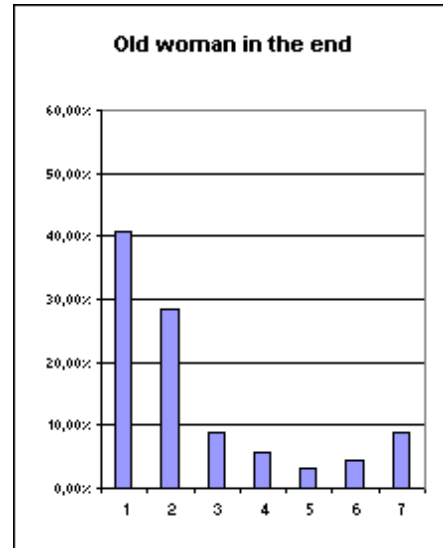
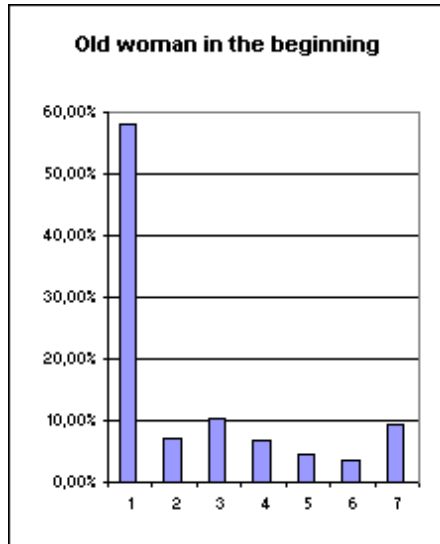
The steward, the bad character in the story who is punished, slides down in the opposite direction:



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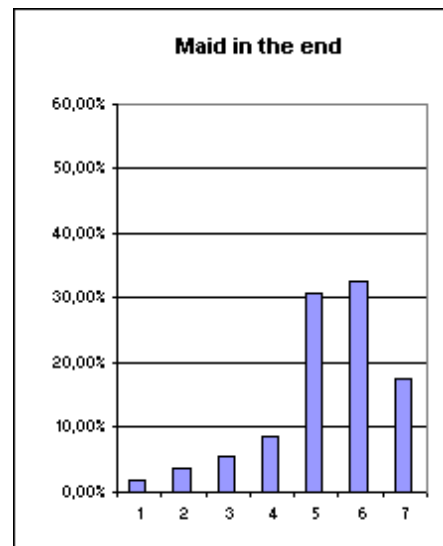
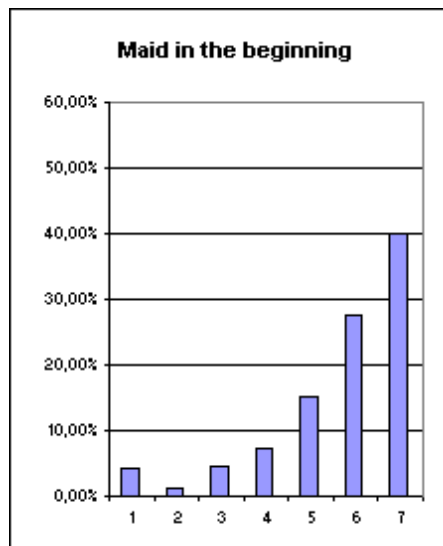
In his case, he finishes up at the bottom, but even at the beginning, he is not all that powerful but somehow fitted into the major social hierarchy.

The old woman in the wood commands supernatural power. She ranks relatively high:



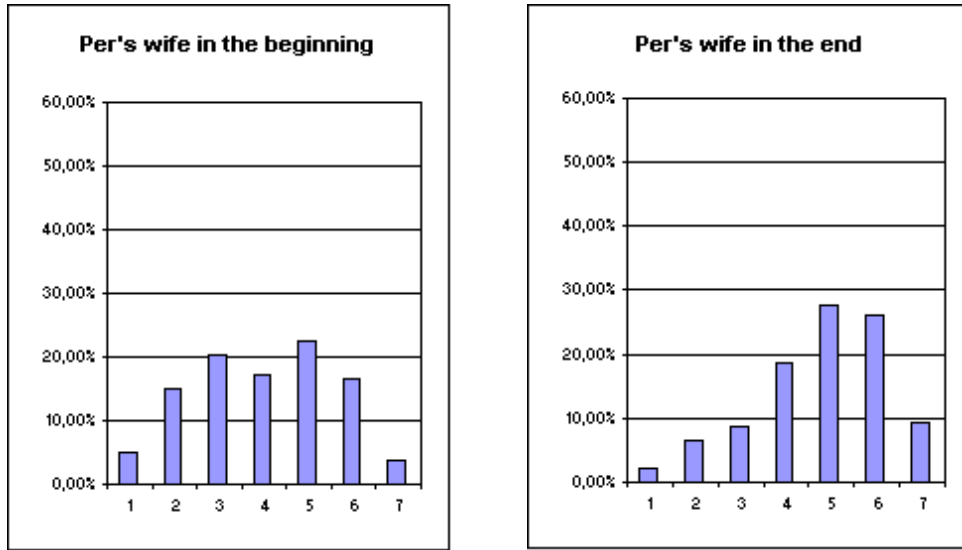
It is noted that she still retains a high position at the end, but that this is less clear. In the story she has, after all, handed over to Per one of her magic tools. For the duration of the story he has therefore been given a share of her 'supernatural' power to rectify the injustice he has suffered.

Per's maid has shifted a little bit:



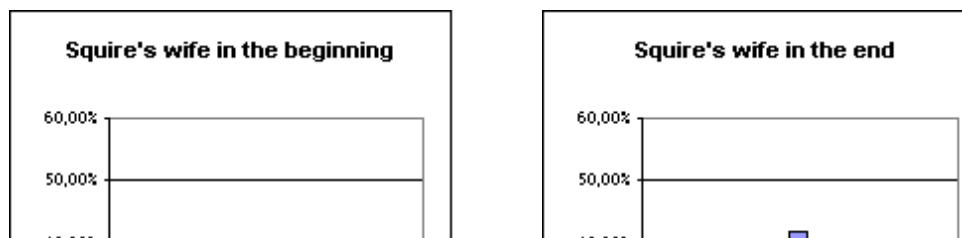
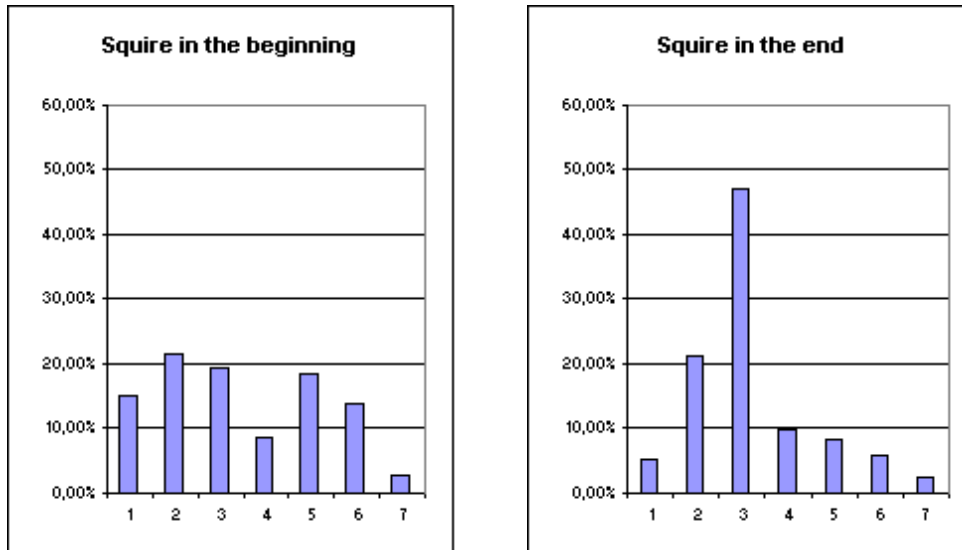
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This should probably be related to the change in the position of Per's wife, which looks as follows:



The position of Per's wife shifts towards a lower place in the hierarchy: she has not only lost the ability to cuckold her husband and order him around, but she has also been humiliated in public. The maid was, in the beginning, the only character whose position as a servant was clear. It is therefore not only the wife's degradation, but also the fact that the steward becomes a low-status figure that promotes the maid's position.

As far as the squire and his wife are concerned, they change positions as follows:



The overall movement is that, in the beginning, readers find it difficult to place the two characters in the social hierarchy. This is not surprising, since the story describes a society that is more than 100 years old and ‘squires’ are relatively unknown to modern young urbanites. Therefore it is the events in the story which clarify their relation vis-à-vis the other characters.

The levels in power

The distance in power between the seven characters cannot be measured exactly, but the characters can be placed at different levels. This provides another overview of their relative placement in the hierarchy, with the caution that the levels are not equidistant.

We thus get the following hierarchy:

LEVEL	IN THE BEGINNING	IN THE END
1	The old woman in the wood	Per
2		The old woman in the wood
3	The steward – the squire	The squire
4	Per – Per’s wife	The squire’s wife
5		Per’s wife
6	The maid – the squire’s wife	The maid
7		The steward

Since this is a chart of relative and not absolute positions, we should be cautious about too categorical statements at this time.

Discussion

The relationship between Per and the old woman in the wood's relative position is, in all likelihood, due to the fact that readers find it difficult to make up their minds as to which of them is the most powerful. The old woman is still, in 'the world at large', the one who possesses supernatural powers and can set things right. In the universe and the social world depicted in the story, it is Per who has re-established order. There are thus two different 'worlds' that are difficult to compare, especially under the limitation of a set questionnaire.

The changes in status are in some cases, notably as far as the squire and his wife are concerned, due to the readers' initial ignorance of feudal society. The changes in the maid's and Per's wife's position have been discussed, but they also depend on how readers view the positions of the other characters, to which we should add that they appear to be subsumed to male values in society.

The downfall of the steward and the rise of Per represent the development of the plot, and at a deeper thematic level, the externalised ordering of a universe in which good wins out in the end.

Conclusion

In terms of methodology, the study, and the answers discussed above in particular, illustrate that it is possible to gauge the response to characters in literature.

In other words: we can chart the dynamics of the reading process by targeted questions immediately after the reading. These dynamics are often overlooked because most empirical studies are based on retrospective responses or retrospective criticism, both of which tend to focus on the end result (as we did ourselves with more than 200 readers in the preparatory rounds of 'Folktale').

In the story in question, we have unveiled at least three power relations which are reflected in responses:

There is one between Per and his wife which is multi-faceted and in which some aspects change and other do not.

There is another one between the oppressor (the steward) and the oppressed (Per).

The third one reflects the power distribution in the society in which the story was originally told and which becomes clear even to modern readers from different nationalities in the course of the reading.

Notes

1. We wish to thank readers who have participated in the studies as well as our assistants over the years. We gratefully acknowledge the support given by UNESCO, which made it possible to conduct the major data collection. We also thank Professor Ludvig Wimmer og Hustrus Legat,

Kommunelærer Th. E. Giese og Hustrus Mindelegat, to Fornanderska Fonden, the Department of English, University of Copenhagen.

2. For this information, we are indebted to Dr Tabish Khair.

Publications from the study

Work on the project has been described in 14 reports which are available in the ERIC system. In addition, we refer to:

Dollerup, Cay & Iven Reventlow & Carsten Rosenberg Hansen. 1990: The Copenhagen Studies in Reader Response. *SPIEL: Siegener Periodicum zur Internationalen Empirischen Literaturwissenschaft* 9. 413-436.

Dollerup, Cay & Iven Reventlow & Carsten Rosenberg Hansen. 1995. Self and cultural identity. "Folktale": levels in a cross-cultural reader response study. In: Pereira, Frederico (ed.). *Literature and Psychology: Proceedings of the eleventh international conference on literature and psychology*. Lisbon: Instituto Superior de Psicologia Aplicada. 3-12.

Cay Dollerup & Iven Reventlow & Carsten Rosenberg Hansen. 1993. Identity in practical translation: conducting cross-cultural studies. *Langage et l'homme: recherches pluridisciplinaires sur le langage*, XXVIII. 11-25.



The Rosenborg Palace (c. 1625) in Copenhagen, Denmark