Kačer, Tomáš

Morphology and the theory of actants

6 ▶ Morphology and the Theory of Actants

There is another tradition in the history of the development of the theoretical approach to the structure of literary works which is helpful to our consideration of the new messengers and their application in contemporary mainstream drama. This tradition can be traced back to the famous study by Vladimir Propp, *The Morphology of the [Russian] Folktale*. Propp, in his influential work, approached Russian traditional folktales from the Formalist perspective and presented an abstracted overview of all character-types present there. A a result, Propp is regarded as one of the pioneers of what is now called narrative grammar. Aston and Savona observe that, "in respect of the application of semiotic methodology to character, an important legacy from the early structuralist and formalist approaches has been the concept of the *functions* of character" (Aston and Savona 36). Similarly, Fořt stresses that, "what makes Propp's model valuable for further research is the introduction of the category of function" (Fořt 23). For our purpose, it is then expedient to follow this line of thought and look at the messenger in an abstract way, either as a function in the structure of the narrative, or as a role attributed to a character. But before we conclude this chapter with the identification of differences between the function of the messenger and that of the new messengers (which will also explain the structure of the analytical chapter of this book), a brief recapitulation of the basic principles of Propp's method and its later developments applied to drama, is set down below.

The Morphology itself is limited as to its direct applications to other genres. What matters in the context of this book is the line of thought that this approach represents. First of all, Propp focuses on characters from the perspective of their function in the narrative structure of the folk tales: "it is primarily important for the future development that he used the functional aspect of acting characters which he applied on his research of Russian miracle folk tales. This way he offered a system which helps to see general narrative schemes as well as the layer of concrete embodiments of these schemes" (Fořt 21). In other words, Propp's approach shows the way to approach a narrative (or, a set of narrative related stories) from a specific perspective. That is, the functions and their realizations as characters in the structure of a story.

Furthermore, he looks for patterns underlying the folktales he analyzes. By doing so, he produces schemes of various folktales. What is significant about this achievement is the fact that he observes a limited number of character functions employed in the Russian folktale, which are all based on a set of basic functions of acting characters, each with several variations. There are a total of 7 basic functions (spheres of action) according to the acting characters (see chapter 6, Propp 72-5) and 31 functions of "*dramatis personae*", the acting characters (see chapter 3, Propp 24-59).

He attributes a name and a letter to each of the functions: for example, "separation" – β, "prohibition" – γ, etc. In addition, he labels these functions when they are materialized in an acting character, including the variations of the seven basic types: for example, "villain" – A, "hero" – H, etc. This notation makes it possible to create the abstracted schemes. However, this is not to say that each character is limited to only one function: "It is clear that these abstracted roles are metalinguistic narratological entities and that there is a fundamental difference between abstract roles and ways of their embodiment" (Fořt 21). Certain characters may fulfil various functions in the course of the action, which lie in the core of the developmental dynamics of a tale.

However, what is often forgotten when discussing Propp's seminal contribution to the area of narratology, the study of character, and narrative grammar, as a method of analysis of a story, is the fact that his study is rigidly grounded in a singular genre – that of the Russian (magical) folktale. It would be misleading to infer a general conclusion from the *Morphology* and claim that there is a total of only seven spheres of action (the villain, donor, helper, sought-for person, dispatcher, hero, and false hero) (Propp 72-3). Although it cannot be denied that a lot of these model spheres of action may be found elsewhere, it is the method as such that calls for further utilization as a potent tool for the analysis of a narrative. To repeat the crucial point, in Fořt's words: "Both roles and functions are abstract entities" (22). The characters are their carriers. Still, the challenge of finding a generally applicable list of abstract functions has been accepted by several in the history of the development of structuralist thought, including applications of such models on character-functions in drama. The most successful of these attempt is the model presented by A. J. Greimas in his theory of "actants" presented in his *Structural Semantics* in 1966[16].

---

16) It should be noted that Greimas did not only follow Propp and his *Morphology of the Russian Folktale*, but he also adapted a model of the "dramatic calculus" as developed by Etienne Souriau in 1950. Elam even describes Greimas's *Structural Semantics* as "Souriau married with Propp" (118). For our purposes it is enough to state that Souriau, too, identifies six functions (The Lion, Sun, Earth, Mars, Scale, and Moon) which basically correspond to Greimas's actantial functions and he also sees them as roles, which may be realized in characters. According to Souriau, in accordance with Propp and Greimas, some characters (figures) may fulfill more than one function and, vice versa, a function may be carried out by more than one character (figure).

6.1 ▸ The Propp Inspiration

Propp's inspiration was acknowledged by Greimas, when he recognized the potential of Propp's abstracting attitude as a possible general theory of the deep structure of drama. "While Propp's narratology is limited to the Russian fairy tale, the notion of linking spheres of action to character offers an important insight into character and the dramatic text" (Aston and Savona 36-7). Greimas, however, chooses a different starting point when he, unlike Propp, derives his narrative-grammatical categories from syntactic categories (Fořt 22). He identifies six such universal roles which he names *actantial roles* that characters may play (subject/object, sender/receiver, helper/opponent). His actantial roles, "that is, universal (oppositional) functions analogous to (and indeed, supposedly derived from) the syntactic functions of language" (Elam 114), are the building blocks of the deep structure, the underlying grammar, of a dramatic narrative. He is looking for "the possible principles of organization of the semantic universe" (*Structural Semantics* 199, qtd. in Aston and Savona 37).

Once a character assumes a role, he becomes an actant ("a subject with an assigned predicate, or activity" (Fořt 25)) and the actant's concrete embodiment as an individual character is an actor (*acteur*). "One actant can be embodied into several various actors, just as an actor can represent several actantial roles at once" (25). This is to say, that the assignment of the abstract roles may find various application in drama depending on the complications and constellations among characters in each individual play.

In Greimas's case, the term "grammar" is rather appropriate, as "he understood actants as elements of a narrative syntax (narrative level) and actors as their concrete embodiments in language (discourse level)" (26). His method, however, has serious drawbacks when compared to his predecessor Propp. While Propp derived his 31 functions and seven spheres of action from a comparative study of a serious body of works, Greimas focuses on linguistic features. Although he was searching for a generally applicable model, he in fact ends up facing the same limit as Propp. That is, there are only certain types (genres, if you like) of drama which adhere to his model. "Whatever its precise form, the actantial model has a certain utility in accounting for the basic structure of the *fabula* in those plays founded on the protagonist's obstacle-laden quest. As a universal code of dramatic structure, its claims are far more questionable" (Elam 118).

Therefore, there is now a two-way reductionism caused by such an approach. Firstly, on a theoretical level, as we could see, there are the limitations which lead to a mechanistic view of characters as a mere embodiment of a closed set of possible functions. This perspective contains the hidden premise of opposition to the psychological interpretation of "individuals", which Elam identifies as a post-Romantic interpretative approach to literature in general and drama in particular (119). As such, it represents another extreme method which excludes, for example, other types of motivations than those required of a certain functional type. Therefore, it remains closed in its own limited field of looking at a narrative as a set, inflexible phenomenon. However, there are also types of narratives other than "the protagonist's obstacle-laden quests," as Elam critically put

it (118). Thus, this type of grammar, at least in the version Greimas offers, cannot meet its initial aim as a universal grammar of dramatic action.

Secondly, in practical terms, while such an approach does offer insightful help as a tool of studying the narrative structure of a work of art (even in theatre), it falls short as a practical tool for the analysis of the whole process in which a dramatic text finds its realization on the stage[17]. It exclusively focuses on character, disregarding other constitutive elements of the dramatic and theatrical structure. In other words, it reduces the possibility of interpreting action in drama and on the stage on creative levels other than the character-role in a narrative. A character, and more explicitly so in its realization on the stage, includes other levels that are at play during a performance. Generally, there is no need for a play to follow any pre-established narrative structure in the first place. And, in addition, there are other roles that a character has in a play than those expressible by the narrative-grammatical categories, such as various signifying ones both on the level of drama and of performance. While on the dramatic level, a character may serve as a metaphor (e.g. of a social situation) or a metonymy (e.g. of a social class), as well as a fictional referent (e.g. of a historical figure – "individuation") and a character-type *per se* (e.g. a Commedia dell'Arte abstraction – "collectivisation") (see Aston and Savona on Übersfeld 38-42). This is to say that an analysis of dramatic and theatrical characters is by no means reducible to a strictly narrative-grammatical approach.

6.2 ▶ The Messenger as Character-Function

The main aim of what has been criticised here, has been to show the limitations of the application of such an abstract model to dramatic texts. Nevertheless, as was noted in the beginning of this chapter, this tradition is useful if applied with caution (and is inspirational due to its abstract mode of thinking about narrative as a collective of functions and roles and their materializations in characters). For the purpose of this book, let me say that Propp's and Greimas's approaches offer another perspective of looking at the issue of the messenger and, analogously, the new messenger.

The messenger and, consequently the new messenger, too, primarily operates on the level of the narrative as a function. Its presence in the plays is rarely motivated by other needs than that of the constituting part of the narrative structure. Even the realization of this function in the traditional dramatic text and on the stage is so conventionalized[18] that the messenger gives out that he or she is nothing but a bearer of this function. This includes the conventionalized announcement of his or her entrance, appearance, behaviour, mode of delivery, and many other components of his or her performance.

---

17) We still subscribe to the approach to the dramatic text which regards it primarily as a source for the subsequent staging. In this process, however, there is a complex system of dramatic and theatrical components at play built upon, or independent of, the narrative.
18) For a study of this convention, that is, its classical uses and transformations, see Chapter 8 "Reportage" and Chapter 9 "Introducing New Messengers".

What matters is the communication of the news from another space and/or time that is a part of the fictional world outside the stage-action. To stick to the narrative-grammatical terminology, the messenger is a dramatic role in the abstract sense and the structural element of the syntax of the play, in parallel with Greimas's model, discussed earlier. These particular figures are mere actors of this role (in Greimas's sense – figures as concrete bearers of roles, and actors as carriers of function).

As previously stated, in agreement with Aston and Savona's view of the narrative-grammatical reductionist attitude, and developed further in its criticism, these theories prove very helpful to the critical study of narrative. This is due to the fact that they are highly inspirational when dealing with common features of an array of characters from a collection of genre-related narratives on a certain level of abstraction. This, in turn, allows the emergence of a view of a type of character who is a manifestation of a function hidden behind the structure of the narrative.

Therefore, I take the liberty of identifying the messenger as a certain function with its own standing in a narrative. As we have seen, the applications of both Propp's and Greimas's models had their limitations; thus, I believe that it will not be held against this argument that the messenger-function is not present in either of the two. It is present in those types of narratives that we are dealing with in this book, though, i.e. those kinds of dramatic narratives where a substantial amount of action takes place outside the framework of the stage and the dramatic dialogue, and where there are many references to facts and events outside the stage, both in the fictional and actual worlds, such as in the case of historical and political drama. However, in order to lessen the boldness of introducing a new general, abstracted function of the narrative, let me say that the messenger is a function/role of the kind which is in correspondence with the line of thought introduced by the classics of the narrative grammar and the respective functional/actantial models.

What is, then, the messenger's primary function and what is the messenger-figure's primary role in the plot? To put it plainly, it is to push the action forward – what makes it different from other character-functions and means, is the fact that the messenger does so by bringing the news (reporting about a fact or event) from a part of the fictional world which is not acted out on the stage, primarily for spatial/temporal reasons, and sharing information which is otherwise out of reach of the other characters; this is associated with certain conventions, such as the change of the mode of utterances (switching from action to narrative). It is no coincidence that in classical drama, the messenger as a function and as a character share the name, as there is no need for the logic of development of the narrative to develop a full character. As the chapter on reportage shows, a classic example would be the two messengers in *Oedipus the King*.

This reporting on facts and events which pushes the action forward is then the primary and most typical function of the messenger. This function (or, roles as applied to various messengers in the concerned plays), will thus constitute the topic of the first part of the analytical chapter dealing with the new messenger, as it is shared by the messenger and the new messenger. However, two more functions, or roles, are associated with the new messenger, which deliver information and interpretation. The difference from the

first case is that the new messenger is entitled to bring information that has little or no effect on the action of the play, serving what we may call the purpose of this general account, an "educational" role – teaching of other characters (and consequently, to the audience) as well as exclusively the audience. This information may refer to the fictional as well as actual world. This function or role will be studied more closely in the second part of the analytical chapter, below.

Thirdly, the new messenger's role is to interpret facts or events in the actual world by reporting on actual events and expressing his ideas about the actual world. Typically, this is the case with reporting figures in plays that are primarily political or historical in the sense that they aspire to work as a political forum for the audience. This "political" role of the new messenger will be discussed at some length in the third part of the analytical chapter.

To conclude, Propp's and Greimas's abstracted functional/actantial models of the character-functions in a narrative, come in limited sets of seven and six, respectively, abstract character types, which work as functions of the narrative. Inspired by this line of thought, and based on observations of the body of texts by Frayn, Stoppard, and Wilson as the topical case-studies of this book, the messenger (and consequently, the new messenger) has been identified as a certain character type with specific roles in the plot and its development, and specific associated conventions (the reporting mode and access to information outside the stage action frame). Finally, this chapter states that the new messenger informs other characters and audiences about facts and events that push the action forward, bring information with little or no connection to the development of the plot and interpret the actual world, thus becoming political agents.

However, before more may be said about the new messenger, it is necessary to briefly deal with a specific type of drama and theatre that has had such a strong influence on the further development of this art form, that it is impossible to continue the study concerning reporting and political outreach without it. The topic of the following chapter is, of course, the theatre of Bertolt Brecht. Without Brecht, the context of the later writings dealing with social topics and using this type of messenger would not be complete, and perhaps even possible.