

# THE SHADOW SINGER

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### The Morphology of the Conan Tale Project Methodology

This first appeared in THE CROSS PLAINSMAN, my REHupa journal.

In the first installment regarding this critical approach, I noted the pioneering work by theorists Vladimir Propp, Claude Levi-Strauss, Lord Raglan, and Joseph Campbell.

In beginning the proposed investigation, the first step must be the gathering of data. I wish to go into the study without too many preconceptions and formed hypotheses — I can't say "without any" since it's not possible for anyone to have encountered the stories and not to have some notions and some preconceptions of aspects likely to prove to be common elements or morphologically consistent structural traits of narrative in the Conan corpus.

To begin this research, I will use a modified form of Levi-Strauss' structuralist method: the plotting of motifs/"mythemes" in both "diachronic" and "synchronic" axes. Think of "diachronic" as the linear way in which we must read a story or hear a story — in reading: left to right [in English anyway] and page by page in consecutive order; with the told and heard story from the time the teller begins the tale until the time it is finished — in other words "from start to

finish" and, it should be noted: unidirectionally.

*Diachronic* refers to the linear events of the story start to finish—something happening over time, or historically. *Synchronic* refers to something that happens simultaneously with something else OR in Levi-Strauss' sense: ahistorically — in effect timeless or at least repeatable through any number of iterations and instances.

The diachronic sequence of story elements (*motifs / mythemes*) are recorded [likely I'll use a spread sheet program or even physical index cards] across the horizontal axis (in rows) going from left to right.

The synchronic reiterations of recognized previously-encountered story elements (plot elements; characters appearances, exits, actions, etc.; settings or situations; even themes or symbols) would demand a shift down to a different "row" and over to the vertical axis (the column) under the previously noted item. In other words, repeated motifs or mythemes or narrative "moves" can be tracked along the vertical axis. Each repeated element would necessitate the shift down to another row, but the horizontal flow of the diachronic elements would continue again, until another reiterated element would again require a downward shift to yet another row.

Example: Let A be the initial situation of a tale, B the next event, then C, then D, etc. Then

let's say that D represents confrontation with an enemy and an ensuing fight. If a second confrontation and fight occurs somewhat later in the tale, the story on the axes described would go:

A B C D E F G  
          D          H I J K etc.

Note that H must shift right to avoid confusion.

The notation would keep going left to right until the next repeated motif / mytheme / element which would necessitate the shift down to a new row. An example—let's say that motif G repeats after plot element K, this would cause the following:

A B C D E F G  
          D          H I J K  
                  G          L M N, etc.

The ideal form of prose narrative upon which to perform this sort of close reading analysis is the "short prose tale" a Poe called it — in modern parlance the Short Story. With this form, a sentence-by-sentence close reading and annotated analysis is not too prohibitive. But that leaves us with the need for a system of notation.

I've included a page following this article illustrating Vladimir Propp's findings regarding his study of hundreds of Russian folktales and his conclusion that they all follow essentially the same line of presentation and have the same *dramatis personae* as character types. The difficulty of trying to apply his exact notation scheme to literary works such as the corpus of Conan tales by Robert E. Howard is obvious. Howard was neither influenced by the Russian folktales, nor is his work essentially "folk" or in the oral tradition. To find his literary tendencies as a modern creator of the written tale we must develop our own system.

Having said that, it does not mean that the pioneering work of Propp need be completely disregarded in essence. Propp developed a notation system of both Greek

and Roman letters and numbers to show the sequence, the divisions of narrative "moves," and the sub-varieties of related elements. The system I'm mulling over and "tweaking" for the project is one modified and adapted from Propp's ideas as described below.

First, the sequence of story elements is laid out physically on note cards or on computer in a spreadsheet pattern, the number of columns ultimately dictated by the number — great or small — of synchronic repetitions of element as described above by the time the story (ultimately the entire body of Conan stories) is examined.

It should be noted that there is an aspect of subjectivity and of preference of "school of literary criticism" on the part of the researcher in a project of "tagging" the elements of a story in this manner. My "elements" will be those of the traditional analytical (Aristotelian) method: PLOT (narrative comment, dialogue, action of characters), CHARACTERS (introduction of, development and description of, and any departures of), SETTING (descriptions of places and specifics of and shifts in time), THEME (either explicitly stated or implied by events), with the addition of my interest in probable or potential SYMBOLS (especially archetypal or innate, but also contrived). I will, additionally, make separate notes and observations regarding matters of STYLE and RHETORICAL tendencies.

The Feminist Critic might make quite different observations or arrangements of story elements, as might the Psychological Critic coming from a Freudian perspective, or the Biographical Critic especially interested in how Howard's life might have impacted the tale.

Once the stories are set against the two axes that develop, the notion of finding a consistent or common morph or "shape" to them — as Propp did with the Russian folktales — can begin. I believe that Howard's Conan stories (and other tales) do have a consistent morphology and that there were formulae at work in the creation of his fiction.

This is not to disparage Howard or "formula fiction" in any way. Our entire concept of story is highly formulaic. Campbell's proposed *monomyth* suggests that formula is even innate to humans. Our lives are lived according to many societal and

personal formulae. The familiar Freitag diagram of story plot is formula: inciting moment, rising action, crisis, conclusion. Language grammar itself is a set of formulas. We find pleasure in pattern. It is a reassuring step away from chaos. It is a reaffirmation that order is possible.

So, some things regarding the notation system I have in mind — and ideas for revision or inclusion are most welcome:

For scientific reasons, I propose to use Greek alphabet letters to designate common elements of the traditional analytic mode: Chi **X** for *chronos* = TIME and for Tau **T** for *topos* = PLACE, Delta **Δ** for *dialogos* = Dialogue, Theta **Θ** for *thema* = theme, Sigma **Σ** for *symbolo* = SYMBOL, etc. These letters will be used either as introductory markers for the notational entry of any given element OR, perhaps, as superscripted or subscripted markers

This is a variance from Propp's use of the Greek, but it leaves the Roman alphabet free to be used for the linear (diachronic) depiction of whatever formulae and morphology emerges for the sequence of events in the tale being transcribed. A would stand for the initial situation, B for the next element or story "beat" as screenwriters would say, etc. For the sake of the study, I will examine the stories in the order of creation as much as that can be exactly known — rather than by some reconstructed arrangement that places them in an order theorized about the life and career of Conan. It should be noted that, while the story will be examined sentence-by-sentence, multiple sentences will most often comprise the content of any given story element, since it will frequently be the case that several sentences will go toward the presentation of the element being recorded in notation.

This system "leaves the door open" for the eventual inclusion of numerals — either or both Arabic and/or Roman as might be indicated or suggested by discoveries along the way.

In addition to the alphabetic marking / tagging of the events of the story as indicated

above, I am working on a system of SYMBOLS for assisting in the notation. Some of these are also suggested by Propp's study, but are often used differently and specially for some of the analytical concepts I have in mind.

The following are the symbols I'm considering now in a developing hypothesis on how this notational system might work:

- The INCITING MOMENT (the point at which the reader sees that a conflict exists: Person vs. Person/Person vs. Nature/Person vs. Society/Person vs. Self/Person vs. Supernatural) signified by a downward-pointing V:
- The ENTRANCE/ARRIVAL OF A CHARACTER into the story signified by a downward-pointing arrow:
- The DEPARTURE OF THE MAIN CHARACTER(S) ON A JOURNEY OR QUEST signified by an arrow pointing right:
- The RETURN OF THE MAIN CHARACTER(S) FROM A JOURNEY OR QUEST signified by an arrow pointing left:
- The EXIT OF A CHARACTER from the story signified by an upward-pointing arrow:
- The CRISIS/TURNING POINT OF A STORY (or at least of any given CONFLICT) signified by an upward-pointing V:
- COMPLICATION OF A SITUATION signified by an upward and rightward slanting arrow:
- DE-INTENSIFICATION OF A SITUATION signified by a downward and leftward slanting arrow:
- CHARACTER DYNAMIC CHANGE, DEVELOPMENT, or "ARC" indicated by an arching arrow:

I fully expect that a distinctive and objectifiable typical structure will emerge from such a study, providing insights into Howard's method of creation and favored narrative "moves" in the process of writing. Once established, these morphological consistencies and patterns can be applied to other Howard tales and genres.

This is definitely a study in the early stages of planning at this point. I welcome ideas, comments, suggestions, alternative or additional theories regarding this proposal.