THE USE OF A STORY : THE APPLICATION OF THE THEORY OF STRUCTURALISM

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Abstract

A literary theory is very helpful to understand a piece of literature. This paper will introduce the theory of structuralism. This paper will then apply the theory of structuralism into five stories so that one can have a deeper understanding of the five stories. The five stories are Crook's (2000) (Retold) *Tom Thumb*, Pearce's (2007) *The Squirrel Wife*, Kingsbury's (2011) *Brave Young Knight*, Souci's (1989) (Retold) *The Talking Eggs*, and Shepard's (2007) *One-Eye! Two-Eyes! Three-Eyes! A Very Grimm Fairy Tale*. After that, some questions will be provided. A teacher can decide if he or she would like to use the questions. A teacher then can have one more way to utilize a story in the classroom.

Key Words: structuralism, stories

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THE USE OF A STORY : THE APPLICATION OF THE THEORY OF STRUCTURALISM

故事使用：結構主義理論之應用

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摘要

本文介紹結構主義，使用結構主義分析五個故事，這五個故事是 Crook (2000) (Retold) 的 *Tom Thumb*，Pearce (2007) 的 *The Squirrel Wife*，Kingsbury (2011) 的 *Brave Young Knight*， Souci (1989) (Retold) 的 *The Talking Eggs*，和 Shepard (2007) 的 *One-Eye! Two-Eyes! Three-Eyes! A Very Grimm Fairy Tale*。本文提供一些問題，教師可選擇是否使用這些問題進行故事教學。

關鍵字：結構主義，故事

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1. Introduction

It is good to understand a theory. A theory can be helpful to comprehend a piece of literature. With the application of a theory into a story, a teacher can have one more way to use the story in the classroom. Also, students can have the advantage of understanding the story from another viewpoint. This paper will first talk about the theory of structuralism. Next, this paper will use structuralism to analyze stories. After that, some questions that are developed from the theory of structuralism will be offered.

2. Structuralism

Structuralism is a distinct theory. This theory focuses on how a word acquires its meaning. A word is a sign. A word does not represent a thing in the world. There is no natural connection between a sign and the thing the sign refers to. A sign gets its meaning from being different from all other signs. For example, we know *eraser* because it is different from *table* and *chair*. A word obtains its meaning through differentiation. As Hawkes (1977) says while citing Saussure's words, "Signs,...., function 'not through their intrinsic values but through their relative position',.... '... whatever distinguishes one sign from the others constitutes it.' As a result, 'in language there are only differences *without positive terms*...." (p. 28).

Signs are combined according to rules. The systemized combination of signs explains codes that are produced by human society and culture. The codes help maintain and reinforce the structure of society and culture. Literature is made up of a systemized combination of signs that reflects the codes in a society and a culture. The understanding of a piece of literature is therefore not dependent on the author's point of view nor the readers' responses to the text. Instead, a piece of literature can be understood by examining the signs and codes that are expressed in it.

The value of a code is best understood when a sign is differentiated from another sign. These differences form a binary differentiation. For example, *heaven* and *earth* are a pair of binary oppositions. As Bressler (1994) points out:

> Still others believe that the primary signifying system [a systemized combination of signs] is best found as a series of binary oppositions that the reader organizes, values, and then uses to interpret the text. Each binary

> operation can be pictured as a fraction, the top half (the numerator) being what is more valued than its related bottom half (the denominator). Accordingly,.... in the binary operation "good/evil" the reader has.... valued good over evil. (p. 66)

It is not difficult to understand a piece of literature because the signs and code in a piece of literature are already in a reader's mind. Reading literature reinforces a reader's understanding of signs and codes that already exist in a society and a culture. As Bressler (1994) states, "How the reader organizes the various binary operations found within the text but already existing in the mind of the reader will determine for that particular reader the text's interpretation" (p. 66).

This paper is going to apply structuralism into five stories by examining the signs and codes in the five stories. The five stories are Crook's (2000) (Retold) *Tom Thumb*, Pearce's (2007) *The Squirrel Wife*, Kingsbury's (2011) *Brave Young Knight*, Souci's (1989) (Retold) *The Talking Eggs*, and Shepard's (2007) *One-Eye! Two-Eyes! Three-Eyes! A Very Grimm Fairy Tale*. Other stories can also be chosen and used when applying the theory of structuralism. After the analysis of the five stories, questions will be offered. A teacher can use these questions to discuss a story in the classroom. As a result, the teacher can have one more way to utilize a story.

2.1 Crook's (2000) (Retold) ***Tom Thumb***

A couple wanted a son. They did not care if the son was small. So, a magician gave the couple a small son. Because the son was as small as a thumb, the son was called Tom Thumb. Tom liked to go places. Even though Tom was small and vulnerable, he was able to free himself from danger.

One day, Tom was directing a horse. Tom and the horse got caught by two bad men. The two bad men told Tom to go into a rich man's house and steal the rich man's money. After they got the rich man's money, Tom secretly directed the horse to the police station so that the two bad men could get arrested.

The police officer complimented Tom for cleverly bringing the two bad men to the police station. As a result, Tom got to see the king and queen. Then, Tom returned home and brought honor to his family.

The story presents two signs. One sign is shown by Tom Thumb. The other sign is displayed by the two bad men. The two bad men are bad because they capture Tom and

force Tom to go into a rich man's house and steal the rich man's money. Tom is good because after Tom and the two bad men get the rich man's money, Tom directs the horse to the police station. So, the two bad men can be arrested.

As the signs are put together, a code that is accepted by a society and a culture is unveiled. Even though one is small and vulnerable, one needs to be brave and clever to bring the bad men to the police station so that justice can be served. The values of being brave and doing the right thing already exist in a society and are being reinforced through the story.

2.2 Pearce's (2007) *The Squirrel Wife*

The story was about two brothers. One was the elder brother and the other was the younger brother. The younger brother was called Jack. The two brothers were swineherds. They lived on the edge of the forest. The elder brother forced Jack to take care of the pigs. Jack needed to bring the pigs into the forest to eat. Jack was not allowed to have the pigs go deep into the forest. He also needed to bring the pigs home by sunset. Jack did all the work. However, his elder brother gave him very little food to eat.

One night in autumn during a storm, there was a strange voice coming from the forest calling for help. The elder brother claimed that he did not hear the voice. However, the elder brother told Jack that even if there was someone who needed help, he should not go and help this person. After the storm went away and the elder brother fell asleep, Jack went to the forest. Jack discovered a green man stuck under a fallen tree. Jack rescued the green man from under the fallen tree and carried him back to the green people.

The lord of the green people told Jack that he had done a good job and deserved to be rewarded. Jack got a squirrel-wife. The squirrel-wife was able to tell Jack the secrets of the forest. She told Jack specifically the best function for each wood. She was able to determine which trees were healthy and how old they were. She easily found the best blackberries and mushrooms. She knew where to find honey and nuts. From the squirrel-wife's knowledge, Jack built and sold furniture. So, Jack and the squirrel-wife lived very happily and prosperously on the opposite side of the forest from where the elder brother lived.

One day, the elder brother heard about Jack and his squirrel-wife. The elder brother went to the village where Jack sold his furniture. The elder brother accused Jack of being a thief because Jack took away his equal, fair share of the pigs. The villagers were convinced by what the elder brother said. So, the villagers captured Jack and put him into prison.

The squirrel-wife turned back into a squirrel so that she could help Jack escape from

prison. After Jack got out from prison, he and the squirrel went to see the green people in the forest. Jack asked the lord of the green people to give him his squirrel-wife. The lord of the green people told Jack that he could not have his squirrel-wife, but he could have the squirrel on his shoulder or his wife. Jack chose to have his wife. Then, Jack and his wife moved to the village because they did not want to live far away from people. Jack continued to make furniture and take care of the pigs. His wife cooked, cleaned, and cared for the babies. They lived a happy life together. They ended up having children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

Jack's elder brother was punished by the green people. He was put in a similar situation as he treated Jack before. Jack's elder brother treated Jack like a servant and did not give Jack his fair share of the pigs. The elder brother was treated as a servant by the green people. He was treated this way for a long time until he learned wisdom. The wisdom he needed to learn was to not treat his younger brother like a servant and to be kind to his younger brother.

The story addresses two signs. One sign is seen in the elder brother and the other sign is shown by Jack, the younger brother. Jack is different from his elder brother. Jack is kind. He does what his elder brother tells him to do, he looks after the pigs, and he rescues the green man who is trapped under a fallen tree and takes the green man back to the green people. The elder brother is unkind. He gives Jack orders, he does not take care of the pigs, he gives Jack very little food to eat, and he ignores the one calling for help in the forest. Later in the story, the elder brother continues to show his unkindness by denouncing Jack as a thief. This is because Jack carries away half of their pigs.

As the two signs are combined and developed in the story, a code that is accepted by a society is revealed. The code shows that Jack is kind and as a result, he is rewarded well. He is given a squirrel-wife. The squirrel-wife's knowledge helps them become prosperous. The squirrel-wife later turns into a squirrel and rescues Jack from prison. Then, the green people turn the squirrel into Jack's wife. After that, Jack and his wife move to the village where Jack has a good job making furniture and taking care of pigs. They also have children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Jack's elder brother is unkind. He is punished. He becomes a servant to the green people for a thousand years. The elder brother needs to understand that he shall not treat Jack like a servant. Instead, the elder brother has to learn to treat Jack, his younger brother, with kindness and as an equal.

2.3 Kingsbury's (2011) *Brave Young Knight*

There was a young knight who lived in a kingdom. The kingdom was comprised of four sections. It included the east village, the west village, the south village, and the north village. The young knight dwelled in the west village. The young knight from the west village was a kind person and had good abilities. He could run quickly, he was very strong, and he could solve difficult puzzles. The young knight from the west village showed these qualities by carrying a crippled boy on his shoulder, helping a woman carry bricks, and correctly calculating how much wood the villagers needed to rebuild a bridge.

One day, the king declared that he would pick the bravest knight to be prince of the kingdom. The king held a contest to determine who was the bravest knight. People from each of the four villages wanted a knight to be chosen from their respective villages. When the young knight from the west village knew that a knight from the east village was very fast and could run faster than his horse, the young knight from the west village practiced running many times. When the young knight from the west village heard that a knight from the south village was very strong and was able to carry a horse under each of his arms, the young knight from the west village practiced by lifting many dogs. When the young knight from the west village found out that a knight from the north village was very smart and could find the answers to puzzles that the village teachers could not solve, the young knight from the west village figured out answers to all the puzzles that he could find.

The contest consisted of three competitions. The first competition had the purpose of proving which knight was the fastest. The knight who ran through the forest the quickest was the winner. The course started at the entrance of the forest and finished on the other end of the forest. As the race began, the knight from the east village said loudly that he knew a shortcut. The knights from the east, south, and north villages all took the shortcut and finished the race quickly. However, the young knight from the west village followed the course that the king set up. He was the last one to cross the finish line to complete the race.

The second competition had the purpose of showing which knight was the strongest. The four knights needed to go to a lumberyard, choose the largest log that they could carry, and bring it to the king. After the four knights got to the lumberyard, the knight from the south village directed the knights to a different pile of logs that were hollow. He suggested that they carry the hollow logs because they could carry bigger ones. The knights from the east, south, and north villages all took large hollow logs to the king. However, the young knight from the west village followed the king's instruction, chose a medium-size log from the right pile of logs, and brought it back to the king. The young

knight from the west village had the smallest log. However, his log was solid, unlike the other three knights' logs which were hollow.

The final competition was to prove which knight was the most intelligent. The four knights were each given a treasure map. They needed to solve puzzles on the treasure map in order to find the treasure and bring it to the king. At the beginning of the competition, the knights solved a few of the puzzles. Then, the knight from the north village noticed that the king was not present. So, the knight from the north village suggested that they see a man in town who gave answers to puzzles. The man in town charged one dollar for ten answers. The knights from the east, south, and north villages all went to see the man in town and buy the answers to the puzzles. Because they did this, they were able to find the treasures and bring them to the king quickly. The young knight from the west village, on the other hand, sat on a rock and figured out the answers to all the puzzles by himself. He was then able to find the treasure and bring it to the king. However, he was the last one to bring the treasure to the king.

The king examined the results of the three competitions. He scolded the knight from the east village for cheating by taking a shortcut. So, the knight from the east village could not be prince of the kingdom. Next, the king rebuked the knight from the south village for bringing a hollow log to the king and trying to deceive the king. As a result, the knight from the south village could not be prince of the kingdom. Then, the king reproached the knight from the north village for telling a lie about who solved the puzzles. So, the knight from the north village could not be prince of the kingdom. Lastly, the king told the young knight from the west village that he did a good job because he was honest and completed all of the tasks that he was asked to do. Since the young knight from the west village was honest and did not cheat, he was considered the bravest. The young knight from the west village became prince of the kingdom. He was able to rule the kingdom with moral strength, compassion, and honesty. The kingdom became the strongest one in the area. In addition, honor was given to the people of the west village. In the end, the young knight from the west village and the people of the west village all lived forever happily.

This story presents two signs. One sign is displayed by the young knight from the west village. The young knight from the west village is a kind person. He helps a woman take bricks to the place where she is building a home. He also carries a boy on his shoulder as this boy has not been able to walk since he was born. The young knight from the west village is a hard worker. When he hears that the knights from other villages are quick, strong, and smart, he practices hard to improve himself. To become quicker, he practices running many times. To get stronger, he carries more and more dogs. To be smarter, he

solves all the puzzles that he can find. The young knight from the west village is an honest person. In the three competitions, he follows the king's instructions to complete each one. He never cheats.

The other sign is exhibited by the knights from the east, south, and north villages. People in the kingdom say that the knight from the east village is very fast. The knight from the south village is very strong. The knight from the north village is very smart. However, in the three competitions, the three knights do not show their abilities. In the race through the forest, the knights from the east, south, and north villages cheat by taking a shortcut. In the competition to carry the biggest log from the pile that the king indicated, the knights from the east, south, and north villages are deceptive because they take hollow logs from a different pile. In the competition to solve puzzles in order to find their treasures, the knights from the east, south, and north villages buy some of the answers to the puzzles. They lie about who solved some of the puzzles. The knights from the east, south, and north villages are not hard workers. In each of the competitions, they go against the king's directions and use quicker and easier ways to complete each competition.

The young knight from the west village is considered good because he is kind, hardworking, and honest. The knights from the east, south, and north villages are viewed as bad because they cheat, deceive, and lie. They also do not work hard.

As the two signs are combined, a code is uncovered. The code shows the value of being good. To be good, one is kind, hardworking, and honest. If one displays these qualities, then one is rewarded by becoming prince of the kingdom. On the other hand, the code also exhibits the value of being bad. To be bad, one is deceptive and is not hardworking. If one has these qualities, one could be scolded and is not permitted to be prince of the kingdom. This code reinforces the values of being kind, hardworking, and honest. These values are important for the leader and members of society to have.

2.4 Souci's (1989) (Retold) *The Talking Eggs*

There once lived a widow. She had two daughters. This family was very poor and lived on a farm. Blanche was the younger sister. She was sweet, kind, and smart. She was also a hard worker. Blanche needed to do all of the chores. She had to use an old iron to iron the clothes in the morning. She had to chop cotton during the afternoon. She also needed to string the beans so that they could eat them for supper. Blanche needed to work from morning until evening.

Rose was the older daughter. She had a bad temper and was easy to get angry. She was

lazy and never helped on the farm. Mother loved Rose the best. This was because they were the same type of person. They both easily got angry, said mean things, and acted as if they were better than others. Mother and Rose would sit on a shaded porch and talk about moving to the city to live a rich, high-class life.

One day, Blanche went to the well to get some water to bring home. While at the well, Blanche happened to see an old woman who was hot and needed a drink of water. Blanche got some water from the well for the old woman to drink. The old woman told Blanche that she had a good heart and God would bless her. When Blanche returned home, her mother and sister yelled at her for taking too long to bring warm instead of cool water home. Mother and Rose bawled Blanche out and hit her. Blanche ran into the woods and started to cry. She felt scared because she did not want to go home and she did not have any place to go. The old woman saw Blanche crying. The old woman told Blanche that Blanche could eat dinner and sleep at her home. However, Blanche needed to promise not to laugh at anything she saw. Blanche promised not to laugh, so the old woman took Blanche deep into the woods. When they came to the old woman's home, Blanche saw some strange animals there. A cow had two heads and sounded like a mule. Also, there were chickens of many colors, which sounded like mockingbirds. Blanche kept her promise and did not laugh.

When Blanche and the old woman went inside her home, the old woman asked Blanche to start the fire to cook dinner. Then, the old woman took her head off her body. The old woman fixed her hair and put her head back on her body. Next, Blanche and the old woman ate supper. After that, they sat outside on the back porch and watched rabbits dance as one rabbit played an instrument. The next morning, the old woman and Blanche ate breakfast. Then, the old woman told Blanche that Blanche needed to go home. Since Blanche was a very good girl, the old woman told her to go to her chicken house to get a present. Blanche was told to take the eggs that were plain. She was also told not to take the eggs that were gold, silver, or covered with jewels. Blanche did what she was told and only took the plain eggs. On the way home, Blanche followed the old woman's instructions and tossed the eggs over her shoulder. Out of the eggs came diamonds, rubies, gold and silver coins, pretty dresses, dainty shoes, and a carriage that was pulled by a pony. Blanche brought all her new things home. When mother saw all of Blanche's finery, mother was very nice to Blanche. After that, mother got Blanche to reveal where she got all her treasures.

Mother told Rose to go into the woods on the following morning to find the old woman and get treasures. Rose did not want to do it, but she still went into the woods. Rose found

the old woman. The old woman told Rose that she could take her to her home if she did not laugh. Rose agreed. However, when Rose arrived at the old woman's home, she laughed at the strange animals. Rose and the old woman had a small, bad dinner because Rose was rude. The next morning, when the old woman removed her head from her body, Rose took the old woman's head. Rose said that she would only give the old woman her head back if she gave Rose a present like her sister, Blanche, received. The old woman told Rose to go to the chicken house and pick the plain eggs. Rose put the old woman's head on the porch, so the old woman needed to grope around. When Rose got to the chicken house, she did not choose the plain eggs. Instead, Rose took the gold, silver, and jeweled eggs. When Rose was going home, she tossed the eggs over her shoulder. Out of the eggs came whip snakes, toads, frogs, yellow jackets, and a big wolf. The animals started to chase Rose. Rose ran home with all the animals following her. Mother tried to save Rose, but couldn't. So, Rose and her mother quickly ran into the woods with all the animals chasing them. Rose and her mother returned home, hurt, angry, and tired. They could not find Blanche because Blanche had moved to the city and lived like a high-class lady.

Rose and her mother spent the rest of their lives looking for the woman's cabin and eggs, but never found them.

This story presents two signs. One sign is portrayed by Blanche. This sign shows the qualities of being sweet, kind, smart, and hardworking. The other sign is displayed by Rose and mother. This sign describes the characteristics of being mean, lazy, and prideful. As two signs are put together, a code is developed. Blanche who is sweet, kind, smart, and hardworking is rewarded to become rich and be able to move to the city. Mother and Rose, who are lazy, mean, and prideful, are punished by remaining poor and continuing to live on a farm.

2.5 Shepard's (2007) *One-Eye! Two-Eyes! Three-Eyes! A Very Grimm Fairy Tale*

The story started by introducing three sisters. The oldest sister had one eye. This eye was positioned in the center of her forehead. She was called One-Eye. She was an ordinary person. The middle sister had three eyes. One of her eyes was above the other two eyes. She was called Three-Eyes. She was an ordinary person, too. The youngest sister had two eyes. She was named Two-Eyes. The youngest sister was different from her two sisters and other people. She was not an ordinary person. Her two older sisters were ashamed of the youngest sister. So, the two older sisters teased the youngest sister, had the youngest sister wear the two older sisters' ragged clothes, forced the youngest

sister to eat leftovers, and made the youngest sister care for their goat.

One morning, the youngest sister took their goat to the meadow to eat grass. The youngest sister started to cry because she did not have enough food to eat. Suddenly, a caring old woman with two eyes appeared in front of the youngest sister. The old woman told the youngest sister two rhymes. One rhyme caused a table full of an abundance of food to appear for the youngest sister to eat. After the youngest sister was finished eating, she could say the second rhyme, which caused the table and food to disappear.

After the youngest sister returned home, she did not eat the leftovers. The two older sisters suspected that the youngest sister was getting food from somewhere else. Then, the middle sister found out that the youngest sister said a rhyme that caused their goat to bring her a lot of wonderful food to eat. So, the two older sisters made the goat go away. The next morning, the youngest sister had nothing to eat. She cried again. The old woman appeared a second time. This time, the old woman gave the youngest sister a seed. The seed could produce a tall tree full of silver leaves and gold apples. When the youngest sister said a certain rhyme, she would receive a gold apple in her hand.

The youngest sister planted the seed. On the following day, a tall apple tree full of gold apples appeared. The two older sisters discovered the tree. After that, they saw a knight riding towards them. The two older sisters hid the youngest sister in a barrel. When the knight arrived, he asked for a gold apple. In return, he would grant a request to the person who gave him a gold apple.

The two older sisters tried to get a gold apple, but were unsuccessful. Then, the knight noticed a stone that was rolling away from the barrel. The knight asked the person in the barrel to come out. When the youngest sister lifted the barrel off herself, the knight also showed his face. The knight had two eyes just like the youngest sister. The youngest sister said the rhyme to get a gold apple. After she gave the gold apple to the knight, the youngest sister asked the knight to take her away from her two terrible and malicious sisters. The knight brought the youngest sister to his castle. Since they had so many shared qualities, such as both having two eyes, the knight and the youngest sister lived forever happily.

The two older sisters continued to stand under the apple tree. They tried to get gold apples by repeating the rhyme the youngest sister had said. However, no gold apples ever fell.

This story represents two signs. One sign is shown by the oldest and middle sisters. They have one and three eyes respectively which make them ordinary. The other sign is displayed by the youngest sister. She has two eyes which makes her not ordinary. As two

signs are put together, a code is formed. The youngest sister is not ordinary. She embarrasses her two older sisters. So, the two older sisters make fun of the youngest sister, have the youngest sister wear their ragged clothes, have the youngest sister eat leftovers, and have the youngest sister take care of their goat. The two older sisters exclude and isolate the youngest sister and push her to the fringe of society.

In the middle of the story, an addition code appears. The youngest sister who is not ordinary is no longer miserable. She is helped by an old woman who has two eyes. The old woman teaches her how to get a table full of food from their goat so that she has food to eat. Even though the two older sisters drive the goat away, which causes the youngest sister not to have food to eat, the old woman continues to help the youngest sister. The old woman gives the youngest sister a seed that produces a tree full of gold apples. The youngest sister gives a knight, who has two eyes, a gold apple. The knight takes the youngest sister to his castle. At the castle, people who have two eyes are accepted and treated well. So, the youngest sister can live a happy life there. Thus, the youngest sister, who has two eyes and is not ordinary, is excluded and treated poorly at the beginning of the story. Then, life changes for the youngest sister. She is treated well by an old woman and a knight because she is different just like the old woman and the knight. The code of being not ordinary changes from being excluded to being accepted by the knight's society and culture.

3. Questions to the Five Stories

As structuralism states, an individual sign does not show meaning by itself. A sign needs to contrast with another sign to give rise to its meaning. The combination of signs exhibits a code that is valued in a society and a culture. A code is reinforced in literature. By examining a story, one can discover the signs and codes that exist in a society. To understand the signs in a story, one can focus on the main characters (protagonists) and the characters who go against the main characters (antagonists). To comprehend the codes in a story, one can look at the consequences of the protagonists' and the antagonists' actions. By using the ideas related to the protagonists' and the antagonists' actions to analyze a story, this paper offers the following questions.

3.1 Who are the protagonists?
3.2 What qualities describe the protagonists?
3.3 Who are the antagonists?
3.4 What qualities describe the antagonists?
3.5 What are the results of the protagonists' actions?

3.6 What are the consequences of the antagonists' actions?

The use of the questions are one possible method to examine the signs and codes in a story.

4. Implications

A theory can be a good tool to deeply understand a story. By understanding how a theory is applied to a story, one can develop questions. The questions in turn can be applied to other stories. This can help one gain a new perspective on other stories. One can then have one more way to understand and use a story.

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