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ABSTRACT

Folklore study, too often misunderstood and maligned in the academic world, is pursued by a relatively small number of scholars (fewer than 100 people in this country have a doctorate in folklore). However, at least 170 American colleges and universities offer popular folklore courses, 71 percent of which are part of the English department curriculum. These courses treat folklore study in several ways, as may be seen by examining a specific folklore sample from five different approaches: nostalgic, subliterary, descriptive, functional, and behavioral. Instructors wishing to disseminate applied knowledge can use the nostalgic approach, while those advocating pure knowledge may choose from the other four approaches. In any case, folklore can contribute to the understanding of literature and may also be perceived as vital expressive culture itself. (JM)

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Five Approaches to Teaching Folklore in a College English Curriculum

The study of folklore--and hence its teaching--is one of the most misunderstood, misplaced, and maligned activities in academe. Although folklore scholarship has been closely associated with anthropology since the development of both disciplines during the late nineteenth century, in this country folklore and folklorists have usually been assigned spots in college departments of English. Without delineating the reasons for this situation, it will suffice here to note that the result has been the creation of an anomaly: the folklorist in the English department, who teaches freshman and sophomore classes for which he is no better prepared than to teach medieval ethics so that once or twice a year he can subvert the curriculum with his folklore offerings. Jan Harold Brunwand, author of the most widely used textbook in college introductory folklore courses, has characterized the folklorist in the English department as a "court jester,"[1] the fellow who has published weird papers on Polack jokes and occasionally amazes his colleagues by admitting to having read Richard III.

English departments put up with these court jesters for two reasons. First, they are rare. Less than a hundred people in this country have the doctorate in folklore, and the number of scholars with even a trace of serious folklore study in their backgrounds probably amounts to less than a thousand. Second,

folklore courses are very popular. It is not unusual for an introductory folklore course at a moderately sized college to have a hundred students enrolled. Such an offering in an English department's program can compensate for several courses in Old Norse, Renaissance phonology, or colonial American sermons with their six students apiece. This latter point suggests why college folklore courses are numerous despite folklorists' being in scanty supply. A recent survey has revealed that at least 170 American colleges and universities offer folklore courses (71% in English departments).[2] Many of these courses are obviously taught by individuals whose training in folklore is slight or nonexistent. The purpose of this paper is to describe and evaluate some of the approaches employed in these courses.

Like "history" the term"folklore" has a double denotation. It refers both to an academic discipline and to the cultural materials examined by that discipline. Most college introductory folklore courses employ the second denotation and aim to make students aware of the varied material which is considered to be folklore. It is beyond the scope of this paper to break new ground in an attempt to define that varied material. Although any definition of "folklore" is bound to be inadequate and will perhaps reflect more the interests of the definition maker than a synthesis of scholarly opinion, generally the term refers to either discrete items of culture which owe their distribution

through time and space to oral circulation and traditional imitation or the totality of the past-oriented culture in a complex society or a communicative process during which art is transmitted within the context of a small group.[3] For example, the following story and its context of performance constitute folklore according to any of these general definitions. I collected it on the afternoon of 13 July 1968 from John Hughes, a seventy-year-old country storekeeper, in Orange County in south-central Indiana. I had been asking him about a haunted cemetery nearby and directed the interview to other narratives involving the supernatural. He responded,

> Well, Father and Mother didn't believe in them [supernatural beings], but--and I'd ask my grandmother, you know. I'd say, "Now Grandma." Us kids'd ask her, "Grandma, do you believe there's any witches nowadays?" "No, no. I don't believe there's witches now, but now I'll tell you in my father and mother's day there was. Now there was an old lady over there, and she was a witch. And she'd witch people, and she would--and so one time they shot her--or shot her picture.
>
> "Said they drew her picture on a board of some kind. And they said, 'Now, that's old Grandma So-and-So. She's an old witch,' and took a silver bullet. They run a silver bullet and put it in an old muzzle-loading rifle. And they shot this picture. And just at the time that they shot

> this picture, the old lady fell down her stairs from the upstairs part of her house down the stairway and broke her leg." And she knowed that that happened, and she knowed that that shooting that picture with a silver bullet. And if that old woman hadn't've been a witch, why, that wouldn't've happened.

Since this is folklore from virtually anyone's standpoint, it can serve as a good illustration of the kind of thing treated in a college introductory folklore course. However, the way it is treated depends upon the approach of the instructor. Each of the five approaches discussed below--nostalgic, subliterary, descriptive, functional, behavioral--finds a different significance in Mr. Hughes's story and performance. By viewing this bit of folklore from the perspective of each of these approaches, perhaps it will be possible to examine and analyze them fruitfully.

Nostalgic. Most contemporary folklorists no longer subscribe to the idea that folklore must be something passed down from the hoary past. Indeed, there is a modern folklore with a life in tradition of six months rather than three generations. However, those instructors of folklore who employ the nostalgic approach refuse to accept any aspect of contemporary culture as folklore and concentrate on cultural forms from the "olden time."[4] These cultural forms, which are especially attractive if they must be artificially preserved by folk festivals and craft shows, often have only two features in common: they are old and they represent

a lifestyle less complex and more "honest" than that created by twentieth-century progress. The nostalgic approach can be characterized as "nativistic"--that is, directed toward a "conscious, organized attempt . . . to revive or perpetuate selected aspects of . . . culture."[5]

Eliot Wigginton, sponsor of Foxfire magazine and editor of the bestselling Foxfire Book, has inadvertently become a major spokesman for the nostalgic approach. In a reply to professional criticism of his projects, he has succinctly presented the nostalgic perspective:

> And celebrating the existence of the Aunt Aries [the archetypal specimen of the folk] of our world has the germ of several great lessons for my kids and others like them: that you don't have to have a television and a fine bathroom to be a valuable human being worthy of attention and respect and affection--even love; and that if people like Aunt Arie deserve our respect, it probably also follows that other minority groups and other individuals who may happen to be out of the mainstream of our society deserve our respect and affection also. The jury is still out, but I hope that my students will be more humane and sensitive adults as a result of that contact with the Aunt Aries "tucked in hollers and secluded from the modern world." Perhaps--though

> it probably asks too much--readers of our books will be too. In a society like this one, some increased sense of humanity would not be too bad a thing.[6]

A college introductory folklore course taught from this perspective would treat an item like Mr. Hughes's witch story as a precious reminder of a time when problems were viewed simply. Witchcraft and its attendant crimes, after all, were moral, nor social evils. At the same time, the elderly informant's apparent skepticism at the story could be attributed to the common sense that supposedly prevaded the rural American psyche of a century ago. Students in a nostalgic folklore course would learn to appreciate this memory culture, to see it as a meaningful alternative to modern life, and perhaps to participate in such elements of it as weaving chair seats, baking spoon bread, and singing "Bonny Barbara Allen."

The nostalgic approach provides an invaluable service for college students by affording them a sense of their own culture's history and exposing them to unfamiliar cultural responses to environmental stimuli. It serves mankind in general by helping to preserve for his edification and enjoyment certain artifacts, activities, and beliefs which might otherwise disappear. However, these positive aspects of the approach confront a major criticism. The nostalgic approach subjectively evaluates folklore, a kind of culture, from the perspective of the nativistic instructor and his students. Aunt Arie's quilt pattern will be viewed as significant, but her earthy jests are better left forgotten.

Ultimately, the ethnocentrism--or temporocentrism--inherent in nostalgia blocks out any possibility for understanding the unpleasant features of the folklore of the past. It is similar to a literature class's reading only stories with happy endings; the earthy jest may reveal more about Aunt Arie and her culture than the quilt pattern will.

Subliterary. In most college English curricula, the introductory folklore offering is considered to be a genre course. Folklore is hence viewed as a genre--albeit it a simple one--of literature. Its value for the student lies in the opportunity afforded him to observe the operation of various literary devices like alliteration and symbol at a basic level. Also, since much sophisticated literature draws upon folklore as a source, students in an introductory folklore course taught from the subliterary approach are enabled to come into contact with background material incorporated into works like A Midsummer Night's Dream and Huckleberry Finn. The idea that folklore represents some sort of simple, basic kind of literature is suggested by the attitude toward it in the Modern Language Association's "articulated English program" of fifteen years ago. In the discussion of the literary education of elementary school students, it is noted, "Just at this point in a child's education opportunity occurs . . . to lay a foundation for the imaginative enjoyment of literature, and for further discovery and recognition. This can be done by introducing him (at his level of comprehension) to the folklore,

fairy tales, and national legends which provide material for allusion and symbol used by both past and present writers in the great tradition, to whose works the child will later come."[7] Folklore can provide the college student also with a similar foundation; he can see literature operating simply and fundamentally. Literary historian Robert E. Spiller has discussed the role of folklore as a source for sophisticated literature. Among his factors contributing to the creation of a literary work are tradition and myth, "the body of beliefs which forms in a people of a given time and place its compensation for reality."[8] Under the general heading "Culture" Spiller suggests that the effect of folklore on literature often involves "the pace of life of farm and forest [which] produces the poetry of nature and the simple life and the romance of the long ago to help warm the long evenings by the log fire."[9]

In treating Mr. Hughes's item of folklore, a college introductory folklore course taught from the subliterary approach would emphasize two elements: literary devices which occur in her performance and folklore knowledge therein which would contribute to understanding sophisticated literary works. It is obvious that the seeker of alliteration and symbol whould be disappointed in Mr. Hughes's presentation. However, his straightforward use of single-stranded narrative technique and the framing device of a conversation with Grandma suggest literary style. Of most interest, perhaps, from a subliterary perspective is the content of the narrative. When combined with other examples of

Anglo-American witchlore, Mr. Hughes's description of a device for combatting witchcraft would give the student information to enhance his appreciation of works by authors like Scott and Hawthorne.

The contributions of the subliterary approach to the teaching of a college introductory folklore course emerge primarily in regard to increased comprehension of literature. For example, many literature instructors who have tried to convey the concept of metaphor have discovered in such folklore forms as the proverb and the riddle a means for presenting metaphors encouched in expressive culture familiar to the students. Even an advanced student can benefit from observing such literary devices in folklore. At the same time, the recognition of folklore as a source for literature contributes toward literature appreciation. Yet while the subliterary approach makes these contributions to a student's literary education, it does little to foster an appreciation of folklore itself. It seems very inappropriate to relegate material being introduced in a course to a secondary position, but this is exactly what the subliterary approach does. An introductory folklore course should introduce folklore, a difficult enough task, and leave the relationship between folklore and literature to students whose backgrounds in both fields are sufficiently advanced.

Descriptive. The textbook by Brunvand mentioned above is a descriptive survey of the categories of folklore one might encounter in contemporary American society. Under the general headings of

verbal, partly verbal, and non-verbal, Brunvard classifies such genres of folklore as proverbs, customs, and folk architecture. His purposes are to define each genre, to describe any sub-categories within it, and to give ample illustrative examples. For instance, Brunvand begins his chapter on folk games (partly verbal folklore) by delineating those features that make a game "folk." Then he divides folk games into seven categories: pastimes, games of physical action, games involving manipulation of objects, games of mental activity, practical jokes, kissing games, and drinking games. For each category, he describes specific games with which college students might be familiar. Hence, kissing games include Post Office, Flashlight, and Perdiddle.[10] In those chapters treating genres for which folklorists have devised elaborate classificatory schemes, Brunvand presents the schemes in detail. Since Brunvand's book is the most readily available text for college introductory folklore courses, it can be assumed that his descriptive approach is frequently employed.

The fundamental principle of the descriptive approach to teaching a college introductory folklore course is that the materials of folklore are of sufficient interest and value that the presentation of them to students is a valid undertaking. Exposure to varied kinds of folklore in as clear--if artificial--a manner as possible is viewed as an end in itself. It is especially worthwhile if the examples of the kinds of folklore can be drawn from the experience of the students; therefore, college lore and late-adolescent traditions may be emphasized.

Although Mr. Hughes's witch story has nothing to do with either college life or contemporary adolescence, it could still be treated from the descriptive perspective. The major interest would be in classifying it. According to Brunvand's definitions, the Hughes story would fall under the rubric of legends, "prose narratives [generally] regarded by their tellers as true . . . set in the less-remote past in a conventional earthly locale."[11] However, the classification can become more discrete; this is a supernatural legend. Perhaps the descriptive approach would proceed even farther and show students that the story contains motif G271.4.2ba, "Shooting witch picture or symbol with silver bullet breaks spell," from Ernest W. Baughman's catalogue of narrative elements found in British and American folk literature.[12]

A primary positive aspect of the descriptive approach to teaching a college introductory folklore course is that it does recognize that folklore is a complex aggregation of material, the serious study of which is unfamiliar to most students. Introducing students to this material certainly broadens their cultural awareness. When elements of their own culture are employed to illustrate particular genres, the students are afforded the opportunity to see that activities in which they participate have been deemed significant enough for scholarly consideration. If one accepts without reservation that the materials of folklore are significant, the descriptive approach may be an adequate way of introducing them. However, folklorists have long been aware of

the derision directed at their discipline. Part of that derision stems from the folkloristic concern with the seemingly trivial--for example, a jump-rope rhyme. The descriptive approach does nothing to show critics--and students may be among them--how such a rhyme is not really trivial, but may in fact operate in the same fashion as any other art form. The major criticism of the descriptive approach is that it does not go beyond superficial formal analysis of the material to the evaluation of the psychological, social, and cultural meaning of items of folklore.

Functional. For social scientists, functionalism is an established theory. However, instructors of folklore whose background is primarily literary may have only a superficial familiarity with the concept. Hence, college introductory folklore courses taught from the functional perspective are more rare than the insights which the theory affords seem to warrant. The functional approach emphasizes the fact that folklore, like any other aspect of culture, is interrelated with other cultural forms and contributes to their maintenance. The classic formulation of folklore's functions is that of anthropologist William R. Bascom, who suggests that folklore in culture serves as validation of other cultural forms, compensation for social, intellectual, and physical limitations, reinforcement of conforming behavior in a group, and education of group members.[13] The instructor who uses the functional approach in teaching a college introductory folklore course attempts to demonstrate to his students how their jokes, proverbs, and the like play vital roles in their lives and are as essential to social and psychological survival as any

other aspect of their culture.

Therefore, while the instructor employing the functional approach might be interested in classifying Mr. Hughes's story so that it could be more easily comprehended, his major goal would be to show how the story functions for both the informant and his culture. Bascom's four functions, of course, are not canonical, but they do serve as a handy model to follow. For example, the witch legend might be construed as a reinforcement of group conformity by citing an incident of the inevitable punishment of a violation of social ethics. For the informant personally, the story validates his assertion that past generations were more credulous than his own in their acceptance of the existence of supernaturally endowed individuals. Of course, a full and accurate account of the function of this item of folklore would require specific knowledge about the informant's real attitude toward it, his reasons for recalling it during a formal interview, and the natural context when and where he might perform it. The functional approach to teaching a college introductory folklore course would hence be more likely than the three approaches discussed above to go beyond an examination of merely the text of a folklore item to a study of its ecology.

The functional approach recognizes the significance of folklore, yet implies that that significance lies not in its formal properties but in the contributions it makes to the individual and his culture. It extends the descriptive approach to enable students to see elements of culture in operation. It counters

the criticism that folklore is trivial by demonstrating the manifest and latent roles which folklore plays for a society's members. However, it is not without flaw. Functionalism as a theory is often charged with a priori reasoning, for many social scientists argue that the assumption that all cultural forms are functional is invalidated by the presence of dysfunction--that is, the occurrence of elements of culture that operate negatively rather than positively. Pedagogically, the functional approach to teaching a college introductory folklore course can be criticized for initiating English majors into a complex social scientific theory for which they may have no preparation. The result may be a cursory survey of folklore and its functions. It was suggested above that the subliterary approach might be effectively applied in a folklore course beyond the introductory level. Likewise, the functional approach might be reserved for students whose grounding in the social sciences and folklore is relatively advanced.

Behavioral. During the past few years, many folklorists have shifted the focus of their field from concentration on the item or text of folklore to the complete contexts wherein those items are performed. The emphasis on folklore as behavior has emerged as the newest paradigm of the discipline. Using the incipient science of sociolinguistics as the source of many of their ideas, behaviorists have viewed the folklore text as being no more important than such aspects of performance as performer strategy, audience reaction, and performer-audience relationship.

Folklore is thus defined as a communicative event. Occasionally the behavioral approach has been employed in teaching a college introductory folklore course. In such a case, the student is initiated not into genres of folklore as discrete categories, but into the concept of artistic communication as an event. Folklore is especially useful for dealing with this concept since it involves the exchange of often complex messages with performer and audience in direct, immediate interaction.

It is obvious that not enough information is available for a complete behavioral treatment of Mr. Hughes's performance of his witch story. More detailed knowledge about the context of the interview (performance) and about the personalities of both informant and collector is essential. The behavioral approach is interested in what Mr. Hughes performed (a witch story), how and why he performed it, what effects the performance context had on his presentation, and the social and psychological benefits which he derived from the performance.

The behavioral approach to teaching a college introductory folklore course can contribute strongly to broadening student cultural outlooks. Most English students have been educated in a text-oriented fashion; the New Criticism has seen to that. The exposure to an event or performance treatment of culture would provide them with insights not only into folklore, the material which can represent all performance in microcosm, but also into a new way of viewing literature, art, and music.[14] It can be argued, though, that this exposure to a new way of

viewing culture should be left to some course besides folklore--for instance, sociolinguistics. In many ways, also, the behavioral perspective is controversial, for it challenges most conventional ways of looking at folklore. To use it as the basis for a college introductory folklore course might leave the student unable to deal with conventional folklore theories and techniques. At the same time, it may require a degree of social scientific sophistication beyond what most English majors have achieved.

There can be no real conclusion for this discussion since no foolproof method for teaching any subject is possible. However, some generalizations can be drawn. Firstly, the isolation of five approaches for teaching a college introductory folklore course suggests that folklore is a versatile field with much to offer individuals whose pedagogical and scholarly philosophies may differ. The instructor who is interested in disseminating "applied" knowledge can employ the nostalgic approach while advocates of "pure" knowledge have four approaches from which to choose. Secondly, the significance of folklore in its own right and as a key to understanding other aspects of culture is apparent. For instance, folklore can make a real contribution to understanding literature, but also can be preceived as vital expressive culture in itself. Thirdly, one should not judge the nature of folklore purely on the basis of one course in the field. That course reflects the instructor's perspective and

may distort the true nature of folklore. At any rate, matters concerning the teaching of folklore are no longer the concern only of antiquarians; anyone interested in college English curricula must contend with the emergence and growth of folklore as a discipline.

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Notes

[1]Jan Harold Brunvand, "Crumbs for the Court Jester: Folklore in English Departments," in Perspectives on Folklore and Education. Folklore Forum Bibliographic and Special Series No. 2, ed. Eliott Oring and James Durham (Bloomington, Indiana, 1969), pp. 45-49. Brunvand's textbook is The Study of American Folklore, An Introduction (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968).

[2]Ronald L. Baker, "Folklore Courses and Programs in American Colleges and Universities," Journal of American Folklore, 84 (1971), 221-229.

[3]For examples of the use of these definitions, see Brunvand, The Study of American Folklore, p. 5; Henry Glassie, Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), pp. 1-17; and Dan Ben-Amos, "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context," Journal of American Folklore, 84 (1971), 3-15.

[4]Precedent for the nostalgic attitude toward folklore was provided by William J. Thoms, who coined the term "folklore" in 1846. His introduction of this neologism has been reprinted by Alan Dundes, ed., The Study of Folklore (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 4-6.

[5]Ralph Linton, "Nativistic Movements," in Reader in Comparative Religion, An Anthropological Approach, ed. William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt, 2nd edition (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 499.

[6]Eliot Wigginton, "A Reply to 'The Lesson of Foxfire,'" North Carolina Folklore Journal, 22 (1974), 36.

[7]"An Articulated English Program: A Hypothesis to Test," in Issues, Problems, & Approaches in the Teaching of English, ed. George Winchester Stone, Jr. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1961), pp. 235-236.

[8]Robert E. Spiller, "Literary History," in The Aims and Methods of Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures, ed. James Thorpe (New York: MLA, 1963), p. 50.

[9]Spiller, p. 49.

[10]Brunvand, The Study of American Folklore, pp. 226-241.

[11]Brunvand, The Study of American Folklore, p. 87.

[12]Ernest W. Baughman, Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), p. 266.

[13]William R. Bascom, "Four Functions of Folklore," Journal of American Folklore, 67 (1954), 333-349.

[14]Roger D. Abrahams, "Folklore and Literature as Performance," Journal of the Folklore Institute, 9 (1972), 75-94.

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