



THE IMPORTANCE OF BINARY OPPOSITION IN ENGLISH FOLKLORE

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the crucial role of binary opposition – a core structuralist concept – in the analysis of English folklore, myths, legends and fairy tales. Based on the theory of structuralism, it is emphasized that binarism is not only a factor constituting the text but also a means of encoding society’s moral, social, and cultural values, and transmitting them from generation to generation. Furthermore, this article clarifies that binary oppositions play a crucial role in English folklore for creating conflict, developing the plot, and explaining the structure of the world and its moral boundaries to the audience.

Introduction

Binary opposition is a fundamental structural concept that plays a crucial role in analyzing and understanding English folklore, myths, legends and fairy tales. It provides a foundational framework for constructing meaning, driving the narrative, and establishing moral or social codes. Besides, it is a fundamental concept in structuralism, most notably associated with the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. It posits that human thought organizes the world into pairs of opposing concepts to create meaning. In English folklore, these oppositions are not just literary devices, they are the foundational structures that drive narrative, define morality and reflect cultural anxieties.

In English folklore, binary opposition is important because it is the engine of the plot and the source of moral clarity:

Narrative structure and conflict: Folktales depend on conflict, which is often personified by binary opposites. These oppositions set up the main struggle that the hero must overcome. Examples: *good-evil, hero-villain* (Robin Hood-the Sheriff of Nottingham), *order-chaos*.

Character and Theme: It helps delineate characters sharply, making them immediately recognizable as “good” or “bad”. This clarity is essential for oral storytelling. Examples: *beautiful-ugly* (often linked to moral quality), *rich-poor* (Cinderella, Jack and the Beanstalk), *human-supernatural* (elves, fairies, or ghosts vs. mortal protagonists).

Moral and Social Coding: Folklore acts as a tool for teaching social values. Binary opposites allow the community to define what is desirable and what is taboo by showing the negative consequences of the “wrong” choice. Examples: *civilized-wild, obedience-disobedience* (which dictates the fate of a character), *life-death*.

In essence, binary opposition is the grammar of meaning in English folklore, providing the essential framework through which stories are told, values are transmitted and the world is understood.

It should be noted that binary oppositions are not only used to distinguish the text, but they also hold the following significant importance:

1) one of the most crucial functions of folklore is to resolve seemingly irresolvable contradictions. For instance, the rich vs. poor opposition is temporarily resolved through the “poor youth achieving wealth”, which, in turn, offers hope to the community.

2) by clearly defining oppositions, the listener gains the ability to quickly distinguish between the hero and the enemy or villain.

3) these oppositions serve as a simple “guidebook” that helps children and youth understand the world, risks, and social roles.

The legend of Robin Hood is one of the most beloved stories of the English people, and it derives its entire meaning from the struggle between contrasting pairs. *Justice-tyranny* serves as the central opposition of this legend. Robin Hood and his Merry Men’s primary goal is to overcome tyranny, restore justice, and help the poor. The actions of the Sheriff of Nottingham – namely raising taxes, imprisoning the poor, and torturing them – are examples of this tyranny. *Rich-poor* defines the socio-economic foundation of the legend. Robin Hood demonstrates this opposition by stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. He attempts to restore balance by ensuring a fair distribution of social resources. The territorial opposition of *forest-wilderness-city/civilization* determines where the hero operates. The forest is a place of hiding, freedom, and just law for Robin Hood, while the city represents official law, traps, and oppression. Here, the forest serves as the location for a new order, free from the corrupted laws of society.

The analysis demonstrates that binary opposition is not merely a literary technique but the structural backbone of English folklore. Drawing upon structural principles, particularly in the context of legends like Robin Hood, these contrasting pairs (such as justice-tyranny, rich-poor, and forest-city) provide the essential framework for narrative construction, conflict generation, and thematic depth.

CONCLUSION

Binary oppositions in English folklore are not merely a means of explanation but also a tool for regulation. They construct a mythical worldview in which good must always triumph over evil, and order must govern chaos. Furthermore, binary oppositions in English folklore not only structure the texts but also play a crucial role in reflecting and strengthening cultural values, social order, and worldview. By analyzing them, we can gain a deeper understanding of the fundamental beliefs and values of the English people, shaped over centuries.

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