

Roles of Siblings in Folktales

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the portrayal of siblings and sibling relationships in folktales. It focuses on tales from collections with either British or American cultural backgrounds that include siblings as main or secondary characters. The methodology in this research is strongly inspired by the study of sibling relationships in young children's literature conducted by Laurie Kramer, Sonia Noorman, and Renee Brockman in 1999. Folktales are analysed in terms of the birth order of main characters, their gender, and themes that characterise the relationships and behaviour of siblings. The structuralist framework of Vladimir Propp is employed to classify character functions, such as heroes, helpers, and villains, within the narratives. Furthermore, this article challenges, to some extent, certain traditional views regarding folktale characters, ultimately highlighting the importance of scholarly research into sibling dynamics in literature.

KEYWORDS

folktale, character type, siblings, birth order, structuralism

Introduction

During childhood, people often develop a deep affection for certain folktales that they may cherish even later in their adult lives. Generally thought to be highly beneficial for children, tales teach didactic and moral lessons, entertain, stimulate the imagination, and help children understand the world around them. In *The Uses of Enchantment* Bruno Bettelheim asserts that “nothing can be as enriching and satisfying to child and adult alike as the folk fairy tale.”¹ Siblings frequently appear in folktales, and the richness of topics proves the significance of this portrayal. Tales depicting sisters and brothers commonly incorporate features of sibling dynamics that resemble real-life relationships, which may include themes of sibling rivalry, betrayal, jealousy, cooperation, unity, support and loyalty. Examining tales about sisters and brothers may provide valuable insights into real sibling relationships and their depiction in narratives. Yet, siblings seem to have been neglected in the academic study of folktales. Despite the strong analytic potential, scholars seem more interested in individual heroes and symbols instead. This article has the ambition to address the gap by analysing the roles of siblings in selected folktales. The methodology for the research has been adapted from a 1999 study of siblings conducted by Laurie Kramer, Sonia Noorman, and Renee Brockman at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.²

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- 1 Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1976, New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 5.
 - 2 Laurie Kramer, Sonia Noorman, and Renee Brockman, “Representations of sibling relationships in young children's literature,” *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (1999).

Folktales and Fairy Tales

There is no fixed terminology for folk narratives, and terms like *folktale* and *fairy tale* are often used interchangeably. Nevertheless, scholars like Andrew Teverson and Jack Zipes emphasise that these two terms have slightly different meanings. Both Mary Beth Stein³ and Donald Haase⁴ argue that oral tradition is essential for folktales, while the term *fairy tale* refers to written tales. Stith Thompson challenges this distinction, however, claiming that “it is impossible to make a complete separation of the written and the oral tradition” since “stories have frequently been taken down from the lips of unlettered tale-tellers”⁵ before they have entered written collections. Teverson suggests that the blurred boundaries between the two forms may result in folktales being mislabelled as fairy tales in fairy tale collections,⁶ creating a snowball effect of more incorrectly labelled tales. For example, although “Cinderella” is frequently classified as a fairy tale, Alan Dundes notes that it has roots in oral tradition.⁷ Based on the discussion above, “Cinderella” should be categorised as a folktale.

Importantly, folktales are often perceived as a broader category than fairy tales. Unlike fairy tales, which are usually associated with magic and happy endings, Thompson asserts that folktales include “all forms of prose narrative, written or oral, which have come to be handed down through the years.”⁸ In other words, folktales serve as an umbrella term covering various subgenres, including stories classified as fairy tales. Folktales can thus be defined as narratives of a shorter length, which have been shared orally for generations and which display ordinary and rather stereotypical characters usually in fictional settings, who, by their cleverness, bravery, luck, or magical assistance, are able to overcome challenges.

Structuralist approach to folktales

People tend to organise the world into categories to make sense of it. This tendency to search for underlying structures can be seen in all fields of human endeavour, including natural sciences and humanities such as linguistics and literature. In folktale studies, researchers have identified recurring patterns such as plot structure, setting and character types, which enable them to examine the structure from various viewpoints, ranging from the classification of narrative types to the analysis of narrative functions and symbolism.

In the late 19th century, Finnish folklorist Julius Krohn developed the historic-geographic method to study the origins and distribution of traditional songs. His method of breaking tales into units was further embraced by his son, Kaarle Krohn, who applied it to folktales. Antti Aarne, a student of the Krohns, followed the same method of comparative folkloristics and in 1910 created the practical catalogue of thematic types *Tale Type Index*. This index was translated to English in

3 Mary B. Stein, “Folklore and Fairy Tales,” in *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, ed. Jack Zipes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 167.

4 Donald Haase, ed., *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), 322.

5 Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (New York: The Dryden Press, 1946), 5.

6 Andrew Teverson, *Fairy Tale* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 20.

7 Alan Dundes, ed., *Cinderella: A Casebook* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), ix.

8 Thompson, *The Folktale*, 4.

1928 by Stith Thompson, who later revised and expanded it. In addition, Thompson compiled the influential *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, which the American folklorist Richard M. Dorson described as Thompson's "landmark work."⁹ In 2004, German scholar Hans-Jörg Uther further enlarged the index of tales, shifting focus away from the historic-geographic method toward a more inclusive and comprehensive classification system known as the Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index (ATU). It is built upon all the accumulated data and covers over two thousand tale types.

Despite its practicality and wide use by the early 20th century, the folktale index system was criticised by some researchers. The influential structuralist Vladimir Propp, for example, found fault with Aarne and Thompson's catalogue of folktale types for its superficiality, partial inconsistency, and focus on external motifs rather than the underlying narrative structure and functions. Propp's interest lied in the typically Russian tales, especially those that the ATU classification system categorises as Tales of Magic. Based on his analysis, Propp made three important observations. He postulated that the functions of characters "serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled," the number of functions is limited, and their sequence is always identical.¹⁰ In other words, identical actions can be attributed to various characters, and the order in which the actions follow is given. All functions are not necessarily present in the story, although, as Propp asserts: "The absence of certain functions does not change the order of the rest."¹¹ He then proceeded to identify a total of 31 functions that characters typically perform in a specific sequence in a folktale. Within these functions, seven *spheres of action* and, accordingly, types of characters (*dramatis personae*) are recognised: the villain, the donor, the helper, the princess (the sought-for person), the dispatcher, the hero, and the false hero.¹² The villain, for instance, initiates the conflict that leads to the hero's quest, struggle, and eventual victory. The donor and helper assist the hero, often providing magical aid, while the false hero attempts to take credit for the hero's achievements.

Perhaps the most significant *dramatis personae* is the *hero*. Propp distinguishes between two types: victimized heroes and seekers. The hero is the character who "either directly suffers from the action of the villain in the compilation (the one who senses some kind of lack), or who agrees to liquidate the misfortune or lack of another person."¹³ A *victimized hero* must actively try to resolve the injustice done to them and punish the villain. If another character undertakes the journey to save the victimized hero, that person would be considered the *seeker hero*, and the individual in need would lose their hero status. Propp also notes that although these character types are distinct, their roles can shift throughout the story, and some actions may be absent completely.

Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* remains an extremely influential work of 20th-century structuralist research. It has received both praise and criticism. A prominent American folklorist, Alan Dundes favoured Propp's approach over the Aarne-Thompson system. Regarding the index of tale types, Dundes recognised its shortcomings, such as its Eurocentric nature, as well

9 Richard M. Dorson, "Stith Thompson (1885-1976)," *The Journal of American Folklore* 90, no. 355 (January-March 1977): 4.

10 Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2nd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), 21-22.

11 Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 22.

12 Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 79-80.

13 Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 50.

as certain inaccuracies in classifications. Dundes also drew attention to the issue of censorship, since some taboo topics were simply omitted in the index.¹⁴ But it was Propp's morphological framework that appealed to him, which Dundes applied to North American Indian folktales, merging Propp's approach with the theory and terminology of Kenneth L. Pike. In his 1964 article, Dundes describes how he adopted, for example, Pike's term *motifeme* to refer to Propp's function. Combining the two structural models allowed him to "discern a number of clear-cut structural patterns,"¹⁵ disproving the hypothesis that American Indian folktales are composed of unpredictable motifs.

Unlike Dundes, the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss did not consider Propp's methodology efficient. According to Teverson, Lévi-Strauss was among the first theoreticians to criticise the model.¹⁶ The subject of his criticism was primarily Propp's treatment of form as opposed to content. Lévi-Strauss argues that by giving form prime importance and seeing content as an arbitrary part of the tale with only insignificant value, Propp positions himself as a formalist rather than a structuralist.¹⁷ Although Lévi-Strauss's ambitious work to some extent resembles Propp's typology, he focused mainly on myths. Tyson claims Lévi-Strauss was particularly interested in structural similarities among myths from different cultures, with his primary aim to discover if seemingly distinct myths from all over the world were actually just different versions of the same one.¹⁸ Furthermore, as Lévi-Strauss highlights the relationships between elements within a larger system, focusing on underlying structures across stories and cultures, his approach can be considered paradigmatic. Propp's emphasis on the linear progression of narrative elements can be, contrarily, described as a syntagmatic approach.

Methodology

A research team headed by Laurie Kramer, clinical psychologist and the founding director of the UIUC Family Resiliency Center, rank among the few scholars who have emphasized sibling relationships in their work. For their study "Representations of Sibling Relationships in Young Children's Literature," the researchers collected a sample of 261 children's books under the subject headings of sibling relationships, sibling love, sibling rivalry, sibling jealousy, and brothers and sisters. A chosen work fit into their sample if it could be identified as a picture book or a book for early readers, portrayed an existing sibling relationship, involved characters over two years of age, and could be easily obtainable, for instance, from a public library or a bookstore. The next part of their methodology involved the description of each book based on the following categories: the gender of the main character, the birth order of the main character, the kind of the main character (human, animal, or other), and the importance of the sibling relationship to the plot of the story.

14 Alan Dundes, "The Motif-Index and the Tale Type Index: A Critique," *Journal of Folklore Research* 34, no. 3 (September-December 1997): 195-198.

15 Alan Dundes, "Structural Typology in North American Indian Folktales," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 42, no. 3 (Autumn 1986): 418.

16 Teverson, *Fairy Tale*, 104.

17 Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Structure and Form: Reflections on a Work by Vladimir Propp," in *Theory and History of Folklore*, trans. Monique Layton, ed. Anatoly Liberman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 178-179.

18 Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: A User-friendly Guide*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 204.

The team then assigned each book one or more thematic codes based on six categories reflecting current conceptualisations of the quality of the sibling relationship: “(1) warmth and affection; (2) involvement; (3) conflict management and relationship maintenance; (4) agonism; (5) control; and (6) rivalry/competition.”¹⁹ Generally speaking, the first three of these were described as positive themes and the other three as negative. The primary objective of their work was to examine to what degree positive and negative themes of sibling relationships were portrayed in their sample of children’s books so that this classification could help educators identify books that “portray sibling relationships in the most adaptive ways.”²⁰ In addition, a section of the research was concerned with how parents were represented, especially their response to sibling conflicts. The methodology used to examine the parental reactions is not essential to the research conducted for the present article.

Since this analysis deals with folktales, a slightly different set of criteria had to be applied. To be selected, the folktales needed both to include siblings and originate (or at least have a long tradition) in English-speaking countries. There was no requirement for the siblings to be key characters in the story. For this research, folktales were gathered from four collections: *English Fairy Tales* by Joseph Jacobs,²¹ *English Fairy Tales* by Flora Annie Steel,²² *Scottish Folk and Fairy Tales* by Gordon Jarvie, and William Bernard McCarthy’s *Cinderella in America: A Book of Folk and Fairy Tales*. Although the titles suggest the origin of the collected tales, it is important to explain that McCarthy’s collection does not represent tales of Native Americans. McCarthy stresses that his collection “limits itself to the tales derived directly or indirectly from the repertoire of European ancestors.”²³ Nevertheless, the collection meets the criteria for analysis since, as McCarthy says, it presents tales that are “distinctively American,” focusing on “storytellers whose families had already been on [the American] continent for generations at the time each particular tale was collected.”²⁴ McCarthy’s collection is thus somewhat different from the others because it consists primarily of authentic tales as they were uttered by “the original storytellers”²⁵ rather than retellings.

Steel’s anthology comprises retold tales, many of which have already appeared in other works. For instance, tales such as “The Rose-Tree,” “Cap o’Rushes,” or “Molly Whuppie” can be found in an almost identical form in Jacob’s and Steel’s collections. Hence, these folktales were entered into my sample only once. On the other hand, the story of the “Three Little Pigs,” which also appeared in more than one anthology, varied significantly in some respects and was consequently treated as three separate tales. To avoid potential errors and lack of coverage, another alteration had to be made regarding three tales that tell a story of more than just one set of siblings. As it is unlikely that each type of sibling relationship or the number of siblings is the same, these tales

19 Laurie Kramer, Sonia Noorman, and Renee Brockman, “Representations of sibling relationships in young children’s literature,” *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (1999): 559.

20 Kramer, Noorman, Brockman, “Representations of sibling relationships,” 557.

21 As presented in a 2012 edition containing all tales from both volumes of Jacobs’s collections, i.e., *English Fairy Tales* (1890) and *More English Fairy Tales* (1893).

22 A 1962 reprint of the original 1918 publication.

23 William Bernard McCarthy, ed., *Cinderella in America: A Book of Folk and Fairy Tales* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 8.

24 McCarthy, *Cinderella in America*, 13.

25 McCarthy, *Cinderella in America*, 15.

were each entered twice. Thus, while the number of tales compiled for this research was 61, by entering three of these stories into the corpus twice, I finally worked with a sample of 64 tales.

Similarly to the study conducted by Kramer, Noorman, and Brockman, gender, birth order, type of the main character, and importance of sibling relationship to the story were examined. In addition, the siblings' blood relations are considered in order to see whether the relationship is in any way influenced by the fact that siblinghood is more or less incidental. My evaluation of whether the relationship between siblings is significant or insignificant is based on the following: to be considered significant, some interaction must take place between the siblings, or an action described suggesting a filial or acrimonious bond. If there is no exchange between the siblings, it can be said that the relationship is insignificant to the plot. This is commonly related to tales that describe a sequence in which siblings take turns trying their luck at achieving a goal, or to tales classified as the ATU 923 such as *Love Like Salt*, in which daughters separately tell their father how much they love him but there is no interaction between the sisters, making it impossible to define their relationship.

The relative negativity or positivity of the themes were assessed in the tales in which sibling relationships were deemed significant. Taking into account the fact that folktales deal with archetypal characters and, as Bettelheim highlights, all situations are simplified unless some details are pivotal,²⁶ the occurrence of both negative and positive themes in one tale is highly improbable since character development cannot be expected. On the other hand, from the original research by Kramer, Noorman, and Brockman it can be assumed that literature for early readers depicts characters as individuals with unique personalities, not just types, as is common for folktales. This makes it easier to discern negative and positive themes within a story.

Given that positive and negative themes may be indeed observed in folktales, the six categories established by Kramer, Noorman, and Brockman seem too broad in relation to folktales and should be narrowed and modified. To make it more efficient, the positive theme category includes affection, and involvement, while the negative themes consist of two subcategories: agonism and rivalry/competition. The first type, affection, includes tales in which the characters show love to a sibling by rescuing them, cooperating with them, giving them advice, or simply expressing a loving relationship by hugging, kissing, etc. Involvement is considered in folktales where siblings are companions to one another. The first category of negative themes, agonism, designates situations in which the siblings argue, deceive and/or lie to each other, ostracise, mock or betray one another, or where their disputes climax into an intentional killing of a sibling. It is important to note that, in many folktales, good and evil characteristics do not describe the behaviour of all siblings. As Bettelheim explains, "the figures in fairy tales are not ambivalent, good and bad at the same time, as we all are in reality," so, in these stories, "a person is either good or bad, nothing in between."²⁷ Once any indication of ill will is expressed by at least one sibling towards the other, it is evaluated as a negative type in this research. The second category, rivalry/competition, includes folktales in which siblings compete against each other in a task or are jealous of a sibling.

²⁶ Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 8.

²⁷ Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 9.

The overall purpose of this research differs from the one presented by Kramer, Noorman, and Brockman, as it aims to examine what themes prevail in folktales and whether a pattern can be delineated in the depiction of siblings regarding their birth order, gender, and chances of success.

Birth Order and Gender

As suggested, 61 folktales met the criteria for analysis, but due to multiple sets of siblings in 3 instances, the total number analysed was 64. The first step was to focus on the type and gender of the protagonist, although the main character or their gender is not always clear in the story. Indeterminate main characters can be found in the tales classified ATU 720, such as “The Rose-Tree,” “La Madre Cruel,” and “Louis and Louise.” In these tales, none of the siblings seems to perform heroic acts in the traditional sense, so it is difficult to distinguish the protagonist. There are at least three other instances of tales with no clear main character. One of the tales in which multiple siblings appear, “The Babes in the Wood,” tells a story about dying parents who wish that their two children be raised by their uncle. Their father’s brother, however, wants to inherit the parents’ money and lets the children die. Considering that both children are in the same situation and appear rather powerless, neither of them is more important than the other. Another case of an undistinguishable main character is the tale “Children and the Ogress,” in which, unlike in the previous example, the children take action and contribute equally to the success at the story’s end. The last tale with no clear protagonist analysed here is called “The Three Brothers.” Although the title may imply that one of the brothers is more instrumental to the plot than the others, this is not the case, as each receives a valuable gift without performing any exceptional deed. Moreover, distinguishing the main character in the case of tales about good- and bad-natured siblings (ATU 480 *Kind and Unkind Girls*) may also be tricky, with those who act kindly generally classified as the main character since positive traits are preferred in folktales. In my results, 7 out of the 64 tales (10.94%) were found to have no clear protagonist in relation to the siblings featured.

One tale with no gender assigned to the characters is the story of “Three Little Pigs,” as collected in *English Fairy Tales* by Flora Annie Steel. Although Steel uses the masculine pronoun to refer to the pigs, there is no direct mention of whether the pigs are brothers, or the pronoun is used as a general pronominal reference. According to Fischer, it is common for the sex of animal characters in folktales to remain ambiguous in some cultures.²⁸ In other words, there is a possibility that Steel used the pronoun *he* without any specific gender of the pig in mind, thus the gender of the pigs in this version of the folktale is not considered in the present research. The tales involving three little pigs in the category ATU 124 are the only examples in the sample in which the siblings are not humans.

The gender of main characters is mentioned in 56 instances. Female main characters were found to occur in almost half of the selected tales (31; 48.44%), whereas male protagonists appear in 25 (39.06%). The traits of the female characters who are deemed more important than their siblings in the chosen folktales can be mostly described as positive. The protagonists are clever,

28 John L. Fischer, “The Sociopsychological Analysis of Folktales,” *Current Anthropology* 4, no. 3 (June 1963): 255.

kind, beautiful, brave, and selfless. Considering that in traditional fairy tales, female heroines are stereotypically passive, in the examined folktales, passivity was found in the female main characters in only 4 tales. For instance, in tales like “How Death Came to Ireland” and in the first part of “The Bird of Truth, or the Three Treasures,” one of the sisters can consider herself the luckiest since she marries a king, but otherwise no direct, active undertaking is performed on their part. The present research shows that wit, bravery, and kindness are much more vital factors than physical beauty in most tales. A specific example of this is the tale “Kate Crackernuts.” Kate is not described as a particularly beautiful girl, yet she manages to break the spell put on her stepsister and a prince through her wit and bravery. Male heroes in folktales, on the other hand, are expected to be endowed with wit and courage. Kuykendal and Sturm describe these stereotypical expectations of characters: “fairy tale men are powerful agents of their own destiny.”²⁹ Indeed, active heroes can be frequently found in the selected tales, too. Apart from bravery and cleverness, kindness and selflessness are also recurrent traits, as found in “The Flower of Olivar” and “The Three Brothers and the Hag.”

In terms of birth order, it is essential to consider what number of siblings is the most common in folktales and then examine whether the youngest, middle, or eldest child plays the most significant role. Numbers, in general, are very important in folktales, particularly the number three. Often, a hero faces three challenges, receives three gifts, or, significantly, is one of three siblings. In describing the symbolism of the number three, David Fontana comments on how it “underlies all aspects of creation: birth, life, death; past present, future; mind, body, spirit.”³⁰ According to J.C. Cooper, the number three also “carries the authority of accumulated effect, once or twice being possible coincidence, but three times carries certainty and power.”³¹ Put differently, the number three presents a memorable symbolic pattern of completeness and perfection which appears as often in the everyday lives of individuals as in folklore. Bruno Bettelheim, who analyses numbers in folktales from the psychological perspective, suggests that children may easily identify with the third sibling because that is how they see themselves in relation to their parents.³²

Table 1. Number of Siblings in Folktales

Number of siblings	Occurrence	Percentage
2	27	42.19%
3	33	51.56%
4	3	4.69%
5 and more	1	1.56%
all	64	100%

29 Leslee Farish Kuykendal, and Brian W. Sturm, “We Said Feminist Fairy Tales, Not Fractured Fairy Tales!” *Children and Libraries* 5, no. 3 (winter 2007): 39.

30 David Fontana, *The Secret Language of Symbols: A Visual Key to Symbols and Their Meaning* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2003), 104.

31 J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1987), 114.

32 Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 106.

Table 1 shows that the most common number of siblings in the sample is three, which does not seem surprising, considering the popularity of the number mentioned above. Three siblings can be found in 33 instances, two siblings in 27, four in 3 cases, with more than four siblings appearing in only one tale.

Many folktales feature siblings of the same gender. This allows for a clearer and more direct comparison of character traits, behaviours, and moral decisions. Since folktale characters are typically simple and straightforward, they may help children process their own emotions. Bettelheim describes how folktales not only isolate and separate “the disparate and confusing aspects of the child’s experience into opposites,” but they also project these properties onto the various characters.³³ Alison Lurie agrees and adds that tales often show the consequences of making different choices. Lurie illustrates this with an example of the fairy godmother and the witch whom she claims to be two versions of the same woman.³⁴ The actions of siblings in folktales demonstrate how different behaviours lead to differing outcomes, with the use of siblings of the same gender enabling these contrasts to be made more directly than if brothers and sisters were featured in the story. Interestingly, when it comes to stepsiblings, there is a strong tendency to portray siblings of the same gender. For example, tales like “Kate Crackernuts,” “Goldenstar,” “The Mermaid,” “Rawhead and Bloodybones,” and “The Three Heads of the Well” incorporate stepsisters, while “Sam Patra and His Brothers” is a folktale about three brothers. Sometimes, combinations of brothers and sisters are presented. Rather than focusing on contrasting actions and outcomes, folktales about siblings of different genders may put emphasis on other characteristics such as cooperation, as featured in “Hansel and Gretel.”

The results of the analysis concerning gender are presented in the following table:

Table 2. Gender of Siblings

Gender	Occurrence	Percentage
females	25	39.68%
males	16	25.40%
combination	22	34.92%
all	63	100%

As explained above, gender was not evaluated in one version of “Three Little Pigs.” *Table 2* reveals that sisters are represented in 25 cases, brothers in 16 out of 63, while the remaining 22 tales feature combinations of brothers and sisters. As for the combinations, one brother and one sister appear most often (12; 54.55%), with the next frequent combination of siblings being two brothers and one sister (4; 18.18%), and two sisters and one brother (3; 13.64%).

In terms of the birth order of the main characters, it is not always clearly stated who is the youngest or the eldest, although sometimes this is implied by the use of expressions like “the

³³ Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 75.

³⁴ Alison Lurie, *Not in Front of the Grown-Ups: Subversive Children’s Literature* (London: Sphere Books Ltd., 1991), 40.

third brother,” “the second boy,” and so on. Such description is used in “Three Brothers and the Hag” and “The Fairy with Hair as Fair as Oatstraw,” thus birth order is regarded as given and is counted as such in the results of this paper. The number of tales with an unidentifiable order of birth of siblings is 27. The results concerning the majority of the remaining tales ($n=37$) reveal the prevalence of the youngest siblings as protagonists (28; 75.68%). Importantly, siblings may not always be the heroes in folktales. They may fulfil other roles, such as helpers or sought-for persons. For example, in the tale “John the Bear,” John marries the youngest princess, quite conveniently, the most beautiful of three sisters; in “Snow Bella,” the youngest of three brothers marries the girl. Yet, in these examples it can be said that one of the siblings gains more from the situation and is more important to the story. Additionally, as suggested earlier, children may find the youngest sibling most relatable. Obviously, featuring the youngest as protagonists may carry many other narrative and other implications not examined here.

In the past, eldest sons often benefited significantly more than their younger siblings in keeping with the practice of *primogeniture*, which Zouheir Jamoussi defines as the “custom which allowed the elder son to inherit the whole family estate.”³⁵ Other children in the family would be excluded from the inheritance of land, titles and offices, which conferred considerable economic advantages, social standing, and political power to the eldest child. Younger siblings, on the other hand, were to some degree left to their own devices. Younger sons, in particular, often had to seek their livelihood elsewhere, and daughters’ fortunes were generally tied to their marriage prospects. The system led to great disparities in wealth and opportunity among siblings. As Carolyne Larrington suggests, “in a pattern typical of folk-tale, the youngest achieves most fame, compensating for his lack of advantage under normal primogeniture rules.”³⁶ Traditionally depicted as foolish, irresponsible or selfish, the older siblings in folktales are usually inferior to their more resourceful and better-mannered younger siblings.

Nevertheless, the eldest siblings are represented in 7 folktales ($n=37$, 18.92%), and the middle ones are highly underrepresented, since no tale portrays the middle child as the main character. According to sociologist Jeannie S. Kidwell, middleborns are also often overlooked in real life. She says that for the middle children, “there is no uniqueness, and there is no inherent reason for the middleborn to receive specialized attention or recognition from parents.”³⁷ After observing the middle siblings in folktales, it can be said that Kidwell’s theory that middleborns seem to lack uniqueness is also true for the characters of the tales examined. As secondary characters in folktales, middle children are commonly linked to their older siblings, for instance, by repeating the same mistakes or plotting with them against the youngest. There seems to be no folktale in which a middleborn accomplishes something on their own, at least not in this sample of selected tales.

Two tales that are not included in the categories mentioned above represent siblings of the same age. In “Barney McCabe,” the children are twins, but in “Sam Patra and His Brothers,” the three boys are not even blood-related, despite being born on the same day. As narrated in the tale, “when they grew older, the three children called themselves brothers because they looked

35 Zouheir Jamoussi, *Primogeniture and Entail in England: A Survey of Their History and Representation in Literature* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 2.

36 Carolyne Larrington, *Brothers and Sisters in Medieval European Literature* (Suffolk: York Medieval Press, 2015), 63-64.

37 Jeannie S. Kidwell, “The Neglected Birth Order: Middleborns,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 44, no. 1 (1982): 227.

so much alike.”³⁸ To summarise the findings, *Table 3* shows the representation of siblings in the selected folktales based on the birth order of the main character.

Table 3. Birth Order of the Protagonist

The order of birth	Occurrences	Percentage
unclear	27	42.19%
younger/the youngest	28	43.75%
the oldest	7	10.94%
the same	2	3.13%
all	64	100%

Interestingly, most folktales about stepsiblings tend to ignore the birth order of protagonists, focusing directly on the characters’ behaviours and the negative consequences of the remarriage of parents. The tales are usually concerned with the maltreatment of children at the hands of their stepmothers. The father often fails to register the poor treatment, sometimes only realising the child’s sufferings much later. Therefore, in tales of this type, the age of characters is not instrumental.

For comparison, findings of research conducted by Kramer, Noorman, and Brockman reveal that males are slightly more represented than females in terms of characters.³⁹ Contrastingly, in our sample of folktales, the majority of main characters are females, 48.44%, while males are represented in 39.06% of tales. In terms of birth order, the researchers observed that the youngest children were portrayed more frequently than middle and older siblings: “Of the 226 books that had a main character, 95 (42%) were oldest children, 18 (8%) were middle, and 113 (50%) were youngest children.”⁴⁰ Even though it has been found that in the selected folktales, the youngest children are in most cases considered most important, too, the differences in the representation of oldest and youngest children are much more prominent since the youngest siblings are represented in 28 tales out of 37 (75.68%), whereas the eldest children are portrayed in 7 instances (18.92%), and middle children in no tales at all. Concerning the middleborn, Kramer, Noorman, and Brockman highlight that “characters who were middle children are under-represented in children’s literature.”⁴¹ As suggested above, this lack of representation of middleborns is also apparent in folktales.

Themes

Folktales that deal with sibling relationships provide a rich source of various themes. The analysis revealed that themes can be observed in 43 folktales ($n=64$), with a total number of 61 identified in the sample, indicating that some folktales embody more themes. While the size of the sample

38 McCarthy, *Cinderella in America*, 415.

39 Kramer, Noorman, Brockman, “Representations of sibling relationships,” 563.

40 Kramer, Noorman, Brockman, “Representations of sibling relationships,” 563.

41 Kramer, Noorman, Brockman, “Representations of sibling relationships,” 555.

does not allow the analysis of all tales, sibling relationships are illustrated through a wide range of examples incorporating the theoretical framework of the Russian structuralist Vladimir Propp where possible.

Positive sibling relationships in folktales often showcase themes of loyalty, cooperation, and mutual support. Such themes, however, seem to be much more subtle and less memorable than the negative ones. In the sample of selected tales, paradoxically, positive themes prevail (65.57%). Although affection may sometimes be demonstrated by simple gestures which may seem superfluous for the storyline as such, the way in which the siblings interact is significant for this research, as it illustrates how siblings feel towards each other.

An example of an affectionate sibling relationship can be found in the tale “Jujuyana, or the Mist of No Return.” In this tale, a young man named Juan is cursed to forget his love, Jujuyana, as soon as someone embraces him. He wants to introduce Jujuyana to his family, but his sister surprises him with a hug from behind, causing him to forget all about his girl. According to Proppian theory, if it were not for the hug, the tale could have already concluded with a wedding. Although the sister expresses her love for her brother, she unknowingly becomes a catalyst for another series of challenges for Juan and Jujuyana to overcome. Despite activating the curse, Juan’s sister does not fall into any category of characters introduced by Propp, considering she cannot be perceived as a villain, hero, sought-for person, false hero, dispatcher, helper or donor.

Nevertheless, Propp’s archetypes can be found in many folktales portraying positive sibling relationships. One of the siblings is usually the hero, while the others may take on various roles, such as helpers or sought-for persons. In tales in which affection is shown through cooperation, siblings commonly become helpers to aid the hero. This can be found, for instance, in one of the versions of “Three Little Pigs” collected by McCarthy, in “Mr. Fox,” “Katie and Johnnie,” “The Children and the Ogress, and “Sam Patra and His Brothers.” Quite regularly, these tales also depict sibling involvement, for the siblings are often companions. It is important to note that siblings may interact only briefly, at the beginning or end of the folktale. To provide an example, in tales “Three Little Pigs” and “Mr. Fox,” siblings work together to defeat the villain, but their relationship is not apparent until the very end of the story.

Two tales that are fully dependent on the relationship between siblings are “Katie and Johnnie” and “The Children and the Ogress,” both belonging to ATU 327A *Hansel and Gretel*. They highlight cooperative behaviour, yet they cannot be considered identical. In “Katie and Johnnie,” the boy is the hero and, in a sense, the leader, while his sister takes on the role of a helper, mostly following Johnnie’s instructions. Contrastingly, in “The Children and the Ogress,” it is difficult to determine whether both siblings are heroes or helpers, since they take every step of their rescue together.

In “Sam Patra and His Brothers,” the bond between siblings is so strong that they cannot live without each other. Sam Patra, Sylvius and Lazillia are not brothers by birth, but they are inseparable. Nevertheless, since Sam Patra’s actions make him more important than the other two, he is the hero. When a giant comes to take revenge, the brothers join Sam Patra in the fight to defeat him, proclaiming that the three of them are “exactly alike,”⁴² with the three young men going on to

42 McCarthy, *Cinderella in America*, 417.

marry three sisters. Even though the marriage may signify Propp's final function, the tale does not end here, as after some time Sylvius falls ill and dies, followed by Lazillia, who commits suicide. Sam Patra, who initially believed himself a bit different from the other two, realises he is not, and he decides to join them by shooting himself with an arrow from Sylvius. This rather gloomy ending is unusual, considering that most of the tales conclude with a happy ending. However, it shows an extraordinary bond between siblings.

Apart from helpers and heroes, employing other Proppian archetypes can help demonstrate an affectionate sibling relationship. Some characters may find themselves in trouble and become sought-for persons who need to be rescued by their heroic siblings. In the sample of tales we can find a rich representation of this type. Specifically, tales like "The Red Ettin," "Childe Rowland," "The Enchanted Sisters," "The Laidly Worm of Spindleston Heugh," and the second part of "The Bird of Truth, or the Three Treasures" focus on siblings who overcome challenges to save their sisters or brothers.

In "The Red Ettin," "Childe Rowland," and "The Bird of Truth or the Three Treasures," it is partially the character's own fault that they are in danger. They often violate an interdiction, as they fail to answer some questions, cannot resist a temptation, or disobey when instructed to do something, resulting in their imprisonment or enchantment. The hero finds out about the misfortune of their sibling or siblings through various means. In "The Red Ettin," a boy who goes out into the world leaves a knife for his brother to see how he is doing⁴³ and in the other two tales, it is simply the fact that siblings do not return which prompts the hero to embark on the journey. Nevertheless, the rescue mission is usually not the hero's only or even primary goal. The protagonists commonly succeed in a particular task their siblings failed to accomplish, earning more than they initially intended. For example, in "The Red Ettin," the hero saves his brother alongside a beautiful princess that he later marries, while in "The Bird of Truth or the Three Treasures" the heroine obtains three magical objects, rescues her brothers and, in addition, contributes significantly to the reunion with their parents. The motivations of Childe Rowland are different because the rescue of his siblings is his only intention.

The tale "The Laidly Worm of Spindleston Heugh" from Jacob's collection does not incorporate turn-taking, and it is not the sought-for person's own fault that they find themselves cursed. A cruel stepmother in this folktale is jealous of her husband's daughter, Princess Margaret. She says, "I'll soon put an end to her beauty,"⁴⁴ and proceeds to cast Margaret under her spell, transforming her into the monstrous Laidly Worm. The only person who can break the spell is the princess's brother, Childe Wynd. Having discovered what has happened, he rushes to his sister's aid and battles the witch in her attempts to stop him. The queen's powers have limits, so after a certain distance, Childe Wynd can easily break the curse by giving his sister three kisses. Ultimately, the witch turns into an ugly toad as her punishment.

Up to this point, the analysis has presented tales portraying existing relationships between siblings. Contrastingly, in "The Enchanted Sisters," a boy sets out to find his three older sisters who he has never met. He successfully locates them, but they advise him to leave, for their animal

43 Joseph Jacobs, *English Fairy Tales* (Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012), 63.

44 Jacobs, *English Fairy Tales*, 85.

husbands would hurt him. The hero persists and enjoys spending time with his sisters and their husbands when they are in their human form. When the time comes for the husbands to transform back into dangerous animals, he leaves, receiving three magical objects from them to help him in times of need. After his departure, he is forced to use the gifts, by which he breaks the enchantment of his sisters' husbands and rescues a beautiful girl. The hero marries her, and together with his sisters and brothers-in-law reunites with their mother.

Importantly, not all folktales portray sibling relationships in a favourable light. Since ancient times, tales have explored topics such as sibling conflicts, jealousy, competition, and betrayals. According to Amy T. Peterson and David J. Dunworth, perhaps the best-known tale focused on sibling rivalry is the biblical story of Cain and Abel about two brothers that are so different that "one felt the need to kill the other."⁴⁵ Folktales also sometimes incorporate killings and attempted killings, while themes such as jealousy caused by the contrasting natures of siblings are also very common. In the sample, 34.43% of tales deal with negative themes.

Agonistic behaviour can be observed in the tales "The Black Kitty," "Assipattle and the Mester Stoorworm," and "Polly, Nancy, and Muncimeg," all of which feature older siblings that tease, mock or ostracise the protagonist. For example, when Assipattle's brothers come home from work, "they would push him about and tease him,"⁴⁶ and in "Polly, Nancy, and Muncimeg" and "The Black Kitty," the protagonist's older siblings try to stop them from coming with them to seek their fortunes. What these protagonists have in common is that they can be called simpletons. Their siblings and sometimes their parents believe them to be lacking in a certain area such as wit or discipline. Yet, despite their naivety and doubts about their capabilities, these characters prove to everyone that they are in fact courageous and, as described by Bettelheim, "superior to those who think little of [them]."⁴⁷ They become unexpected heroes and, as a reward, each of them marries a member of the royal family. Although the older siblings in such tales do not treat the younger ones well, they do not harm them to the extent that a villain, in a traditional sense, would, so they do not fit into Propp's descriptions of a villain.

Jealousy is one of the most frequent negative themes in folktales. The tales in the category ATU 480 *The Kind and the Unkind Girls* frequently illustrate this theme, focusing on the contrasting personalities of siblings and jealousy, which stems from the success of one of the sibling. In the sample of folktales, while there are numerous examples of jealousy in the tales classified ATU 480, the relationship between siblings is important only in "Rawhead and Bloodybones," "The Three Heads of the Well," "The Two Sisters," and "Goldenstar." In each of these tales, a kind girl sets out first because she gets mistreated at home. She seeks her fortune, or she may be tasked by her stepmother and stepsister to bring back a particular object as in "Rawhead and Bloodybones" and "Goldenstar." In these tales, the stepsister takes on the role of a dispatcher. On their journey, the heroines treat everyone they encounter nicely, for which they are rewarded. Upon discovering their sister's fortune, the mean girls, also commonly described as ugly, become jealous and try to mimic their sister's journey, failing miserably. Consequently, they are punished for their bad behaviour.

45 Amy T. Peterson, and David J. Dunworth, *Mythology in Our Midst: A Guide to Cultural References* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004), 163.

46 Gordon Jarvie, *Scottish Folk and Fairy Tales* (London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1997), 107.

47 Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 103.

Furthermore, jealous siblings who act as villains can be found in “Binnorie,” and the first part of “The Birth of Truth, or the Three Treasures.” While the first tale leads to the sibling’s death, the second is more complicated, as it gets interrupted by a different storyline, although the sibling is eventually saved. In “Binnorie,” the reason for jealousy is the interest of two sisters in the same gentleman, while in the first part of “The Birth of Truth, or the Three Treasures” two older sisters are jealous of their younger sister’s happiness. To harm her, they switch her children for puppies and lie to her husband, who punishes his wife by burying her from the neck down. All these actions can be described as acts of villainy on the sisters’ part. Only after the abandoned children complete their own adventure is the injustice done is recognised, and the two wicked sisters face the consequences of their villainy.

Betrayal is another powerful negative theme in folktales. Tales which incorporate sibling betrayal include “The Mermaid,” “The Deserted Children,” “Little Red Nightcap,” and “The Flower of Olivar.” To apply Proppian character types, the two former tales portray one sibling as a villain and the second as a hero, whereas the latter two involve brothers as false heroes. Relatively often, sibling betrayal may climax into the intentional killing or attempted killing of a sibling. The disobedient sister in “The Deserted Children” puts her brother John in danger by violating an interdiction, and although the boy saves himself, lets the misdeeds of his sister pass and allows her to become a maid of his royal bride, she once again turns against him, greedily accepting money for his murder.⁴⁸ After his death, John flies to heaven and his sister is punished by going to hell.

Sometimes characters are motivated by the idea of receiving recognition and rewards for the achievements of their sibling, the true hero. In these cases, the reward-driven siblings go so far as to kill the hero to ensure nobody is there to prevent them from receiving praise. In Propp’s terminology, the pretentious siblings are called false heroes, and their role may often blend with the villain’s functions. In the sample of collected tales, “The Flower of Olivar” and “The Little Red Nightcap” clearly illustrate this negative theme and sibling roles. Unlike the first tale, in which the older brothers are forgiven, those in “The Little Red Nightcap” must face the consequences of their actions.

Additionally, it is important to consider the methodology and findings from the original research conducted by Kramer, Noorman, and Brockman. This analysis revealed that the representation of positive themes is almost twice as numerous as the category of negative themes in the selected folktales. In addition, in our sample, affection often seems to be demonstrated by simple gestures, while negative sibling relationships are commonly the driving force of the plot. The following table summarises the findings:

Table 4. Summary of Sibling Relationship Themes Identified in Folktales (n=43)

Positive themes	Frequency	Percentage of Total Themes
Affection	28	45.9%
Involvement	12	19.67%

⁴⁸ McCarthy, *Cinderella in America*, 290.

Total Positive	40	65.57%
Negative themes		
Agonism	14	22.95%
Rivalry/Competition	7	11.48%
Total Negative	21	34.43%

Since the results in *Table 4* do not distinguish between tales portraying relationships between biological siblings and tales about half- and stepsiblings, *Table 5* aims to illustrate the themes only for this category.

Table 5. Summary of Sibling Relationship Themes: Half- and Stepsiblings (n=7)

Themes	Frequency	Percentage	Tales	Percentage of tales
Positive	5	45.45%	3	42.86%
Negative	6	54.55%	4	57.14%
Total	11	100%	7	100%

Due to the relatively small representation of half- and stepsiblings, generalisations cannot be made. Nevertheless, the findings show a slight tendency towards portraying sibling relationships in a negative light. Tales focusing on positive relationships between half- and stepsiblings include “Sam Patra and His Brothers,” “Kate Crackernuts,” and “The Rose-Three.” Negative themes can be observed in “The Mermaid,” “The Three Heads of the Well,” “Goldenstar,” and “Rawhead and Bloodybones.” Interestingly, tales that depict evil stepsisters often highlight that the daughters are as bad as their mothers, thus providing an extension to the wicked stepmother.

The comparison of our analysis with the results of the research by Kramer, Noorman, and Brockman on young children’s literature shows significant differences. The team of researchers discovered that “children’s literature that is focused on sibling relationships tends to represent positive and negative dimensions of these relationships to equivalent degrees,” and that “the majority of books incorporated both positive and negative themes.”⁴⁹ Therefore, the overwhelming dominance of positive themes discovered in this paper provides a strong contrast.

Conclusion

Folktales tend to follow certain patterns that reveal interesting information about their typical plots, settings and characters. This analysis of British and American folktales involving siblings reveals a strong preference for portraying the youngest siblings as the protagonists, while middle children are notably underrepresented. Surprisingly, traditional gender roles are challenged, with female characters frequently taking active roles in reversing wrongdoings or demonstrating intelligence and kindness in task completion. Another unexpected finding is the prevalence of positive sibling

⁴⁹ Kramer, Noorman, Brockman, “Representations of sibling relationships,” 568.

relationships. With this finding, however, comes the explanation of this phenomenon. Positive themes often include loving relationships that are demonstrated by simple gestures like hugs or companionship. Conversely, negative relationships have a greater impact on the plot, as jealousy typically highlights contrasts between siblings, and betrayals may lead to a sibling's death. Overall, this research on sibling relationships in folktales attempts to fill a gap in folklore studies, shedding light on the complex ways siblings are portrayed. By doing so, it highlights the importance of family structures in shaping narratives and continues to encourage deeper exploration of these timeless tales.

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