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Introduction: What Kind of Mother

Shelley Ingram
University of Louisiana at Lafayette

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what kind of mother?

(A N I N T R O D U C T I O N)

by Shelley Ingram

I once assigned Chuck Palahniuk's 2001 novel *Choke* in an upper-level seminar on folklore and literature. Our discussion that day was strained, with students asking for "brain bleach" and decrying the author's "aggressive sexuality" and "vulgarity," falling back on the old standby of accusing Palahniuk of writing for "shock value." In an effort to maintain some level of academic discourse, I guided our conversation to the book's opening chapter. This chapter tells a story of "The Mommy," a woman who steals a school bus in the middle of winter in order to drive her young son – whom the narrator calls a "stupid runt," a "deluded little rube," a "stupid lazy, ridiculous little kid" – out to the side of a cliff. The Mommy makes the boy stand in front of the bus without a coat, where he looks into "the glare of the headlights," "half naked.. as the headlights blind him." His "ears ache with the cold. He feels dizzy ... his little stool-pigeon chest is all dimpled chicken skin." The Mommy traces the shadow of the boy, cast by the headlights of the bus, onto the face of the cliff. As she does this, she tells him the story of the Maid of Corinth, who traced her soon-to-be-departing lover's shadow on her wall in remembrance of him. This act, as the legend goes, led to the birth of art. In *Choke*, it is here, at this cliff, "where symbols are born." "Hold on," The Mommy said, "someday, this will be worth all our effort, I promise."

As soon as I said "let's talk about that first chapter," one student responded, "I stopped reading that part, because she put him out in no clothes in the snow. I mean, what kind of mother would do that

to her son? It's abuse. I just don't want to read about it." A few others in the class nodded in general agreement. Their impulse seemed to be to believe that the narrator, who turned out to be the child all grown up, was telling the reader he was abused and that The Mommy was a bad mother. Even though the author complicated the narrative through a mixture of first, second, and third person narration, and even though the author made the central episode of the chapter about birth of symbols and about art from shadows. My students spoke of The Mommy as a *real person* with motivations and an interior life in a way that simply could not be justified by a close reading of the text. I was a bit



discouraged by my students' moralizing, so I did what I thought any good teacher of literature should. I said "STOP THIS NONSENSE NOW. These are not real people." I railed about *construction* and *representation* and *narrative theory*. I later stopped by a colleague's office and bemoaned the sad state of affairs that would lead advanced students to believe that anyone cares what a *bad mother* does in "real life" when that *bad mother* is a character in a novel.

When I was a graduate student studying folklore and literature, I knew that it wasn't enough to point out a novel's fairy tale elements or to identify which particular version of the La Llorona legend an author used as a source. I took the cautions against "genre hunting" and "motif-spotting" seriously. I still do, though I find myself using these approaches in my teaching more often than I ever thought I would. Because genre and motifs are interesting. Because students, especially at the undergraduate level, eat that

kind of concrete analysis up. Because the realization that literature and language and culture all live and thrive in a world with people who have folklore, and that that folklore invariably worms its way into our texts, is enlightening. But I am not my students, and, as Mikel Koven said, “folklore motif-spotting is but half the hermeneutic game.”¹ For a while, I thought that the only other half I needed was the one proposed by Alan Dundes in 1965: interpretation.² Tell us what the folklore really means, to and in and for the text. This profoundly simple but astonishingly useful move is still the first thing I pull out of my bag of lit crit tricks, especially in the early stages of my thinking and writing. But while I’m not keen on following the three-part structure for studying folklore and literature that Dorson had established,³ even if I kick it up to a fourth level of “interpretation,” I am still a folklorist who studies literature. Any attempt I make at “pure” literary analysis inevitably ends up littered with footnotes about that La Llorna tale and recycled definitions of *sägen* and *märchen* and “oh look, it’s a trickster!” I just can’t seem to help myself sometimes. So I made a certain kind of peace with writing in the discourse of my academic folk group, and I realized that sometimes literary scholars really are interested in things that we as folklorists may take for granted.

1. Koven, Mikel. 2007. “The Folklore Files: In(corp)orating Legends in The X-Files” in *The X-Files and Literature: Unweaving the Story, Unraveling the Lie to Find the Truth*, edited by Sharon Yang, 91-104. New Castle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press.

2. Dundes, Alan. 1965. “The Study of Folklore in Literature and Culture: Identification and Interpretation.” *The Journal of American Folklore*, 78.308: 136-142.

3. Dorson called for three kinds of evidence to “authenticate” the folklore identified in literature: (1) biographical evidence, which would establish whether or not the author “enjoyed direct contact with oral lore,” (2) internal evidence, springing from the text itself, which would “indicate direct familiarity of the author with the folklore,” and (3) corroborative evidence, which required scholars to consult extant collections of folklore to verify whether or not the lore had an independent life, that is, whether or not the folklore existed outside the work of fiction (“Identification” 5, 7).

But I started to feel a bit like an undergraduate who had found the formula for getting decent grades in English seminars, who turn in papers with titles like “Symbolism in *The Great Gatsby*” or “Arthurian Allusions in Modernist Poetry” or “The Form and Function of Toenails in the Work of William Faulkner.” Now, essays like this are useful, and honestly, I don’t mind learning about Faulkner’s fictional toenails. But I thought that I could do more, or rather do different, as a folklorist, do something that more firmly linked my twinned disciplines, that took advantage of the latitude such a position granted me. So I thought again about *The Mommy* and the “brain bleach” and the human move toward empathy, about the need to read the first chapter of *Choke* as a literal cry for help from an abused child. Is putting down the book an act of intervention? Is that what the author thinks we should do? Should feel? What do readers – in this case, graduate students in English – have to tell themselves in order to make it through the novel, and how is this part of the novel’s meaning-making process? I started doing some reading about the study of reception, got familiar with Suzanne Keen’s theories of narrative empathy. Should I just dismiss my students treating the characters in a novel as if they are real, or should I instead think like a folklorist? So I began to do things like drawing connections between the negotiations of belief we see in folk narrative and the role of reliability in literary narration, and I was off to the races.

But I’m not going to make you read that essay just yet – and really, that’s enough about me and my academic identity crisis. I want instead to talk about Nebraska. Or rather, about the think tank held during the summer of 2014 in Red Cloud, where members of the American Folklore Society’s Folklore and Literature section met to discuss all the ways in which those of us who study folklore and literature seek to be producers of knowledge. Who are we? Where do we go now? I’m not going to list all the ways in which we feel like we

are sometimes stuck between a tale type and a hard place. It might be fun to air some grievances (“Oh, you’re an expert on fairy tales? So you’ve seen *Frozen* then?” And, “What novels do you teach? Aside from Zora Neale Hurston, of course.”) but that would be a little too self-indulgent. Instead I’m going to unveil the map we drew for the future of our discipline, or at least for the future of our own research.

The map was first constructed through a series of elaborate hand-gestures. Some of the nuance may be lost in the translation from hand to page, but essentially it is this: a text does not exist in a vacuum, nor does the transmission of its meaning run in a flat, unidirectional, authorially-approved line. A text has width and it has depth, and we believe that folkloristics helps us bring out unique aspects of its multi-dimensionality. Frank DeCaro and Rosann Jordan coined the phrase “re-situating folklore” to describe the process by which authors incorporate folklore into their art, how they wrench folklore from its “traditional” contexts and re-position it within literature. But we can also look back at how a text was situated, and how it situated itself, within different realms of folk culture. We’ve long studied the folklore in literature, but there is also literature in

folklore, so we can also reverse our gaze to see how literature has been taken up and incorporated into the folk culture of groups – a book club, or a fandom, or a knitting circle. We study the ways in which authors use, for example, forms of folk narrative to



structure a text, how they tap into the cultural knowledge of their myriad readerships to add depth to their pages. But we can also look inward to find certain ambiguities built into a text which invite or even force readers to fill that space with their own folk knowledge. Those who study folklore and literature have at times suggested that literature can be read as an ethnographic account of culture, a way of seeing what life is “really” like for the people represented in the text. But we can also think of literature as that “one common factor” that makes a folk group, and ethnographies of readers can put into practice what proponents of “Reader Response” theorize. If a text is inert until it is read, the act of reading brings into being a new culture, and with emergent culture is emergent folklore.

If we take the text as sitting at the origin of a three dimensional Cartesian graph, at the site where X crosses Y crosses Z, those of us who study folklore and literature can work within all the planes the axes

create. We can look back to a text’s history to see how it was shaped by and within one folk culture, we can look forward to how it leaves its pages and begins life anew within a different one. We can look up, to see how a work of literature is received by an audience and how that reception completes a meaning of the text, and we can look within, to see how a text compels an audience to fill in its gaps, often with meaning derived from folk cultures both real and imagined. The three essays you are about to read each plot different points on our hypothetical graph, from reader reception to fandom, from old folk to new, from the make-believe to the real and back again. And they do so in ways that are bound to bring up questions about what we mean by “text” and “folklore” and “literature.” And we say that’s good.

