

22. GOLDBLOCKS MEETS OEDIPUS (4/28)

Goldilocks

Useful to work thru analysis of one myth. In this case not really myth in strict sense but published tale, "Goldilocks." Amusing and provocative analysis by Eugene Hammel, meant to show what L-S's structural myth analysis like, its utility. Really just one variant, one take on L-S, but useful place to begin.

H offers 2 kinds of analysis, one sequential thru story, other relations between elements in story regardless of sequence. The first really more like Propp, the latter like L-S. H says that story highly patterned, more like a fugue than a messy narrative. If one reads out loud, this is evident. H says this is much of the appeal of story, appeals to our aesthetic sense.

In fact, one of the innovations in analysis is H's insistence that at some level we appreciate structure. It is not myths thinking themselves in us but we thinking myths, structuring them even if we are not consciously aware of it. In very interesting way, H examines changes in the story to show that it becomes more structured over time.,

So in the "syntagmatic structure," we get three major episodes, with bears only, Goldie only, and the two together. The second and third episodes are broken down into sub-episodes with porridge, chairs, and beds respectively. And all three episodes have divisions between Papa, Mama, and Baby Bear. Q. How persuasive do you find this? For most people, seems intuitively good, but not really L-S's kind of analysis, more Proppian.

The paradigmatic structure, more like L-S. Says elements in story divide into objects and beings, natural and cultural. For cultural beings and natural objects, there is only one, Goldie and Honey. For natural beings and cultural objects, they are divided into threes. Natural beings are differentiated according to size, cultural objects according to levels of activity. These entities are then arranged into diagrams of relationships between them.

Q. This is ingenious, but do we buy it? You all are "natives", who know the story from your own experience, most of you from your own childhoods---does it fit with your ideas as natives?

Q. Do you agree with how he reads the elements? Specifically, is the honey as important as H suggests? Most students say it is not that crucial, not even in a lot of versions we have heard as children. H sees honey as completing structure, but even when it is there, it may not necessarily be an important part of structure.

Q. How about the objects being differentiated by activity? not very persuasive. seems forced.

Kind of disappointing that the supposed point of the story is “people are not animals, that Culture is not Nature” (p.25-14). Not very exciting. If story is supposed to appeal to listener, why so boring?

What would Bettelheim say? He would at least make it about something gripping. Not surprising that B sees it about sibling rivalry, about the Oedipal situation, about facing towards adulthood. In trying out Poppa, Momma’s, Baby’s stuff, Goldie is identifying with them psychologically. B thinks this is very healthy. But then he strongly disapproves of Goldie jumping out window and running away. Goldie is wimping out, not facing up to psychological tasks. B says parents like this story because it holds out hope that children will stay children forever, But B says this is bad bad bad.

B says if Poppa Bear is called poppa, psychologically he is father, is Goldie’s father too, whatever the story says.

No agreement at all with Hammel.

Intuitively I think we can agree with B to the extent that Goldie’s story seems to be about basic stuff, existential dilemmas for kids.

So what alternatives? When I first read H’s analysis, I had small kids. One of issues they dealt with all the time was possession. What is my stuff? What is other kids’ stuff? When can I have it? Endless encounters, adults making kids give back stuff they have grabbed away. ‘No Johnny, this is Suzie’s toy.’ Every kid spends a lot of time both as the aggressor, who takes, and as the victim, who loses. Half of kindergarten consists of getting kids to share or to let others use their stuff.

H also misses the reversal in the story. One of the things that makes it juicy is that the bears are cultural---it is they who live in a house, eat porridge, sleep in beds. Goldie is wild---she comes out of the forest, she invades, and at end she jumps out window. Part of the appeal is that reversal. (We are all a little jaded now, since Disney etc have endlessly multiplied anthropomorphic animals, who even talk like Eddie Murphy.)

What differentiates the three steps in Goldie’s invasion is not degree of activity but degree of invasion or molestation: from having sat in chair and breaking it but now gone; to consuming porridge; to taking over bed, very personal, my bed, and still being there!—breakage to consumption to displacement. So Goldilocks is about this intense situation for children, though concerned not with sex or defecation but possession. “Mine!” And in story the child-listener identifies both with Baby Bear, the victim, and with Goldie, the aggressor.

Assumption of shrinks like B is that if the situation in a tale is from childhood, then it has to be about the immediate nuclear family. But kids struggle about possessions with non-relatives in day care, nursery school, etc. as much as they do with siblings.

So Hammel's analysis is interesting and on some points persuasive, but it shows the difficulties of analysis.

One of the most difficult is how one reads the elements in story: Is Poppa Bear to be read as "Daddy"? or as alien bear? or as nursery school teacher? Almost always, how one sees the arrangement of the overall structure depends on how one has already read the pieces, the elements.

One of the things that makes reading the elements so tricky and subjective is that, even though L-S and many others talk of metaphors in myth, they are really synecdoches. If you think back to our discussion of deciphering metaphor, often it is the comparison between the two sides that gives us the clues.

What you get in such a case is 2 concrete elements, here bears and Russians, and then the more abstract qualities found in each, and then joining up the sides by the qualities they share.

But with a myth, there is no other side, or you're not sure what it is. All you have is the element (a person, a thing, a name, a situation), and then you try to read out the abstract qualities.

Hammel says Goldie is to be seen as representing culture; we saw it as nature or nature hiding in culture. Sometimes the element is easily readable, sometimes not.

Famous case with L-S himself of trickiness of interpretation of elements:

Clam necks and horns

In one myth from North American Northwest Coast, an owl shaman is frightened by a boy who puts mountain goat horns on his fingers to look like claws. In a neighboring society's myth, a female ogre is frightened away when the victim puts clam necks or siphons on his fingers.

L-S says the second myth is a transformation of the first, which explains why the ogre would be scared away by something so insignificant as clam necks. Marvin Harris, a contentious anthro who hated structuralism gleefully showed that L-S had erroneous idea of clam necks, L-S was thinking of little east coast steamers with little tiny necks. The clams in the myth were West Coast gooey duck clams, with necks huge, rigid. Not the opposite of the horns at all but analogous. (Marvin Harris, 1979, *Cultural Materialism*, pp. 202-210).

L-S mistakes shows the hazards of myth analysis

Oedipus

Let's look at his first and most famous example, Oedipus story. After this first sketch, L-S moved to native Americas, never went back to Greek myth. We have summary by Leach, pp. 64-65.

L-S takes certain actions in the cycle, reads them all as examples of over-rating blood relations: Kadmos searches for his sister; Oedipus marries his mother; Antigone buries her brothers.

It is hard for us to contradict his reading, because the strange language of myth makes it unclear what are the crucial dimensions of each element, but reading them all as over-rating kin doesn't seem all that plausible when scrutinized. Kadmos was in fact ordered to find sister. Oedipus marrying mother is more mixing up blood and marriage relationships. Antigone was doing duty by burying---maybe unwise, but not over-rating blood.

The next set are supposedly examples of *under*-rating: this more plausible, though no guarantee that really what significant in myth.

Then particularly implausible set: 3 actions glossed as denying man's autochthonous origin, i.e. man's having sprung from earth here, man the super-native. Kadmos kills dragon, Oedipus kills Sphinx---these according to L-S are autochthonous monsters. But is killing them absolutely to be read as "denial of man's autochthonous origin"? They are monsters, not man. Why is destruction = denial of origin?

Then "affirmation of man's autochthonous origin" Mostly examples of lameness. Lame hero, L-S says indicates that autochthonous. He cites mythology of Pueblo Indians, probably correct for Pueblos, where ancestors were lame when first emerged onto earth from hole in ground, but does that mean it's also right for Greeks?

Element of lameness does seem to be important in Greek mythology. What does it mean? More plausible that indicates a person marked by gods. Achilles, Jason, others. Here esp. Oedipus. Nailed to mountain. Name glossed as swollen-foot.

Another feature of L-S analysis: synchrony vs. diachrony. Says that myth neutralizes time element in story. Fakery about reading elements in myth up and down, between lines, also left to right on line, different relations. But this is silly. It is an artifact of our writing system, fact that we break up flow left to right as convenience to fit on page.

So what can we salvage from L-S on Oedipus? Leach offers us a complicated reinterpretation. I am more impressed by reinterpretation by Terry Turner. Too long and complicated for us to read, but very interesting ideas. ("Oedipus: Time and Structure in Narrative Form" *American Ethnological Society*, 1969, pp. 26-68.).

Interestingly, Turner really salvages a number of things from L-S. T thinks that the myth is in fact partly about kinship. T says not really over or under-valuing kin, but about balancing out relations with kin vs. non-kin. Says story came from an era in Greek history in which they were moving from kinship-based political structures to city-states. So the subject matter of the story was not merely abstract relations, but a real gut-wrenching conflict: who gets my loyalty, my clan or the state? Relevant today in places like Somalia and Afghanistan.

Also about growing up, T says, about maturation. Much of myth is about someone being held back or blocked in progress thru life.

O is nailed down, kept from maturing, because of prediction that will kill parents

O is blocked on road by stranger, who turns out to be father, kills him.

The blocked sphinx, whose riddle is about maturation, movement thru cycle of life.

So initial denial sets off a long chain of episodes about same problem.

T says time progression in myth *is* important, divides it into episodes, looks at bundles of relationships in those episodes.

We can't take on T's whole analysis here. Point here is to see how one gets a reading of the myth, an alternative to L-S's interpretation. More plausible than L-S in part because makes better sense of more elements in story. partly because makes sense in terms of salient issues in society at time.