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Narrative Universals and Cultural Context

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1 *Definition*

Narrative universals are features of narrative that recur across unrelated literary traditions. "Cultural context"—or, more fully, "cultural and historical context"--refers to aspects of particular cultural traditions or historical periods that contribute to features of narrative within an associated tradition. The focus of the present article is on research in narrative universals, with cultural and historical context considered in relation to universal patterns. Generally, this means considering cultural and historical context as specifying universal principles. In other words, certain general principles of narrative appear to be universal. Cultural context bears on the particularization of those principles.

2 *Explication*

Research in narrative universals is research that explicitly examines the recurrence of narrative features across some set of genetically and (with some qualifications) areally unrelated traditions of narrative. Genetically unrelated traditions are traditions that have distinct origins. Areally unrelated traditions are traditions that have not influenced one another. Since it is virtually impossible to exclude all influence, the areal criterion is usually weakened to traditions that have not extensively or coercively influenced one another (e.g., through colonial domination). Thus, a work of narratology might be understood as constituting research in narrative universals if it treats pre-colonial European, sub-Saharan African, Chinese, South Asian, and Native American works. However, a narratological study does not constitute research in narrative universals if it treats only European and/or post-colonial African and South Asian works. One consequence of this is that the great majority of narratological writings do not constitute research in narrative universals, however extensive the explicit or implicit universal claims of those works. Note that this does not mean that their universalist claims are mistaken. They may be correct. Indeed, the work of such theorists as Genette, Todorov, Bremond, Propp, Pavel, Greimas, Lotman, and others, provides many valuable suggestions for universalist research. However, those suggestions have not entered the field of universalist research until they have been systematically examined in relation to a range of unrelated traditions.

In principle, both "universals" and "cultural and historical context" may be applied to features of discourse (including both plot and narration), as well as narrative production and reception. However, research in narrative universals has tended to focus on story patterns with relatively little attention to discourse, production, or reception. For that reason, the present article will focus on story universals.

It is important to note that there are many types of narrative, ranging from personal anecdotes to novels. There are also many potentially universal features of narrative. These range from properties that are common across many discourse practices, such as providing adequate information for one's addressee, to properties that are more distinctive of literary narrative, such as the use of image patterns in foreshadowing. The focus of the present article is on universals of narrative verbal art, primarily enduring works of literature. There has also been important research on patterns in folklore (see Thompson 1955-1958), which merits separate treatment.

Finally, some research on universals is almost purely descriptive. For example, much work on folklore tends to be classificatory. The present article focuses on treatments of narrative that seek to both describe and explain universals. Indeed, a central principle of recent work on narrative universals is that descriptions and explanations are interrelated in that it is difficult to select the most consequential classification of narrative structures without a sense of the relevant explanatory principles.

Before going on to examine narrative universals and cultural context, however, it is important to clear up some common misunderstandings about universals, culture, and narrative.

2.1 *Universals*

There are several common misunderstandings of the term "universal." Perhaps the most deleterious derives from a somewhat peculiar usage of "universal" in aesthetic study. In this usage, a culturally particular work or even an entire tradition is characterized as having distinctive cross-cultural value and thus as being "universal." In contrast, some works or traditions are seen as having value only within their cultural context. Thus, someone might claim that *Hamlet* is "universal" while a Japanese revenge tragedy, such as *The Drum of the Waves of Horikawa*, is only of local or intra-cultural interest.

There are two things to say about this "hegemonic" usage (Pandit 1995: 207). First, it is entirely different from the meaning of "universal" as taken up by students of narrative universals. Second, it involves presuppositions that are incompatible with most accounts of narrative universals. As indicated already, cultural particularity is most often, perhaps always a specification of universal principles. For example, the use of cakravāka birds in Sanskrit is

a specification of the use of foreshadowing imagery (see Hogan 2005). Conversely, universals are necessarily understood as manifest through cultural particularity. In consequence of these points, it makes no sense to speak of one literary work as more universal than another. All literary works involve universal principles and cultural or historical particularity. The only differences are in the familiarity of the reader with the cultural or historical particulars, thus his or her ability to understand and appreciate a given work. A Western reader may be able to understand *Romeo and Juliet* more readily than *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*. Thus, he or she may be able to appreciate it more fully. But this in no way suggests that *Romeo and Juliet* is "more universal." Indeed, the idea simply makes no sense in this context.

There is a subtler misunderstanding of narrative universality as well. This is the view that superficial, obvious, or salient properties must be identical across traditions if there are universals. Put differently, in this view, a putative universal is falsified by the presence of salient differences in the area at issue. However, manifest properties are the product of principles applying in particular conditions. For example, it appears that, cross-culturally, narratives recruit seasonal weather patterns as imagery for emotions. It does not follow from this that everyone will use the same seasons. After all, the seasons differ from place to place, so the conditions in which this principle applies will also differ. These differences in season are consequential not only for basic storyworld conditions (such that stories from Nigeria are unlikely to have snow). They also have consequences for the emotive and suggestive use of imagery—as in the use of rainy season imagery for romantic love in South Asia (ranging from Sanskrit narrative poetry to contemporary Hindi cinema).

2.2 *Cultural Context*

Though less obviously contested, the concept of cultural and historical context is not as straightforward as people generally assume. The main difficulty is that we think of culture as something deeply formative of our being. In this view, we are born into a culture that shapes us in ways that are enduring, perhaps even unalterable; we are "socially constructed" to think and respond emotionally in certain ways. Put differently, we tend to think of "culture" as a matter of identity.

There undoubtedly are some "critical period" experiences of early childhood that affect us very strongly, constraining future possibilities. However, to a great extent, what we think of as our "culture" comprises much shallower and more alterable sets of familiarity, habit, or expectation—not deeply ingrained products of social construction, but sets of variable

circumstances. For example, the economic, work, and property structures of American society at large, and even some physical features of the land itself, tend to produce conditions in which people are unusually isolated. One result of this is that there is a great deal of loneliness in the United States (Cacioppo and Patrick 2008). In this sense, isolation and loneliness are part of American culture. This is likely to affect the particularization of narratives. However, there is no reason to believe that it will alter large cross-cultural narrative patterns. For example, it might change the representation of a character's sense of being alone in the course of a romantic plot. But it will not fundamentally alter the common features of romantic plots.

Of course, there are some cultural differences in narrative patterns. But these are limited and seem to result from changeable factors. For example, parent/child separation and reunion appear to be unusually prominent in Japanese narrative tradition. This may be the result of profoundly consequential differences in, say, the culture of childrearing. Perhaps Japanese culture produced a high degree of attachment insecurity (though that is certainly not the case in Japan today). But it might equally—indeed, more simply and more plausibly—be attributed to contingent and relatively superficial factors. One obvious explanation is simply the canonical prominence of *The Tale of Genji*, which extensively and repeatedly treats parent/child separation and reunion. Such canonical paradigms commonly arise for contingent reasons (e.g., the skill of an individual author). They then serve as models and sources for subsequent works. Indeed, this is itself an historically and culturally particular instance of a cross-cultural pattern. In diverse literary traditions, paradigmatic works influence subsequent works, thereby shaping cultural tendencies within broader universal patterns of, for example, genre.

In addition, we tend to think of culture in terms of the way one society differs from another. Due to the salience of differences, we often fail to recognize that such differences are, again, very likely to be variants on universal patterns. For example, the apparently greater frequency of familial separation narratives in Japan is not a difference in kind, but in degree. Familial separation and reunion define a cross-culturally recurring genre (see chapter four of Hogan 2011b).

Finally, it is important to distinguish the narrative practices of a culture or tradition from the theories that the culture produces surrounding those narrative practices. There is a widespread idea that we need to locate literary works within the theoretical contexts available to their authors. Within narratology, Herman ("Cognitive Narratology") has urged work on narrative and "emotionology," the ideas a culture has about emotions. A more obvious case concerns

the genre categories explicitly formulated in a given tradition. Such work is suggestive. However, it is a different project from studying the patterns developed in the narratives themselves. Consider, for example, the New Historicists' practice of reading Shakespeare's plays in relation to Renaissance medical treatises, including treatments of emotion. Clearly, Renaissance theoretical formulations are very different from those of the present. If Shakespeare's treatment of emotion were primarily a function of Renaissance medical theories, it seems very unlikely that the emotions of his works would continue to be effective with audiences today. It also seems very unlikely that his works would be shaped by the universal, emotion-based genres, as they are. In this way, the consequences of culturally and historically specific ideas seem to be only marginal in Shakespeare's work.

2.3 *Narrative*

"Narrative" too is a term with unfortunate ambiguities when it comes to the study of universals and culture. We often think of categories as defined by necessary and sufficient conditions. However, work on semantics over the past several decades has shown that categories generally have a prototype structure, with a gradient of approximation giving degrees of category membership. For example, one might say that a story prototypically involves an agent adopting and pursuing a goal, facing obstacles in that pursuit, and eventually achieving the goal or being rendered incapable of achieving it (e.g., through death). Indeed, we might go further and say that the goal is prototypically one of love or power, that the obstacles prototypically involve conflict with people who should be allies (such as parents), and so on. (On prototype accounts of narrative, see, for example, Ryan 2007.) Note that this does not present a sharp delimitation of the target domain. Unlike the category *water* (defined as H_2O), the category *story* has degrees of category inclusion. "It's Tuesday" is simply not a story by this definition. *Romeo and Juliet* is a very prototypical case of a story. Finally, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a less prototypical story.

Hogan (2003) argues that there are three universal prototypes for narrative genre—heroic, sacrificial, and romantic tragi-comedy. Subsequent work (Hogan 2011b) draws on the explanatory principles of Hogan (2003) to predict the existence of several other cross-cultural genres—family separation and reunion, revenge, seduction, and criminal investigation. A wide range of individual narratives across traditions approximate these prototypes, often very closely (for cases, see Hogan 2011b). The various narrative prototypes do not define necessary and sufficient conditions. Thus, they do not limit the possibilities for stories. Rather, they set out tendencies for stories. By this account, we would not expect to find all

stories including exactly the same story elements. Rather, we would expect to find many stories that derive from one or another of these prototypes, but that diverge from that prototype to a greater or lesser degree (thus being less or more prototypical themselves).

3 *History of the Concept and its Study*

Interest in universals and cultural context has been widespread in the study of literature. For example, we find the great Arabic philosopher and literary theorist, Ibn Rushd, writing in the 12th century, that he was concerned with "universal rules . . . that are common to all or most nations" (1986: 59). In recent years, much discussion of narrative universality and cultural context has been vitiated by misperceptions and dubious assumptions. These may be divided broadly into assumptions about cultural divergence and assumptions about psychological similarity.

3.1 *Assumptions about Cultural Divergence*

Many narratologists are not particularly focused on historical and cultural contexts. Indeed, it is fairly rare to read the work of a mainstream narratologist and come upon extended treatment of the cultural background of pre-colonial (or, for that matter, postcolonial) work. For example, basic principles of Indian aesthetic theory, Hindu or Muslim ethics, Sufi metaphysics, Igbo ideas and practices surrounding title societies, Yuan-period Chinese ideas of martyrdom, or any other culturally specific ideas are hardly to be found in books of narratology.

In contrast, mainstream literary theorists outside narratology—who still often focus on narrative—have in recent years tended to be highly historicist and culturalist in orientation. In itself, that is a good thing; increased attention to history and culture should (and frequently does) give their analyses a depth that may be lacking in less culturally sensitive approaches. However, such culturalist and historicist critics and scholars commonly begin with a series of assumptions. Perhaps most importantly, they often tacitly assume that whatever is cultural is different. In other words, they tend to presuppose cultural divergence. (Some striking examples may be found in Greenblatt and Gallagher 2000.) In this view, even if two cultures have a shared origin, their separation will lead to systematic cultural differentiation.

Obviously, distinct societies do sometimes diverge. However, non-interacting systems may also converge. Indeed, distinct cultures can develop independently in ways that produce the same or closely similar outcomes.

Consider narrative and nationalism. Humans have a strong cognitive tendency to categorize individuals by reference to putative essences—one thing is a lion; another is a bear; a third is an ant. In the case of people, these are called "identity categories." Identity categories set out

putatively definitive classes for individuals. In connection with this, identity categories define in-group/out-group relations, with associated motivational orientations toward those groups (Duckitt 1992: 69). One complication of identity categories is that they are multiple. Each of us has many possible labels. Moreover, even when a label is assigned, the emotions relating in-groups and out-groups are intricate and variable.

Narratives can contribute to making some identity categories salient and they can orient the elaborative imagination that accompanies and in part guides emotional response to such categories. For example, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* develops a sense of collective identity for the secessionist states of the American south, a Confederate identity. This is a striking feature of the narrative, particularly for someone (such as myself) raised on emplotments of the Civil War that stressed a collective U.S. identity. Mitchell elaborates the bravery and loyalty of the Confederate soldiers, and graphically depicts the suffering of southerners at the hands of "Yankee" enemies. She also presents a highly benevolent view of slavery. This orients the reader's imagination of nationhood—in effect, Confederate nationhood struggling against U.S. colonialism. The cognitive and emotional implications are very different from a (in this case, far more accurate) depiction of the brutality of slaveholders, northern U.S. troops rescuing a large African-American population from that brutality, and so on.

Given ordinary human capacities and propensities and given principles of group dynamics, we would expect problems of conflict among identity categories to recur in virtually all societies. For instance, conflicts between nationality and ethnicity may arise if someone's nation is at war with his or her ancestral homeland. For these reasons, we would expect different societies to develop some aspects of stories in ways that are similar in their manipulation of group identity. For example, we would expect those high in social hierarchies to use narratives to present social hierarchies in a benevolent light and to depict violations of those hierarchies, not as liberatory, but as destructive. This functional operation of narrative would then be a cultural product, but nonetheless convergent across non-interacting societies. Indeed, this appears to be just what we find (see Hogan 2009). For example, there is a long, cross-cultural history of war and usurpation narratives being used to demonize enemies and to cultivate in-group identification. Examples range from the Persian *Shâhnâme* to the Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa* to the Mande *Epic of Son-Jara*.

3.2 *Assumptions about Psychological Similarity*

The late twentieth century emphasis on cultural and historical difference is not a ubiquitous, trans-historical trend. It was preceded by work that often stressed cross-cultural patterns, and

has been followed by a revival of interest in universals. Unfortunately, the mid-twentieth century and early twenty-first century universalisms are problematic as well. The problems are not primarily a matter of ignoring cultural difference (as is usually claimed). Rather, the problems are primarily a matter of simplifying the nature and explanation of universals.

For many readers, reference to cross-cultural patterns in literature calls to mind the work of Jung (1959) and his followers, such as Campbell (1968), as well as more distantly related literary theorists, most significantly Frye (1957). Jungians contributed to the isolation of cross-cultural patterns (e.g., in quest narratives) in literature and myth. However, this work was marred by several methodological and explanatory problems.

First, Jungians should be praised for their interest in literature from a wide range of unrelated narrative traditions. However, they were somewhat unsystematic in their use of that literature. Perhaps most significantly, they do not appear to have rigorously sorted their data into relevant categories for extracting patterns or generating explanations. For example, it is not clear that narratives produced for entertainment should be placed in the same data set as narratives produced for explanatory purposes (e.g., creation stories). Related to this, they do not seem to have clear criteria for what counts as a pattern. Most obviously, it is not always evident that they are isolating patterns in principles rather than patterns in surface manifestations. The result is that Jungian archetypes often seem to be a strange assortment of curiosities rather than parts of a systematic theory. It is certainly true that stories recurrently include, for example, great mother figures. But what exactly is the significance of this? Is "great mother" the right descriptive category? Moreover, is it the same sort of category as, say, a quest or a wise old man? Jungians do point to something of interest when they isolate recurring character types and recurring narrative motifs. But it is very difficult to say just what these types and motifs tell us.

This issue with data is inseparable from the second and more serious problem with Jungian universalism—lack of explanatory rigor. A fundamental principle of cognitive science is that explanations must be algorithmic accounts leading from initial conditions to behavioral outputs by reference to well-defined processes, structures, and contents of cognitive architecture. There is a gesture in the direction of this with the Jungian notion of a collective unconscious. However, it is almost impossible to spell out algorithmically just how a collective unconscious operates—how it exists (e.g., in terms of neural structures), by what processes it manifests itself, etc.

Frye avoids Jungian problems with the ontology and epistemology of the collective unconscious by situating archetypes in the body of literature itself (1957: 112). This has the

advantage of clarifying where the archetypes exist. Moreover, Frye had a keen sense of just what sorts of structures and relations are important for literary, particularly narrative study. He was sensitive to patterns in the trajectory of action, character typology, imagery, and other matters that bear on narrative universals. In this way, his attention to literary features to some extent mitigates the usual Jungian problems in pattern identification as well. For this reason, the recent isolation of story universals (particularly the romantic narrative in Hogan 2003) has similarities to Frye's work at the descriptive level.

On the other hand, Frye's analyses too pose problems. First, by grounding his archetypes in the literary canon, Frye more or less abandoned the investigation of unrelated literary traditions. Second, Frye too had no clear explanation for the patterns he set out. Or, rather, the explanations he had were largely a matter of historical contingency—convention, as he stressed (see 1957:100 on archetypes as conventions). Convention clearly fails as an explanation for cross-cultural patterns.

As already indicated, the main Structuralist narratologists did not engage in research on narrative universals, however universalizing their claims may have been. One exception to this was Claude Lévi-Strauss, who did treat non-European traditions. His work presents a range of important suggestions about cross-cultural patterns in narrative—primarily in the interpretation of narrative—as well as the cultural particularization of those patterns. Two of these suggestions have been especially important. One may be referred to as his "internal" interpretive method. This allowed Lévi-Strauss to interpret individual works or individual myths by establishing homologous binary oppositions (Lévi-Strauss 1963). There are numerous difficulties with this method, however. Two are fairly obvious. First, despite apparent methodological rigor, the isolation and interpretation of homologies ends up being quite intuitive. Second, the framing of intuitions in terms of parallel binary oppositions is itself based on the presupposition that basic principles of Saussurean linguistics are generalizable to other social systems. However, it seems clear that Saussurean linguistic principles are not adequate even for language.

Lévi-Strauss's "external" method, as it may be called, is more promising for narrative interpretation. It involves mapping narrative sequences onto one another in "transformation sets" (Lévi-Strauss 1969). These transformation sets allowed apparently distinct myths to be understood as variations on consistent, underlying thematic concerns, often differentiated by culture. For instance, one society might have a story about hunting buffalo under water and another might have a story about spearing fish on dry land. The structural parallel might

concern periods of scarcity. The structural difference might be explained by the distinct ecologies of the two societies.

The difficulty with Lévi-Strauss's external method is that it is not well-grounded in a cognitive architecture. He writes about relations between myths from different societies. But the precise status of the relation between these myths is unclear. Is there a shared historical origin? Is the similarity somehow produced by common cognitive architecture? If the latter, why are the patterns apparently specific to a region? Moreover, just where do the meanings of these myths reside? Is Lévi-Strauss articulating an explanation of their origin or a statement of (perhaps unconscious) significance in the minds of tellers and recipients? Despite these issues, the idea of a transformation set is promising and suggests a very general or abstract universal of narrative interpretation that merits further research.

One more recent school of universalists, the "literary Darwinists," avoid the problem of having no explanatory principles. However, they tend to err in the opposite direction. They tend to accept the common view that culture equals difference, and thus that universality equals biological innateness. In one of the more nuanced versions of this view, Boyd identifies universals with "species" properties, contrasting these with cultural properties (2009: 383), as well as individual properties. (Note that individuals may converge toward parallel solutions to problems, just as cultures may. Thus, the individual level of explanation also need not be differentialist, despite usual presumptions.) (For an overview of literary Darwinist approaches to narrative, see Carroll 2011 and citations.)

There are several problems with this assumption that cross-cultural patterning implies innateness. First, it simply ignores that there are many other ways in which cross-cultural narrative patterns may arise, as already noted. Second, literary Darwinists tend to assume that all cross-cultural features are innate. This often violates simplicity, since the interaction of innate systems will produce universal features that are not themselves innate. This is almost certainly the case with narrative.

More precisely, it seems clear that humans innately simulate hypothetical and counterfactual sequences of events. In other words, we imagine things that might happen or that might have happened. This is widely understood as adaptive. Here is a crude example. Glug imagines going to the river for fish, but in that imagination he encounters a crocodile. He therefore avoids going to that part of the river, and thereby avoids being eaten. This is clearly adaptive (i.e., it contributes to the likelihood that Glug will pass on genetic material to offspring since this is not possible if he is dead). It is also clear that we have "Theory of Mind" capacities, thus the ability to infer and respond to (putative) mental states of other people. It is also clear

that we make causal connections both spontaneously and through inferential processes. Finally, it is clear that we have emotional goals. Indeed, emotional goals—goals that we would pursue due to love, fear, anger, and so forth--guide our imagination of hypothetical trajectories. Given all this, one would expect people to begin producing proto-narratives of some sort. In other words, one would expect people to begin to simulate sequences of events involving goals and human interactions. Given language capacities, we would further expect these simulations to be verbalized, at least in some cases. Once we have such basic, verbalized proto-narratives, it is relatively easy to account for the development of narratives in verbal art by reference to emotional, social, and other factors. In no case do we need to posit the existence of something like an innate narrative capacity in addition to the innate capacities for simulation, etc.

For example, one recurring feature of narrative in verbal art is the tragi-comic structure. The hero is pursuing a goal (in keeping with ordinary processes of simulation). He or she encounters obstacles so severe that it seems the goal is impossible to achieve. For example, he or she is seeking union with his or her beloved, but hears that the beloved has died. (This is obviously the tragic part of tragi-comedy.) This situation is, however, reversed (into comedy) when the hero is able to achieve his or her goal, as when he or she discovers that the beloved is alive and they are able to be reunited, living happily ever after. Why would this pattern recur? Do we need some sort of innateness to explain it? It is well established that the quality of our emotional experience is strongly affected by the gradient of change from a preceding emotion. Thus, we are happy when our experience goes from bad to neutral, but we are sad when our experience goes from good to neutral. Likewise, the anticipation of tragedy before a comic conclusion intensifies our emotional response to the comic outcome. We would expect some storytellers to discover this. Moreover, we would expect social dynamics to spread such a discovery to other storytellers. Most obviously, such spreading could occur through listeners preferring the (emotionally intensified) tragi-comic structure. Then other storytellers might imitate this format due to listener preference. In this way, we would expect the tragi-comic structure to arise for psychological and group-dynamic reasons as part of cultural development. There is therefore no reason to posit anything innate here. (I am not saying that literary Darwinists have suggested that this particular feature of narrative structure is innate. In fact, they rarely consider particular features of this sort in such detail. The point is that, if we do consider such features, we find that they are open to non-innatist explanations.)

Beyond these difficulties, literary Darwinists often construe innate features as adaptive, though such features might arise for numerous reasons. More significantly, they sometimes extend that adaptive quality to the present, claiming that narrative is currently adaptive or has adaptation-like benefits. This is, of course, the sort of claim that narratologists are likely to appreciate, since it valorizes their object of study. However, there is no reason to believe that exercising one's narrative capacities by reading, say, Faulkner makes it more likely that one will pass on one's genes. Moreover, even if it did, it is not clear that this is a good thing. Fiction may or may not foster a "moral sense," as Boyd claims (2009: 197). But, if it does, the operation of patriarchal, racist, and other ideologies may make that moral sense patriarchal, racist, and so on. Moreover, this is a separate issue from adaptation anyway.

The crucial point here is that literary Darwinists often tend to assume an overly narrow set of explanations for universals. This has consequences even for the way in which one formulates those universals descriptively. Thus, literary Darwinists may reduce the complex romantic prototype to "mate selection" (Boyd 2009: 225, referring to the prototype from Hogan 2003). This is unsurprising as it is difficult to see how one could account for the complex prototype in terms of innateness and adaptation alone. Here, then, we might consider just what that romantic prototype is and how it might be more adequately explained.

3.3 *A Research Program in Universality and Cultural Particularity*

In contrast with these approaches, we may consider a brief example of a research program in universality and cultural particularity as begun in Hogan (2003) and continued in Hogan (2011b) and elsewhere. The focus of this program is narratives of verbal art in the sense of works that operate to produce emotional enjoyment (as opposed to narratives that operate to, say, explain the origin of the universe or to produce conviction about a legal case). Moreover, it attends to narratives in proportion to their social importance, which is roughly their repetition within that society. The narrative of *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* has had countless repetitions (in performance, recitation, and silent reading) in different historical periods. In contrast, a story in my university's creative writing journal has had only a handful of readers and those have been confined to a few months or even a few weeks.

Romantic tragi-comedy is perhaps the most common genre cross-culturally. Prototypically, it involves two people falling in love, followed by some conflict with representatives of society—often parents and frequently due to some identity-based discrepancy between the lovers. The conflict commonly leads to the exile and/or confinement of one or both lovers, with imagery of death or with the threat of another marriage. Following this, the hero may demonstrate his or her worthiness or there may be a discovery that allows the lovers to be

united. The union is often facilitated by some social representative, then generalized to the larger society of the narrative world (e.g., with parents and children reconciled). This structure is not by any means found in every story. However, it is found in a large number of highly esteemed literary works across a wide range of unrelated traditions. Relevant works (which approximate, but also necessarily to some extent vary the prototype) include, among others, the following cases (see Hogan 2003): from the European tradition, Charitōn's *Chaereās and Kallirrhŏē*, many Roman New Comedies, various plays by Shakespeare, novels of Jane Austen, movies such as *Gone with the Wind* and *Titanic*; from South Asia, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Bhāsa's *Vision of Vāsavadattā*, Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, Śūdraka's *Little Clay Cart*, Harṣadeva's *Ratnāvalī*, Bhavabhūti's *Uttararāmacarita*, Śaktibhadra's *Āścaryacūḍamaṇi* (as well as many modern works, ranging from novels by Tagore to popular Hindi films); from China, Wang's *Romance of the Western Chamber*, Chêng's *The Soul of Ch'ien-Nü Leaves Her Body*, Ma's *Autumn in Han Palace*, sequences from Cao and Gao's *Story of the Stone*; from Japan, many stories in Murasaki's *Tale of Genji*, a number of Nō dramas by Kan'ami and Zeami, a number of plays by Chikamatsu, Izaemon and Yūgiri's *Love Letter from the Licensed Quarter*; from the Middle East, various works in the ghazal tradition, Gurgānī's *Vīs and Rāmīn*, Niẓāmī's *Laylā and Majnūn*, various stories from *The Thousand and One Nights*—as well as works from the Americas, sub-Saharan Africa, and elsewhere.

At this point, it might be objected that there is a marked difference in this respect between traditional and modern societies, thus a clear influence of the historical epoch. There are three things to say about this. First, the prototype-based approach explicitly allows for alterations by historical epoch. But it sees those alterations largely (perhaps entirely) as a matter of specifying universal principles. So, it is perfectly consistent with the theory for the precise nature of social conflict to change both culturally and historically. The nature of the social conflict may be caste-based, or class-based, or racial, or religious, or something else. Second, this question seems to be aimed particularly at parent/child conflict over marriage. In fact, it is clear that this does not at all disappear. One only need think of the wildly popular film, *Titanic*. Finally, it is very important that a study of universals not be narrow-minded about the literature of a given historical period. The literature of a period is not confined to work written in that period. Rather, it is the sum total of work circulating in that period—work read, performed, recounted, discussed. It is a bizarre prejudice that would say *Romeo and Juliet* is not part of the literature of the modern period, but some unread story in a journal of

creative writing is. If we wish to understand narratives of verbal art, we cannot arbitrarily exclude works that are widely read, discussed, and so on.

How, then, do we explain this recurring and enduring pattern of romantic narrative? Clearly, many factors are involved. One central principle is that we simulate hypothetical and counterfactual trajectories of events in terms of goal pursuit (i.e., we imagine ourselves or others pursuing goals, independent of what has actually happened in the real world). Goal pursuit is always a matter of the pursuit of what we think will make us happy. Happiness goals are, in turn, specifications of satisfaction conditions for human emotion systems. In consequence, we would expect human emotion systems to generate the prototypical goals for pursuit in counterfactual trajectories (i.e., emotion systems should be the source for patterns in what story protagonists want). In the case of the romantic plot, the emotion at issue is romantic love. In order to intensify the emotional impact of the outcome (romantic union), we would expect the middle to involve the opposite emotions. Thus, we would expect to find the separation of the lovers in a way that threatens to be permanent (through death or another marriage). Cross-culturally recurring social factors lead to the prominence of identity categories and socially representative characters as blocking and facilitating factors in these prototypes. These various elements—cognitive, affective, social-dynamic, and perhaps others--all contribute to the formation of the romantic prototype, accounting for its recurring features.

Before going on, it is important to respond to a common objection here. Theorists who insist that they do not presuppose cultural difference, are working globally, etc., often object that romantic love is not cross-cultural. One can only urge such theorists to read some of the main narrative and lyric works in the literary traditions of other cultures and some recent research on love. Both make clear that romantic love is cross-cultural. (See chapter three of Hogan 2011a.)

It should be clear already that romantic tragi-comedy is a complex universal with a complex explanation. There are, of course, innate elements (e.g., the emotion systems). There are also features that result from group dynamics and other factors. Indeed, things get still more complicated as we explore the details. There does not appear to be an emotion system devoted to romantic love. Rather, it seems that romantic love results from the integration of systems for attachment (e.g., parent/child bonding) and sexual desire. This integration occurs in part for biological reasons and in part for social reasons.

Given this analysis of romantic love, something significant follows for a research program in narrative universals. Specifically, if there are two emotion systems in romantic love (and thus

in romantic tragi-comedy), rather than just one, we would expect those systems to establish narrative goals separately as well as conjointly. In this case, we would expect to find two further genres—an attachment genre and a sexual desire genre (i.e., a genre that represents the pursuit of sexual desire; this is different from a work that seeks to provoke sexual desire on the part of a reader). In fact, we find these two genres cross-culturally, with their own complex, recurring features (see chapter four of Hogan 2011b).

As this indicates, the isolation of a narrative universal is not a simple statement that ends discussion. Rather, a research program should continue to develop from the detailed and multi-component description and explanation of a narrative universal.

4 *Topics for Further Investigation*

Much work remains to be done on story universals. However, a more significant deficit is to be found in research on production, reception, and discourse (as well as style, if this is distinguished from discourse). For example, in discourse, it appears that first-person limited and third-person omniscient forms of narration are the most common cross-culturally. But this has hardly been examined. Nor does it appear that there has been much systematic comparative work on focalization or types of limitation on third-person narrators across genetically and a really unrelated traditions. Similarly, emplotment has been neglected in cross-cultural study. Chronological order appears standard, with some prolepsis and analepsis (flash forward and flash back). But, here again, there seems to have been little systematic research across unrelated traditions.

5 *Bibliography*

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