

Jane Doe
Narrative Paradigm
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Introduction and the Story

In “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument,” Fisher (1984) reiterates a claim that the most compelling, persuasive stories are mythic in form (p. 16). Indeed, one dictionary defines myth as “a legendary narrative that presents part of the beliefs of a people or explains a practice or natural phenomenon,” so a myth should present a strong narrative argument on some aspect of human condition (Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 1998, p. 345).

In Norse Mythology, Crossley-Holland (1980) relates a myth concerning how Asgard’s wall was rebuilt after being destroyed in battle (p. 9-14). One day a stranger came to the gods in Asgard and said he would rebuild the wall. After bargaining, they struck this deal: the stranger would rebuild the wall in six months with the help of his stallion. If he could do so, he would receive Freyja, goddess of love and beauty, along with the sun and moon.

The gods agreed to this deal because they assumed no one could rebuild the wall in six months. Soon they realized the stranger was an evil giant with a horse of magical strength, and the wall would be finished within six months. The high god, Odin, threatened the shape-changing god, Loki, to find a way to make sure the giant lost the wager. Loki changed into a mare and seduced the stallion from his work. After six months the giant was a few stones short of a complete wall and lost the wager. The thunder god, Thor, then killed the giant for daring to trick the gods.

Although “The Building of Asgard’s Wall” is just a simple myth, it reveals the problems resulting in using the narrative paradigm as a form of argumentation. The narrative paradigm is the view that stories provide a good model for argument (Ziegelmüller and Kay, 1997, p. 223). The arguments contained in a narrative can be difficult to discover, may apply awkwardly to real life, and stem from the use of highly subjective tools of evaluation. Narratives may be interesting and appealing, but they are not necessarily helpful in argumentation.

Weakness One: Argument Identification

Fisher (1984) claims that, “Reasoning need not be bound to argumentative prose or be expressed in clear-cut inferential or implicative structures: Reasoning may be discovered in all sorts of symbolic action—nondiscursive as well as discursive” (p. 1). In a simple, short myth like “The Building of Asgard’s Wall,” one should find an argument.

There are many possible arguments one can glean from this myth. One possible argument is that cunning is an effective way to achieve a goal. Loki uses his cunning to defeat the giant and secure Freyja and the heavenly bodies for the gods. But this argument fails one of Fisher’s (1984) two tests of narrative argument, narrative probability (p. 8). The test of narrative probability is much like the test of internal consistency for the standard form of argumentation, the rational world paradigm. Narrative probability requires a narrative be consistent with itself. The argument that cunning is an effective way to achieve a goal is contradicted by the fact that the giant used his own cunning to trick the gods into making a contract with him, but he did not achieve his goal to take Freyja, the sun, and the moon.

A second possible argument in the myth is that cunning is better than brute force in achieving a goal. This argument achieves Fisher’s (1984) other test, that of narrative fidelity, because it is consistent with other tales people accept as true that have fallen into popular knowledge (p. 8). These tales include “David and Goliath,” in which a boy defeats a giant by knowing his weakness, and “Jack and the Beanstalk,” in which a peasant outwits and escapes a giant by chopping down the beanstalk to his castle. However, this argument fails the test of narrative probability because Loki only uses his cunning after being physically threatened by Odin.

A third possible argument is that good prevails over evil. The gods are portrayed in the myths as good, while the giants are portrayed as evil. This argument passes the test of narrative probability because the evil giant is killed and the goddess of love and beauty remains with the gods. This story also passes the test of narrative fidelity because there are many stories, especially in American folklore, in which a man makes a deal with the devil and finds a way to trick the devil and keep his own soul. These stories have essentially the same plot as “The Building of

Asgard's Wall." Therefore, the argument that good prevails over evil passes the tests of the narrative paradigm.

Weakness Two: Application to Real Life

An argument concluded from "The Building of Asgard's Wall" which passes Fisher's tests of narrative probability and narrative fidelity is that good prevails over evil.

In a world where genocide and destruction can occur without consequences, many would argue that good does not always prevail over evil in real life. The conclusion depends on one's view of life through optimistic or pessimistic eyes. It is subjective.

Furthermore, one could oppose the entire idea of labeling characters as good or evil, as is done in the myth. These characters are necessarily flat, or one-sided. Even hundreds of years of mythology from the rich culture of the Norse people yields characters flatter than any human being. Unlike characters, human beings are not easily reduced to black hats and white hats. Applying an argument from a story on real human beings can not always be done because humans are not purely good or evil.

Weakness Three: Subjective Tools

From the discussion this far, one can see that the tools for evaluating a narrative do not offer much help in discovering arguments. Furthermore, the tools are too subjective to have any widespread, objective meaning.

Three possible arguments were found and evaluated with Fisher's tools. The first two arguments failed in the tests of narrative probability. The third argument passed the tests but is awkwardly applied to a real life situation. One is still left wondering which of these arguments is the soundest.

Fisher (1984) agrees with a statement by Goldberg that, "what counts as meeting the various conditions of justification will vary from story to story" (p. 3). With this amount of subjectivity, it is impossible to judge whether or not the flaws in the narrative probability of the first two arguments were significant enough to invalidate them.

Also, the narrative fidelity of a story is always at risk. For example, the argument that good prevails over evil had other stories to support it, but rival stories can be found, even within the same genre, Norse mythology. The myth of Ragnarok tells the story of the end of life as we know it: the gods die, the sun and moon are devoured, and the earth sinks into the sea after evil monsters imprisoned by the gods break free (Crossley-Holland, 1980, p. 173-176). In this story, good does not prevail over evil.

The advice Fisher (1984) offers concerning rival stories is that we must tell “stories that do not negate the self-conceptions people hold of themselves” (p. 14). Like many of Fisher’s ideas, this idea is completely subjective; every individual holds a unique self-conception.

Conclusion

“The Building of Asgard’s Wall” is clearly a narrative. It has a plot, characters, and themes. Interest is subjective, but many people find this Norse myth interesting, with its images of the cunning Loki and the goddess who weeps tears of gold. Unfortunately, however timeless and appealing a story is, it is not always easy to find and evaluate arguments within it, even when applying Fisher’s ideas of a narrative paradigm. The rational world paradigm may seem cold and authoritarian, but it is still much more direct and reliable than the narrative paradigm.

References

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