

Introduction to Folklore II: Folk Genres and Analysis

2010-03-02 Barnie's "Oral Formulas in the Country Blues"

**FOLK AND FINA 113**

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**WHAT DID *YOU* THINK?**

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# THE QUESTION

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- ✘ Blues songs often sound “similar” but not identical to each other
- ✘ A particular blues player sometimes has a seemingly endless repertoire
- ✘ The same player’s “compositions” can vary greatly from performance to performance
- ✘ What’s up with that?

# SUGGESTION: ORAL FORMULAIC THEORY

- ✘ (As discussed last class briefly)
- ✘ Has its origins in studies of epic poetry
- ✘ That question: how did bards remember 10-20,000 line poems?
  - + Ethnographic studies of contemporary bards in Yugoslavia / Macedonia
  - + Descendants of Homeric bards

# ORAL FORMULAIC THEORY

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- ✘ Verse is not “remembered” so much as “recomposed”
  - + “Spontaneous composition”
- ✘ Bards have a large repertoire of “formulas”
  - + Formula – a fixed string of words expressing one idea in so many syllables (or pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables)
- ✘ This repertoire is finite
  - + One formula per idea per syllable cluster

# ORAL FORMULAIC THEORY (CONT.)

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- ✘ Verse is a structured form:
  - + A fixed number of beats in a line
  - + (A fixed number of lines in a stanza)
    - ✘ May also have rhyme / rhyme scheme
- ✘ The form of the verse itself is “traditional,” irrespective of the plot the bard that might be performing
  - + Again, demonstrates a conservative (unchanging) / dynamic (adapting) tension

# BLUES

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- ✗ Bernie suggests the basic unit of the blues is not the stanza but the half-line
- ✗ Basic blues: AAB (12-bar)
  - + I [half-line] | [half-line]
  - + IV [half-line] | I [half-line] (which is a repetition, more or less, of the line prior)
  - + V [half-line] | IV→I [half-line]
    - ✗ Each half-line is two bars long
  - + Other variations include ABB, ABA, AAR (where R is a refrain, a line repeated from stanza to stanza )
- ✗ 16-bar: AAAB, AABB, ABAB, AABR, etc.

# HALF-LINE THUS THE PLACE FOR FORMULAS

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- × 20 examples from Michael Taft
  - + “human have the blues”
  - + “human come to some place”
  - + “human go way from some place”
  - + “human got/have +human”
  - + “human leave/quit +human”
  - + “human love +human”
  - + ”human speak to +human”

# MORE EXAMPLES

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- + “human treat +human in some manner”
- + “some thing worry +human”
- + “+human have the blues”
- + “+human cry”
- + “human do unspecified action”
- + “human go someplace”
- + “human gone”
- + “human come home”

# MORE EXAMPLES

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- + “time won’t be long”
- + “human have something on human’s mind”
- + “human treat +human right”
- + “human wake up”
- + “human leave town”
- × A tradition of themes

**MUSIC!!!**

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# QUESTION OF THE WEEK

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- ✘ Is there a song that, among your peers, functions like Toelken's definition of a "folksong"?

# GO AWAY FROM THIS PLACE

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- ✘ Read “Strategy in Counting Out” by Goldstein, from the *Reader*