

Introduction to Folklore II: Folk Genres and Analysis

2010-03-07 de Caro's "Riddles and Proverbs"

FOLK AND FINA 113

WHAT DID *YOU* THINK?

RIDDLES

- ✘ A form of verbal contest
- ✘ A cryptic and metaphorical description performed by a teller which the listener is encouraged / required to interpret correctly
- ✘ A verbal genre which consists of a question or implied question and an answer to that question

RIDDLES (CONT.)

- ✘ A verbal expression containing one or more descriptive elements, a pair of which may be in opposition to each other; the referent of the elements is to be guessed; the descriptive element consists of both a *topic* and a *comment*
 - + Topic – the basic object being described
 - + Comment – modifies and expands by giving more description
 - + “Topic” is not the ‘real referent’ – the answer is ‘something like’ but expressly ‘not’ the topic

RIDDLES (CONT.)

- ✘ Typically rely on metaphor: a poetic comparison between two seemingly dissimilar objects
- ✘ Sometimes on wordplay / double entendre
 - + Pretended obscene riddles
- ✘ Sometimes on homonyms / homophones
 - + “What is black and white and red/read all over?”

FUNCTIONS AND CONTEXTS

- ✘ Riddles are good examples of a “minor genre” in both senses of the word
 - + They are small units, as opposed to larger verbal forms (myth, tale, legend, ballad)
 - + They have been somewhat marginalised and are considered the domain of children and/or “less-developed” societies

FUNCTIONS AND CONTEXTS (CONT.)

- ✘ Riddling falls into six (seven?) broad situational areas:
 - 1) Leisure-time (for entertainment)
 - 2) Riddling in folk narratives
 - 3) Use as a kind of greeting formula
 - 4) In educational contexts
 - 5) In courtship
 - 6) In ritual, especially initiation or death
 - 7) (not listed by de Caro but stated) as a verbal duel

APPEAL

- ✘ Allow for the opportunity to “play” with established categories of the society
- ✘ Riddles “make sense,” but only in retrospect: the answer either makes a congruity between the seemingly incongruous or is a logical albeit unanticipated outcome

APPEAL (CONT.)

- ✘ Metaphor, wordplay, and verbal manipulation are *transgressive* as they demonstrate the (somewhat) arbitrary nature of culturally established categories
- ✘ Ultimately, demonstrate the ability to transcend these categories, that they are imperfect, and thus flexibility and imagination is possible

PROVERBS

- ✘ Often employs metaphor in a similar way
 - + No one cares about proper glass-house habitation
- ✘ “Conventionalised wisdom”
- ✘ A traditional expression that is meant to contain a truth
- ✘ A group will have a shared repertoire of proverbs, from which one is drawn for its appropriateness to a given situation
 - + A differing proverb can also be employed for a counter-opinion

PROVERBS (CONT.)

- ✘ With their employment, the situation is interpreted not by the teller, but by the “tradition” *through* the teller
- ✘ Conveys a culturally agreed-upon idea which can be used to make a point that may only be made less succinctly and perhaps less clearly and effectively in a speaker’s own words.”
- ✘ Depersonalises a situation by appealing to traditional precedents.
 - + Law

GO AWAY FROM THIS PLACE

- ✘ Read “Totemism and the A.E.F. Revisited” by Oring, from the *Reader*