

“Local Character Anecdotes: A Nova Scotia Case Study”

“Local character anecdotes represent a significant resource within oral narrative repertoires of many regions, communities, and individual performers, yet folklorists know very little about even the basics of local character anecdote exchange.” Diane Tye addresses this issue “through the presentation of a case study analysis of local character anecdotes within one Nova Scotian community.”

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Key Terms

- **Character:** “any individual whose dramatic performance, consistent within a particular context, is recognized as being in contrast to, or in conflict with, governing social norms”
- **Anecdote:** “a brief narrative current in oral tradition that tells something unusual about a person, an event, or a thing. It may involve quotation of a witty remark or description of a remarkable situation”
- **Explanatory Anecdotes:** “explore characters’ personalities and lifestyles”
- **Yarns:** “narratives told and accepted as true about something that transcended common knowledge, experience or expectation”
- **Fear of envy:** lower status might envy their possessions and/or position and ultimately attempt to take these things from them.

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Performance Context

- Generally transmitted within three distinct informal speech contexts:
 1. Those linked with a public space, i.e. a retail outlet or park bench.
 2. Semi-private speech situations that draw on members from formally organized groups.
 3. Informal friendship groups and conversations with family.
- Common gathering places for telling such anecdotes has changed over the years from barbershops, general stores, undertakers’ offices, etc. to retail outlets, pool hall, shopping malls, etc.
- Some local character anecdotes can fall under the heading of yarns, while others fit better under the category of news.
- Can be skillfully shaped into elaborate narratives depending on the performance expectation and the group present.
- The anecdote may have one teller or have contributions from all present.
- Most are humorous. Many are risqué and of a sexually explicit nature which may be linked to the tradition of public speech being mostly male dominated.
- Though sexually explicit in nature, these anecdotes would still be seen as being appropriate to share with adults in the presence of children, but would not be told exclusively to children.

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Form and Context

- Local character anecdotes need only contain the basic requirements of narrative.
- Are able to be abbreviated by drawing on common knowledge within the community.
- Not restricted to any genre specific formulas, i.e. Marchen opening and closing. Can be adapted to any genre the narrator is familiar with.
- Exaggerated, but not to a point where the anecdote become unbelievable. Entertainment value depends on the story's exaggeration but also its ability to actually happen.
- Local characters are often associated with a central image. These images make it easy for community members to distinguish between the characters and easily identify them within stories.
- Exploratory anecdotes often depict the character as a victim and help justify the character's presence within the community. They also give reasons to how these people became 'characters.' Sometimes it is by misfortune, other times by his or her own choice.

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Function

- Give coherence to events and provide a vehicle through which to explore why things are the way they are.
- Explain character's performance. Are easier to believe than the facts.
- Protect community members from the fear of envy. Make it seem that the character's low status is his or her own choice and the individual actually has an abundance of hidden resources, often times money.
- Eliminate fear of strangers by reassuring community members that the characters shares a similar background and motivations as other residents.
- Show that characters may not be what they initially appear to be. Encourage individuals not to judge until they have enough information to fully evaluate the character and his or her performance.
- Act as a form of social control. Parents can use the anecdotes to teach and emphasize lessons.
- Aid in the creation of a social identity, and help sharpen the boundaries of community membership and show what is acceptable.
- Explain the presence of minor nonconformists within a community and help others accommodate their presence.

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Discussion Questions

1. Tye suggests that some characters are aware of the way the community views them and see the benefits of having a sympathetic life story. Do you think most characters are aware of their role in the community and how do you believe they would feel about being a 'character?'
2. Do you believe local character narratives to still be common within current society?
3. Would you say local character narratives are more prevalent within large urban ares or smaller rural ares? Why?