

The Genesis of Agricultural Folklore (The Birth of Passional Genres from Agricultural Oral Tradition)

The oral tradition of peasant cultures was of different stamp, its central ideas draw from agricultural magic deifying agents of plant-growing such as earth, water, sunshine, thunderstorm and air. In the **naturalistic myths** of Neolithic peasants these primordial elements were deified by a family of celestial and chthonic deities. Their pantheon consisted of Mother Earth, Father Heaven and their children, gods of the sun, water, corn and vegetation. The peasants' viewpoint sympathised with chthonic gods of the underworld, who were opposed to celestial gods of heavens. Agrarian harvest festivals were celebrated as a sacred wedding (*hieros gamos*) of Mother Earth and Father Heaven. The chief rite consisted in sacrificing best daughters to the dragon monster mystified as the god of water, who kept moisture, hindered rain and caused drought. Peasants' priests were primarily rainmakers expected to sing hymns to gods and beseech them to produce rain, humidity, sunshine and warmth in extent favourable for an efficient cultivation of fields.

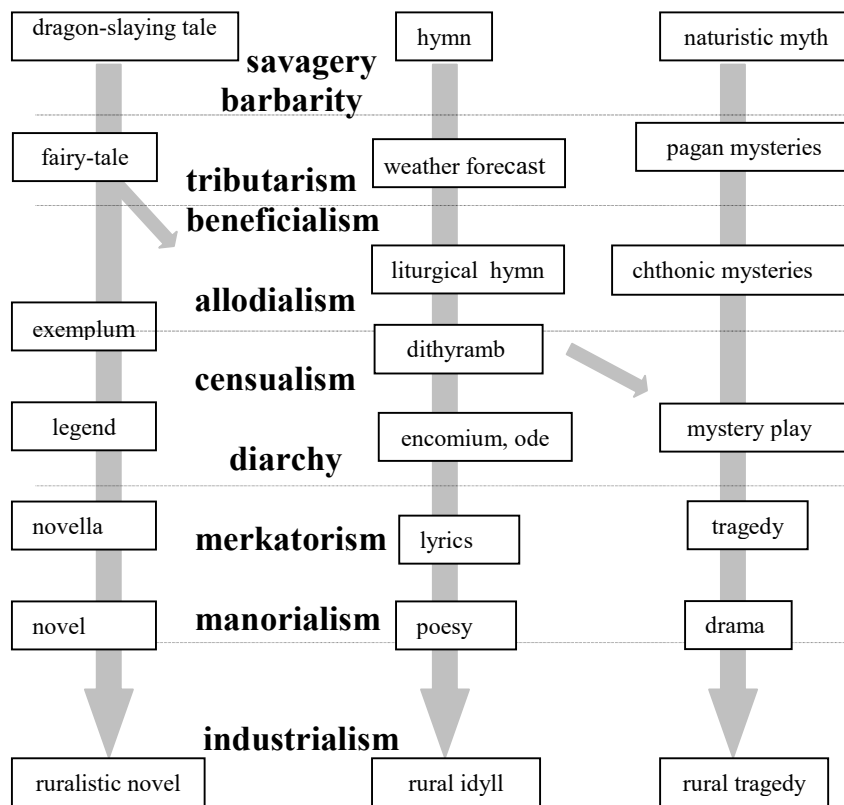


Table 1. *The genesis of genres in agriculturalist literature*

The rite of sacrificing brides to dragon monsters was projected into fairytales about dragon-slayers. The dragon-slayer represented the sun god, who killed a dragon god of water and freed the inflow of soil moisture to fields. As a sun god he was expected to marry the king's daughter and become his successor but he was murdered by a false pretender and sent to the underworld. The plot could be watched either from the perspective of the royal clan of celestial gods or from the standpoint of chthonic gods and peasant commoners. The first view showed

sympathies with the princess and her rescuer but the second standpoint, characteristic of peasants, sympathised with the chthonic deity of vegetation thrown down into the underworld.

The clash of these ideological conceptions was solved by doubling the motif of descent into the underworld. The dragon-slayer is a winner but he becomes a tragic character thanks to ambitions of false rescuers. He is murdered at sleep by his envious brother or killed by a false rescuer who pretends merits for saving the princess's life and aspires to become her royal consort. The motifs of murdering the hero, throwing him down into a deep pit-hole, descent into the underworld and his subsequent resurrection with the aid of miraculous magic of helpful friendly animals is an attempt at a secondary reinterpretation of agrarian myths. They told legends about mourning goddesses of love bemoaning their lost lovers. Their desire was to free the beloved consort, god of corn and vegetation from the underworld.

The fairytales about dragon-slayers retold the myth about Osiris killed by Seth and bewailed by his beloved mistress Isis. Osiris became a corn god who died in autumn with the departure of vegetation and resurrected every spring with the germination of grains of corn sprouting from furrows. In Thrace this heroic couple exchanged roles. The part of martyr goddess was played by Eurydice bemoaned by Orpheus, who descended into the underworld to free her from death. Christian mythology followed Egyptian and Mesopotamian rites, the martyr god was Jesus Christ, who died by crucifixion but the Holy Virgin's mercy helped him resurrect and overcome the dark powers of the underworld.

Such stories about ascetic martyrs, patrons and saints exposed to endless suffering were very popular in medieval legends. They became an essential part of religious processions of penitents and **dramatic mysteries** performed at the central market-place for several days. In the Renaissance and Baroque they gradually grew into tragedies celebrating virtuous innocents rebelling against wrong-doing tyrants. Ancient Greek tragedy paved its way with the aid of symbolic requisites of Dionysian mysteries. But an alternative source of tragic motifs was found the rites of Eleusinian and Orphic mysteries. Their common ground lay in the passions of martyrdom and sacrifice because the agrarian magic of corn cultivation required a period of fasting in spring and sacrificing one part of crop for the next year's harvest.

Europoid and Caucasoid key motifs: cult of plants, trees and carved wooden idols, tribal endogamy, *Zweiklassengesellschaft*, ancestral cults, matrilineal marriage, matrilineal descendancy, dowry, marriage contract, rectangular long house, three-aisled *wurt*, weird sister spinners, naturalistic gods of the sun, air, storm, heaven, earth, moon, fire and water, rainmakers, dragon-gods of water.

Plant-gatherers' tales about phytothanasia – stories about raped girls who disappear or die and after death they turn into plants; a horde of women dig and gather roots but one girl draws apart and is raped by a spirit; after her death she undergoes a metamorphosis into a flower, shrub or tree; a motif common in Greek myths or in Australian and Melanesian folk-tales.

Barbarian peasants' tales – a narration about young heroes setting out on a probation journey and looking for a bride; they meet good old men and women, present them with bread and as a meed they obtain wise advices or magic

objects; heroes follow instructions of old people, who acts as their godfathers or weird sisters grandmothers who wisely spin their fates; their crucial task is often to visit wives of the sun, moon and wind and covertly obtain a counsel from their husbands; they help them learn about their future and win beautiful brides; the crucial idea is ancestral cult, regard for older relatives and all seniors.

- **Barbarian folk-tales about supernatural helpers**¹ and gifts to old men – heroes set out on travels, meet old wanderers and present them with gifts of bread; wanderers view such gifts as a token of kind good nature and reward them with magic objects; they help them look for a bride, find a princess, solve its riddles and get by marriage a half of the kingdom.
- **Naturistic folk-tale** – a hero visits his female grand-aunts married to naturistic gods; they embody essential agents needed for field cultivation, to supernatural husbands symbolising the sun, the moon and the wind; these women protect them from the sullen moods of their mighty consorts and covertly wheedle needful advices out of them; such stories manifest agrarian cults of deities of heaven, storm, earth, water and fire and the inner classification of peasant tribes into phratries and moieties impersonating such godly naturistic phenomena.
- **Hymns** – panegyric hymns celebrating the sacred marriage of celestial parents, the god of heaven and the mother goddess of earth; also hymns devoted to their children, the son god of corn and vegetation worshipped as a suffering martyr in the underworld and the daughter goddess of love and mercy; these hymns were originally composed in quantitative versification and they were sung in processions of peregrines wandering to wooden idols; a priest acted as a chorister presenting invocations to the worshipped deity, while the processions devoutly repeated his sacred words.

- **Tales about the succession of kings by marriage** in agrarian kingdoms – stories about brave heroes who ingratiate themselves with princesses, get married to them and inherit one half of the bride's kingdom.
- **Tales about weird sisters spinners** – after the birth of a daughter the baby is baptised by thirteen old weird godmother sisters who wish them good luck and spin their fate; if one of them is omitted and neglected, she takes vengeance and foretells misfortune to her (*The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood*); such tales reflect conditions in matriarchal peasant communities, where old grandmothers meet at baptism and dedicate the baby a dowry, a part of its heritage from tribal possessions and determine also its consort.
- **Story about a castaway orphan** found in a floating boat such as the tale about charcoal-burner's son; old spinners foretell him a marriage to the king's daughter but the king takes effort to break this divination.
- **Folk-tale about a dragon-slayer** and rainmaking magic – a peasants' community is vexed by drought and wants the rain-king to sacrifice his dearest daughter to a dragon that stops the soil moisture flowing to wells; the king is actually a priest rainmaker entrusted to pray to the god of water holding back the rain. The hero claims to have cut off the dragons' heads

¹ Aarne Antti, Thompson, Stith: *The Types of the Folk-Tale*. Helsinki 1928, 1961, their type index number is 500-559.

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| <p>but there is a false pretender, who sends him to the underworld.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tales about martyr heroes descending to the underworld – the very dragon-slayer is betrayed and murdered by a false pretender, who removes the rope or ladder to the underworld and lets him down in the dark of the realm of dead spirits. The princess refuses the false pretenders’ wooing and pines for the rightful true rescuer. These motifs retell the myths of Set’s murder of Osiris and Isis’ mourning for her lover. Isis sets out on a journey to the realm of the dead in order to save his life. |
| <p>Legends from the age of kings – deeds of saints, holy patrons and martyrs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Miraculous legends on dragon-slayers – In the <i>Legend of St. George</i> Saint George rescues the Libyan town of Cyrene, slays a dragon that held back rainfall and sets free a princess sacrificed by townsfolk on the altar. • Passional legends on martyr saints – the worshippers of Christ face the persecution of Christians and undergo beheading as martyrs of faith. • Church hymns – choral hymns to the Holy Virgin, saints and martyrs. |
| <p>Dramatic mysteries from the period of feudal fractionalism and disintegration.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Miracles – dramatic plays about the miraculous wonders worked by the Holy Virgin or minor miracles done by holy saints. • Mysteries – plays about the martyrdom of Jesus Christ, the mourning of three Maries and the suffering of his followers (<i>Play about St. Dorothy</i>). • Moralities – allegoric dramas about triumphs of abstract virtues over allegoric figures acting as an embodiment of seven deadly sins. |
| <p>Biographical belletristics from Renaissance times: a secularised form of medieval ecclesiastic hagiography and martyrology.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lives of great men (<i>vitae virorum illustrorum</i>). • Teaching of princes (<i>Fürstenspiegel</i>) – the prince’s instruction to his son on tragic fates and pitiful falls of ancient sovereigns. |
| <p>Drama from the reign of patrician merchantry.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stoic tragedies – dramatic plays about the tragic fates of heroes suffering a heroic death under the knout of a wilful tyrant. • Tragicomedies – erotic tragedies about the touching love and moving death of an inseparable couple of young lovers (<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>). |
| <p>Narodniks’ agrarian and ruralistic novel – traditionalistic belletristics about human life in the circle of annual ecclesiastical festivals.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural novel on leaders of peasants’ community (J. Holeček’s Jan Kojan). • Ruralistic novel – prose about peasants’ mystic union with their tilled soil. |

Table 2. *The evolution of genres in peasants’ oral and literary tradition*

Extract from Pavel Bělíček: *Systematic Poetics II. Literary Ethnology and Sociology*. Prague 2017, pp. 199-203