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Motif Structure and the Liminal Function of Death in *The Milk-White Doo,* A Scottish Folktale

Alvanita Alvanita
Universitas Gadjah Mada
alvanita31@ugm.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Although Scottish folktales form part of the broader European tradition, they remain underrepresented in global folklore studies. Meanwhile, Scottish tales are rich with cultural traditions and national identity, which tend to be marginalized by the British tales. This article examines the portrayal of death in The Milk-White Doo, a Scottish fairy tale, using an interdisciplinary approach that combines folkloristics and literary analysis. Drawing on the Thompson Motif-Index, Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, and Victor Turner's theory of liminality, the study identifies four dominant motifs: unnatural cruelty, animal transformation, reincarnation, and reward and punishment. In addition, it also discusses how death functions structurally through the narrative roles of absentation, villainy, victory, and wedding. The analysis highlights how death is depicted not as an end, but as a liminal process marked by separation, transition, and incorporation. This transformation serves to restore moral and familial order, which reflects historical beliefs in death as a just consequence for wrongdoing. By situating death within a ritual and symbolic framework, the study contributes to broader discussions on justice, grief, and renewal in folklore. It also encourages further research into how modern adaptations reshape traditional death motifs to align with modern cultural values.

Keywords: Children's Literature, Death, Folktale, Liminality

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1. INTRODUCTION

Folk and fairy tales have long captivated children, serving as vehicles for imparting moral values. These tales remain relevant, particularly in teaching children to confront adversity, undertake quests, and embrace acceptance (Zehetner, 2013). They also assist children and young adults in connecting themselves with real-world 21st-century problems, such as poverty, disease, inequality, and child abuse (Beal et al., 2021). However, some aspects of these tales may no longer resonate with today's children, such as the absence of female voices and extreme cruelty. It is important to remember that these tales were set in a past era, and their purpose was to enforce societal norms. Additionally, many fairy tales were not initially intended for children (Zipes, 2012). Most are didactic, aiming to instill moral values and appropriate behavior in children (Lewin, 2020). Therefore, extreme punishments in these tales, once seen as wisdom to deter misbehavior, are now viewed as forms of abuse (Garry & El-Shamy, 2016). Although effective in the past, these methods are no longer considered suitable today.

The study of folklore, specifically folktales, is often centred on the European Version of the Brother Grimms (Garry & El-Shamy, 2016). Even though English tales are also quite frequently explored, however, the Scottish tale tends to be marginalized, especially compared to the British tales (Stroh,

2017). This is also true to other Gaelic cultures, including Welsh and Irish, which are often left in the study. Even, when discussing through the lenses of postcolonialism, the Scottish tale is also excluded though Scotland can be considered as colonized by Britain (Stroh, 2017). Meanwhile, Scotland is also rich in tales and culture, which are embedded in their daily life, but the readers' target tends to be local instead of global. Nevertheless, Disney has started to adopt the Scottish tale partially in the form of Brave Movie (2012), yet the focus is on breaking the stereotype of the princess (Cardoso & Clérigo, 2020; Kakade & Kakade, 2021), instead of highlighting the Scottish culture. Given that, this research will specifically examine deeper on the death representation in the tale seen from the perspective of folklore and culture. Death is a common theme in fairytales and the perception of death is changing over time (Robič, 2018). This research would be specifically focus on how death is used in the tale and how it reveals how people perceive of death. In addition, this research is important to broaden the understanding of cultural representations in folklore, particularly how the theme of death can reflect the moral and social values of society at a particular time.

The tale chosen for this study is the famous Scottish fairytale "The Milk-White Doo." This tale, like many folktales, exists in numerous variations due to its oral tradition, with some versions documented by folklorists. The version selected is from the compilation "Scottish Folk and Fairy Tales" by Grierson (1997). This tale shares similarities with another indexed tale by Aarne and Thompson, "My Mother Slew Me; My Father Ate Me; The Juniper Tree," yet "The Milk-White Doo" remains underexplored in terms of motif and interpretation. This aligns with my previous claim that the analysis tends to focus on the European version, instead of embracing Scottish tales. The Milk-white Doo is a tale about a stepson who is cruelly murdered by his stepmother and is cooked to a soup. Then, he is reincarnated as a bird, telling the truth about the murderer, and eventually kills the stepmother.

The motif of a folktale comprises its smallest and most enduring narrative elements (Thompson, 1955). Many studies have explored motifs in folktales from various cultures, for instance, Welsh Folktales (Rudiger, 2021), Indonesian Folktales (Oktarina, 2020; Ramadhani et al., 2022), Malaysian folktales (Harun et al., 2021; Meilin, 2023), Turkish Folktales (Polat, 2019), and Polynesian Folktales (Kirtley, 2019). Those studies focus on the motif and structure analysis, which to some extent respond to the ongoing debate about whether Thompson's motif index should be updated to encompass a broader range of cultural narratives since the motif is arranged primarily based on European traditions. El-Shamy (2020) expanded on Thompson's work to include African and Arab-Islamic folktales, highlighting the interconnectedness of tales across cultures. Not many of the research discusses the specific theme of death and how it connects to the narrative building as well as the cultural implications. Given the previous studies and the gap, this study aims to analyze the motifs of "The Milk-White Doo" based on Thompson's index, the function of death in the narrative, and the liminality of death.

Death is a common theme in folk and fairy tales, often serving as a catalyst for the story's events. It can signify a character's transformation, such as when a villain meets their demise or as the starting point of the journey such as the absence of parent or sibling as seen in Cinderella story (Propp, 1968). Death in fairytales comes with many names; metaphorical death in fairytales include sleep, departure, cold, renewal, and underground (Ruiz, 2007). Meanwhile, this study focuses on the roles of death and how it becomes a liminal experience by borrowing Turner's concept. He defined liminality as a transitional or threshold state between two phases of life, time, or circumstance (V. Turner, 1969). In the context of death, he stated that liminal space and time can be viewed as the period between life and death, where individuals are neither fully alive nor fully deceased. This concept is frequently explored in fairy tales and fantasy stories, where death is depicted not as an

endpoint but rather as a transformative process (Palmer, 2012). In fairy tales, we can observe liminal space and time through the characters' experiences of time during their journeys, often associated with the supernatural and the unknown. The previous research found that liminality is explored as a narrative technique to represent memory, identity formation, and cultural hybridity (Lacy, 2019; Mueller-Greene, 2022). It allows authors to depict the threshold between life and death, as in Jim Crace's "Being Dead" (Palmer, 2012), or to examine the complexities of post-colonial experiences (Chakraborty, 2016). Literary devices such as magic realism, metaphors, and unreliable narration are effective in portraying liminal aspects of memory and identity (Mueller-Greene, 2022).

While there has been extensive research on motif indexes in folktales and on death in fairy tales and fantasy, no research has yet combined these two topics in a single tale, particularly a Scottish tale like The Milk-White Doo. Therefore, this research contributes to the study of folklore by focusing on Scottish tales, which are often overlooked in broader folklore research. By examining how death functions both narratively and culturally in the tale, it also addresses an aspect of folklore that remains relatively underexplored.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach, using textual and folklore analysis to examine The Milk-White Doo, a Scottish folktale. The primary data consists of the written version of the tale published in Grierson (1997) *Scottish Folk and Fairy Tales*. This study focuses solely on the textual narrative; illustrations are excluded, as they only serve to clarify the story visually and do not contribute new information to the narrative content. The analysis includes all intrinsic narrative elements present in the text. Supporting data includes classification systems and theories from established folklore studies. Data collection involved close reading and manual identification of motifs and narrative elements, particularly those related to the theme of death. The data were organized using a G-Sheet into three analytical categories: motif, narrative structure, and liminality, each further divided into thematic subcategories.

Based on the data, the analysis was conducted in three stages. First, Thompson's Motif-Index of Folk-Literature (1955) was used to identify and classify motifs that are directly related to the theme of death. Second, the tale's structure was analyzed using Propp's Morphology of the Folktale (1968), focusing on key narrative functions associated with death, which include absentation, villainy, victory, and wedding. Third, theory of liminality by Turner (1969) was applied to analyze how death is portrayed as a transitional state. The analysis focused on Turner's three-stage model of rites of passage which adopts Van Gennep's concept. They are separation, liminality, and incorporation. This theoretical lens was used to examine how the tale represents death as a threshold between states, rather than as a final event. All findings were interpreted with reference to cultural and symbolic meanings within the folktale tradition. This research is limited to the Scottish version of the tale as documented in Grierson's book. It does not include oral variants, which may differ in form and content, nor does it compare this tale to similar narratives from other cultural traditions.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Motif Analysis

The Milk-White Doo bears a striking resemblance to motif 720 by Antti Aarne and Thompson, known as "My Mother Slew Me; My Father Ate Me; The Juniper Tree." The title of the latter closely mirrors a part of The Milk-White Doo where a bird sings to the villagers, "My mimmie me slew, My daddy me chew, My sister gathered my banes" (Grierson, 1997, p. 11) though The Milk-White Doo lacks the Juniper Tree element. "My Mother Slew Me; My Father Ate Me; The Juniper Tree" tells the

story of a child who is murdered by his stepmother and unknowingly eaten by his father. Subsequently, a tree grows from the child's bones, and a bird perched on the tree reveals the murder. Similar variations of this tale can also be found in Turkish folktales, where the child is killed by an enemy rather than by a parent (Polat, 2019).

This section examines the application of the Thompson motif index to analyze the Scottish version of "My Mother Slew Me, My Father Ate Me, The Juniper Tree," known as "The Milk-White Doo." Both tales feature common motifs such as the wicked stepmother, the father, the murdered child, and the presence of a bird. However, there are some differences in detail, such as reincarnation motif, which is explained further below.

Unnatural Cruelty

The motif of unnatural cruelty is prevalent in fairy tales, as seen in the Brothers Grimm's tales, reflecting societal attitudes where parents believed it was their natural right to dispose of unwanted children, particularly in cases of poverty, defects, disabilities, or multiple births (Garry & El-Shamy, 2016). These circumstances are then woven into folk and fairy tales, illustrating the theme of unwanted children.

The unnatural cruelty (S) depicted in "The Milk-White Doo" is primarily attributed to the wicked stepmother (S30), who goes to extreme lengths to murder her stepson. She first crushes his head (S116.4) and then proceeds to slice his body into small pieces (S139.7), an act that can be classified as mutilation (S.160).

> Now his wife was a very good cook, and she made the hare into a pot of delicious soup; but she was also greedy, and while the soup was boiling, she tasted it, till at last she discovered that it was almost gone. Then she was in a fine state of mind, for she knew that her husband would soon be coming home for his dinner, and that she would have nothing to set before him. So, what do you think the wicked woman did? She went out to the door, where her little stepson, Curly-locks, was playing in sun, and told him to come in and get his face washed. And while she was washing his face, she struck him on the head with a hammer and stunned him, and popped him into the pot to make soup for his father's dinner (Grierson, 1997, p. 10).

As stated clearly in the excerpt, the death of Curly-locks was not an accident, but his stepmother deliberately killed him. This act is premeditated, as she is aware that her husband will soon return home, expecting his dinner. She is described as greedy, having consumed the entire pot of hare soup herself and realizing she has nothing left to serve her husband. She lures her stepson inside under the pretense of washing his face, but instead strikes him on the head with a hammer, stuns him, and places him in the pot to cook (Grierson, 1997, p. 10).

The deliberate nature of Curly-locks' death is evident, as the stepmother's actions are driven by fear of her husband's hunger and anger. She not only crushes his head but also mutilates his body to make it resemble hare meat. However, the father eventually notices something amiss in the soup and identifies his son's hand by a distinctive crook in the little finger. Despite the father's realization, the stepmother denies the truth, claiming it to be hare meat and challenging the father's ability to distinguish between hare and human flesh (Grierson, 1997, pp. 10–11). The tale does not elaborate on the father's thoughts upon returning to work or upon discovering his son's disappearance, shifting the focus instead to the bird's journey, symbolizing the reincarnated son.

The stepmother's cruelty in "The Milk-White Doo" echoes similar themes in other fairy tales, such as Snow White, where the stepmother seeks to kill Snow White to become the most beautiful in the land. Snow White's stepmother is considered one of the cruellest among Cinderella and Hansel Gretel' stepmother, as she openly uses the word "kill" and is described as wicked (Khrisna, 2020).

This theme is also seen in the character of Medea, who kills her children to seek revenge on her husband (Larmo, 2018). Despite the inappropriate cruel scene for today's children, Wittmann (2011) argues that the cruelty of stepmothers in fairy tales can serve to develop children's understanding of authority and the need for emancipation, as viewed through a psychoanalytical lens.

Reincarnation

The reincarnation motif (E) in folktales is expressed in various ways, including motif E607.1, where the bones of the dead are collected and buried, leading to reincarnation, and motif E613.01, where a murdered child is reincarnated as a bird. However, the reincarnation of a murdered child rarely results in the child returning to live again as a human and return to the family (Garry & El-Shamy, 2016). Instead, the reincarnated child often helps to reveal the truth and bring happiness or wealth to the family.

In the context of "The Milk-White Doo," the reincarnation is depicted through the burial of the son's bones. After the son is murdered, his sister, Golden-tresses, collects his bones in her apron and buries them beneath a flat stone near a white rose tree that grows by the cottage door (Grierson, 1997, p. 11). The son then reincarnates as a bird:

"Grew and grew,
To a milk-white Doo,
That took its wings,
And away it flew" (Grierson, 1997, p. 11)

This motif of reincarnation is also prevalent in fairy tales and fantasy fiction, such as in the Harry Potter series, where Voldemort is able to restore his life and physical body through rituals involving the collection of bones and blood. Bones are a common object in folklore, rituals, and folk medicine, as they are believed to be the seat of the soul and do not decay like flesh (Polat, 2019).

Another tale that features bones is "The Singing Bone," where a girl is murdered by her brother, and a shepherd makes a flute from her bones. When the flute is played, the murderer is revealed. Similar tales are found in Indonesia, where a fish bone buried by the main character grows into a gold tree, bringing riches. Meanwhile, in "The Sharp Grey Sheep," a Scottish version of Cinderella, the protagonist buries sheep bones, which eventually lead her to meet the prince. Although there is no reincarnation in these tales, the act of burying bones is still crucial to the protagonists' victories.

The specific location of the buried bones in The Milk-White Doo, beneath a flat stone near a white rose tree, holds cultural significance. Stones, like bones, are durable and often used to mark burial sites in many cultures, including ancient Egyptian and Celtic cultures. The mention of the white rose tree is a unique addition to this tale, as it is not found in many other versions. This element adds a significant cultural reference to Scotland, as the white rose is a native plant and emblematic of the country, following the thistle (National Records of Scotland, n.d.). In addition, roses have long held symbolic meaning in religion, often associated with ceremonies related to birth, marriage, and death.

The reincarnation in this tale sets it apart from tales such as "My Mother Slew Me; My Father Ate Me; The Juniper Tree," which lack this element. In those tales, the daughter buries the bones, which then grow into a tree. On this tree, a bird appears and reveals the secret of the murderer. The truth is thus unveiled through the bird perched on the tree, rather than through a reincarnated son. This element of reincarnation adds a significant layer to the story as the bird is the son, leading to the ambiguity of whether the son is alive or deceased.

Animal Motifs

The animal motif (B) is prominently featured in the symbol of a bird in "The Milk-White Doo." Birds are commonly used in fairy tales, often depicting mythical creatures such as the roc, griffin, and phoenix, which are believed to possess powers of prophecy and are associated with the divine (Garry & El-Shamy, 2016). In this tale, the bird motif is central, as indicated by the title "Doo," a Scottish word for pigeon. "The Milk-White Doo" refers to a pigeon with white fur resembling milk. The bird's appearance in the story is frequent, as it is the reincarnation of the murdered son, Curly-locks, and plays a crucial role in revealing the truth about his death, a poignant irony as his father and sister unknowingly consume his body in a soup.

‘Pew, pew,
My mimmie me slew
My daddy me chew
My sister gathered my banes
And put them between two milk-white stanes.
And I grew and grew
To a milk-white Doo,
And I took to my wings and away I flew’ (Grierson, 1997, p. 11)

The excerpt from the tale aligns with several bird motifs, including B122, where the bird tells a secret; B131.1, where the bird reveals the truth of the murderer; and B211.3, featuring a speaking bird. The bird reveals that his stepmother murdered him ("My mimmie me slew"), and then goes on to reveal the secret of his death, including his father's unwitting consumption of his body parts in the soup. His sister gathers his bones, leading to his reincarnation as a bird. Notably, the bird does not speak in a human-like manner but sings a song revealing the truth about his past life.

The tale progresses with the bird flying to the village multiple times, where the villagers reward it for its singing abilities. It receives clothes from the washerwoman, silver from a man, and a millstone from the millers. After delivering these goods to its family and taking revenge on his stepmother, the bird flies away and is never seen again (Grierson, 1997, pp. 12–14).

The bird's frequent appearance as the central focus of the tale is significant, with six out of the eight pages dedicated to its journey as the reincarnated son. This underscores the importance of the animal motif in this tale, as reflected in its title. In Scottish culture, birds are believed to have the ability to foretell the future and reveal truths through their behavior (Gàidhlig, 2021). For example, seeing a pigeon in the morning is considered a good omen. This belief is reflected in the tale, where the villagers reward the Doo for its singing abilities. Conversely, seeing a grey hen is considered an ill omen or a sign of death (Gàidhlig, 2021). Interestingly, while the tale focuses solely on pigeons, which are typically seen as a good omen in Scottish culture, the pigeon in this tale brings about the downfall of the stepmother, deviating from traditional beliefs. Nevertheless, the pigeon indeed brings a good fortune to the family as the family will live in richness for the rest of their lives (Grierson, 1997, p. 14).

Rewards and Punishments

The motif of reward and punishment (Q) is a common motif in folk and dairy tales, where characters are rewarded or punished according to their actions. Kindness and politeness are often rewarded, while cruelty and misdeeds are punished (Garry & El-Shamy, 2016). In "The Milk-White Doo," this motif is evident in the middle and end of the story. The bird, as the reincarnated son, rewards his sister (the daughter) for her care and actions in saving his bones and enabling his reincarnation. The daughter, Golden-tresses, is portrayed as the most caring towards her stepbrother, taking action

instead of just complaining, unlike the father who remains passive. “Golden-tresses, who has a shrewd suspicion of what had happened, gathered all the bones from the plate” (Grierson, 1997, p. 11). The bird rewards Golden-tresses with a bundle of clothes, symbolizing her good deeds (Q110). And Golden-tresses, being the littlest, ran the fastest, and when she came out at the door the milk-white Doo flung the bundle of clothes down at her feet” (Grierson, 1997, p. 14). Meanwhile, the father who did nothing but being suspicious was also rewarded with a bag of silver (Q110). He receives his reward for perhaps being a caring father before his remarriage to a wicked woman, showing gratitude for his previous kindness. In the end, both the father and daughter lived in peace and wealth. The rewards given to Goodman and Golden-tresses were gifts that the bird received from the villagers for singing a song to them. This demonstrates a repetition of the motif of reward in the tale, as both characters receive benefits from the bird's actions.

In contrast, the punishment motif is seen in the fate of the cruel stepmother. In motif Q211.4, the murder of children is punished, as the bird takes revenge by dropping a millstone on her head, killing her in a similar manner to how she killed the stepson. This act of revenge is the final punishment in the tale, contrasting with the rewards received by the father and daughter (Grierson, 1997, p. 14).

Overall, "The Milk-White Doo" exemplifies the motif of reward and punishment, showcasing how kindness is rewarded and cruelty is punished in the world of fairy tales. The tale ends with the father and daughter living in peace and wealth, while the cruel stepmother meets her demise, highlighting the moral message of the story.

3.2. Death as the Backbone of the Narrative

Death is a recurring element in fairy tales, often functioning not only as a plot device but also as a structural element that initiates or resolves conflict (Propp, 1968; Thompson, 1955). This article applies Vladimir Propp’s theory of narrative functions (1968) to examine how death operates within the plot structure of The Milk-White Doo. Rather than being treated as a background theme, death in this tale directly shapes the unfolding of key narrative functions. Of the 31 functions identified in Propp’s model, four are especially relevant to the theme of death: absentation, villainy, victory, and wedding.

The first appearance of death occurs at the beginning of the story, fulfilling the absentation (function 1), which falls into the first sphere of narrative. Absentation is marked by the absence of one of the members of the family (Propp, 1968). It can be due to the death or separation. The tale opens: “He has one little son, called Curly-locks and one little daughter, called Golden-tresses; but his wife was dead” (Grierson, 1997, p. 9). The statement is simple but structurally important. The use of the conjunction ‘but’ highlights the imbalance in the family unit caused by the mother's absence. This absence removes not only a family member but also the archetype of a protective and nurturing figure. As a result, the children are left vulnerable, and a space is created for the stepmother to enter. In Propp’s structure, absentation often leads to the hero’s departure. However, in this tale, it immediately leads to the introduction of the villain, showing that the mother’s death serves as a structural turning point that enables harm to occur.

The next structural function where death plays a central role is villainy (Function 8), which falls to the second sphere of narrative. According to (Propp, 1968) this function involves the villain causing harm to the hero or the hero’s family. In this case, the stepmother emerges as the antagonist, following a familiar pattern in European folktales in which the stepmother replaces the biological mother and becomes the source of threat (Bahn & Hong, 2019; Nemani, 2010; Ozbay & Ugurelli, 2024; Ryu, 2021) which can be traced back to religious myths perpetuating gender stereotypes and

social constructs (Nemani, 2010). The tale describes her as "a most deceitful woman, who really hated children, although she pretended before her marriage to love them" (Grierson, 1997, p. 9). Her cruelty escalates when she is asked to cook a hare caught by the children's father. After eating the meat herself, she strikes Curly-locks on the head and cooks him into a soup. The act is narrated directly: "She struck him on the head with a hammer and stunned him, and popped him into the pot to make soup for his father's dinner" (Grierson, 1997, p. 10).

This scene shows how the tale handles death in literal terms, without euphemism or emotional elaboration. Meanwhile, many tales intended for children tend to use euphemism when addressing death to lessen the fear and anxiety of children (Carter, 2016; Parkes et al., 2015). Nevertheless, death is presented in direct terms in this tale, which align with earlier narrative conventions where violence was depicted without euphemism, as noted by Garry & El-Shamy (2016). While the act is explicit, it is not accompanied by detailed imagery or descriptions of pain (Violetta-Irene & Anastasia, 2015). When the father and sister later find the boy's foot in the soup, they say nothing and the narrator also comment nothing. This lack of emotional response aligns with a narrative tradition that frames death less as a personal tragedy and more as a disruption that drives the narrative. Although Propp positions villainy in the main body of the story, here it also functions as a narrative reset. The murder reorients the tale from domestic conflict to a supernatural plot of retribution. Death is not just an act of harm, but it reorganizes the narrative and becomes the foundation for the hero's transformation and return in another form. As discussed in the previous subsection, the murdered child is transformed into a bird, which then initiates a quest for justice. Thus, the departure of the hero is started here, instead of right in the beginning after absentation.

The next major function in Propp's model that involves death is victory (Function 18), in which the villain is defeated. Propp (1968) notes that this function may involve direct combat, magical intervention, banishment, or execution. In The Milk-White Doo, the bird recounts how he was murdered and, in an act of retributive justice, kills the stepmother by dropping a millstone on her. The tale describes: "But the wicked stepmother, being somewhat stout, came out last, and the milk-white Doo threw the millstone right down her head and killed her" (Grierson, 1997, p. 14). Although the act is not conducted by a human hero, Curly-locks' supernatural form does not exclude him from the function of victory. His transformation enables him to reclaim agency and complete the narrative arc by defeating the antagonist. In this sense, the tale aligns with Propp's model while expanding its boundaries to accommodate the supernatural resolution.

Death, therefore, functions as more than narrative closure. It shapes the tale's moral and structural logic. Fairy tales often portray death as a consequence rather than a process. It reinforces a binary of good and evil where virtuous characters are eventually rewarded and wrongdoers punished (Garry & El-Shamy, 2016). The death of the stepmother is depicted without ambiguity or emotional nuance. Her death is not mourned, but instead it is presented as a fitting resolution to her violence. This mirrors the treatment of villain deaths in many fairy tales and modern fantasy narratives, where readers are not invited to sympathize with the antagonist's fate (Violetta-Irene & Anastasia, 2015). In contrast, Curly-locks' death demands further narrative action. His reincarnation as a bird reflects a refusal to allow innocent death to remain unresolved. Thus, it shifts the tale from passive mourning to active justice. This contrast highlights the tale's moral framework which mostly claim that evil is met with finality, while the deaths of the innocent are transitional and purpose-driven.

Death in this tale is also tied to the final structural function in Propp's model: wedding (Function 31). Propp (1968) defines this function as the hero's final reward, often represented by marriage, kingship, or peace. In The Milk-White Doo, this function is modified. There is no marriage or

coronation, but the tale closes with the family's restoration and peaceful life: "Then it spread its wings and flew away, as has never been seen again; but it had made the Goodman and his daughter rich for life, and it had rid them of the cruel stepmother, so that they lived in peace and plenty for the remainder of their days" (Grierson, 1997, p. 14). Although the bird does not remain with the family, his departure signals the completion of the cycle. His disappearance may symbolically suggest transcendence or return to the afterlife. The family experiences a form of the traditional "happily ever after," while Curly-locks, now in bird form, departs to another realm. This reflects Thompson's and Garry's observations that the dead may return temporarily to restore justice before departing once balance is restored.

Taken together, these functions (absentation, villainy, victory, and wedding) demonstrate that death is embedded in the tale's structure. It appears at every major turning point: the mother's death initiates the absentation; Curly-locks' murder triggers the central conflict; the stepmother's death completes the revenge arc; and the hero's final disappearance parallels the wedding function which leads to a peaceful resolution. Rather than functioning as isolated events, these deaths are structurally interlinked. Death becomes the mechanism through which the plot advances and resolves. It is central to the tale's structure, even if not always emphasized in emotional or symbolic terms.

3.3. Death as Liminal Transformation

Death in The Milk-White Doo functions not as an endpoint but as a transformative process that follows a ritual pattern. Drawing from van Gennep's model of rites of passage (separation, liminality, and incorporation), Turner (1969) emphasizes the middle stage as a period of ambiguity, where individuals are no longer bound by their previous identity but have not yet entered a new one. In this tale, the death and transformation of Curly-locks follow this structure. His violent separation from human life, his supernatural existence as a bird, and his final act of restoring justice, all illustrate how death becomes a passage through which both the individual and the social order are redefined.

Separation

In the context of this tale, separation is marked by the literal and violent death of Curly-locks, who is struck on the head by his stepmother and cooked into soup. This moment signifies his physical and symbolic detachment from the human world. Gennep (1960) identifies separation as the first stage in a rite of passage, emphasizing the subject's removal from a previous role or status. Turner (1969) builds on this by describing separation as a rupture from social norms and structure. Curly-locks' murder removes him not only from his family but also from his identity as a human child.

The narrative presents no emotional response from the stepmother since she treats Curly-locks' body as food. This absence of guilt or mourning dehumanizes him and aligns his death with that of livestock. His body is dismembered and served, with only his foot and hand remaining visible in the soup. This reflects Turner's concept of the liminal subject as "no longer classified and not yet classified" (Turner, 1967). Curly-locks is no longer alive as a person, yet his physical remains still signal traces of his former identity. His agency is lost as he cannot think, speak, or protest. In addition, he is reduced to parts meant for consumption. The father's response is equally unsettling. He questions the stepmother and expresses anger and grief when he notices that the meat resembles his son. However, he does nothing beyond shouting and weeping, and continues eating the soup.

Moreover, the narrative offers no clear depiction of mourning from the father or the family. Curly-locks' death is treated with detachment. It looks like the loss of a pet rather than a human child. After this event, there is no further elaboration of the family's grief. The child is simply gone. Though, after

that, we could see how Golden-tresses eventually collected all the bones of her brother and buried them. This act not only acknowledges that Curly-locks is no longer with them but also serves as a symbolic closure. It marks his transition into another realm. The burial functions as a personal mourning ritual, even though the tale does not depict communal grieving. The absence of extended family response further reinforces the idea of social detachment, which is part of the separation stage.

Liminality

Turner (1967) defines liminality as a state of being "betwixt and between," where a person is no longer who they were but not yet who they will become. In The Milk-White Doo, this stage begins when Curly-locks' bones are buried and he is transformed into a bird through a ritualized chant spoken by his sister. Though he takes the form of a milk-white bird, he retains his human memories and sense of justice. This ambiguous state challenges fixed categories of life and death. He is physically non-human but mentally aware that he is no longer a living child, yet not entirely a supernatural being.

Unlike the earlier moment when Curly-locks is reduced to food which stripped of his identity and agency, his transformation into the bird restores his autonomy. He actively remembers his murder and seeks justice for it. He also remembers the family he left and tries to protect them from the evil. This shift marks his transition into the liminal state, which was enabled through ritual and symbolic rebirth. The chant spoken by Golden-tresses "Grew and grew, to a milk-white doo, that took its wings, and away it flew" (Grierson, 1997, p. 11) acts as a rite facilitating this passage. Though the tale lacks an explicit mourning ritual, these actions serve a similar function. It aids the living cope with loss and aiding the dead in transition. Scottish and Gaelic traditions of keening and graveside laments are rooted in helping the dead journey to peace and supporting the bereaved through structured mourning (Raeburn, 2019). While Golden-tresses does not perform a formal lament, her ritualized chants mirror this intention. The tale thereby presents liminality not only through the character of Curly-locks but also in how his family participates in the transitional process. This shows how the family, especially Golden-tresses, process her grief and let Curly-locks go away from her life.

Liminal figures in folklore often acquire supernatural abilities, and Curly-locks' transformation into a bird exemplifies this. The bird can speak, which is not commonly associated with ordinary birds. The tale also notes that the bird is unusually large, closer in size to an eagle than a typical dove. This appearance emphasizes its otherworldly nature. Doo is the Scottish word for white dove. The description "milk-white doo" highlights the bird's pure white feathers, which symbolizes innocence and purity. This also emphasizes the notion of rebirth.

Interestingly, the tale features a dove rather than the more commonly symbolic raven in Scottish culture. While ravens are typically associated with war and prophecy, doves are linked to peace and mourning (March, 1898). However, the dove's abnormal size and function in the tale align more closely with the qualities of a raven, such as revealing hidden truths and carrying symbolic weight. Although the bird does not deliver a prophecy, it reveals the truth of the murder. Interestingly, when the bird sings the song that recounts his murder, the human listeners focus more on his supernatural qualities than the moral content of the tale.

> "The man stopped counting his silver, and listened. He felt, like the washerwomen, that there was something not canny about this Doo. When it had finished its song, he said, 'Sing that song over again, my bonnie bird, and I'll give you a' this siller in a bag.'" (Grierson, 1997, p. 12)

Their reaction shows that they are captivated by the bird's uncanny presence but show no empathy for the injustice described in the song. The focus is on the bird's ability to sing, a trait it should not possess, rather than the content of the song, which reveals the truth about the murder. There is no sadness or emotional response to the death; only awe at the bird's supernatural qualities. This mirrors the earlier reaction of the family, who, despite recognizing Curly-locks' remains, remain silent and continue eating the soup. In both cases, the reality of the murder is ignored. This response reflects Turner's view that liminal figures exist outside normal moral boundaries as they may inspire wonder or fear, but not emotional connection (Mueller-Greene, 2022).

Incorporation

The final stage of the rite of passage is incorporation. It marks the end of the transition and the return to a renewed order (Turner, 1967). In The Milk-White Doo, this stage is shown through the resolution of conflict and the restoration of balance in the family. The bird kills the stepmother using the millstone he had collected, and gives silver and clothes to the father and sister.

This act removes the stepmother, who was the source of disruption, and leaves the family with both emotional and material stability. The story suggests they return to the peaceful life they had before. However, Curly-locks does not return as a human or remain as the bird. Instead, "it spread its wings and flew away, and has never been seen again" (Grierson, 1997, p. 14). This departure shows that he is no longer in a liminal state, but fully gone from the human world. He does not rejoin the family, but his role is complete.

In this tale, incorporation happens not through the return of the individual, but through the restoration of the community. The family is safe, whole, and no longer under threat. This supports Turner's idea that the purpose of the rite is not just personal change, but also the renewal of social and moral order.

4. CONCLUSION

This research has analyzed The Milk-White Doo through three interconnected approaches, including motif classification, narrative structure, and liminality. Using the Thompson Motif-Index, four dominant motifs emerge. They are unnatural cruelty, reincarnation, animal transformation, and reward and punishment. Each of them illustrates how death is central to the narrative. Propp's structural model further reveals that death drives key functions such as absentation, villainy, victory, and wedding, which form the backbone of the plot. Turner's concept of liminality sharpens this reading by framing the murdered child's journey from violent separation, supernatural transformation, to final departure as a ritual passage that restores familial and moral order. Focusing on death as a liminal process, this research contributes to discussions of how folktales use symbolic violence to explore justice, grief, and renewal. It highlights how transformation after death does not always aim to reverse loss, but instead to set things right, even though it means things cannot go back to the way they were. Although the tale's depiction of death may be considered too harsh for contemporary children, it reflects historical attitudes where death was seen as a fitting consequence for evil deeds. While this study focuses on a Scottish tale, comparative analysis with other cultural adaptations could deepen our understanding of changing attitudes toward death in children's and folklore narratives. Future research might explore how modern retellings modify these motifs to suit contemporary values.

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