

# ROOMER

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## A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF AN IRISH MUMMING PLAY\*

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As language is composed of units called phonemes and morphemes, Claude Levi-Strauss posits that myths, because they are part of language, are also made up of constituent units. These structural units are not isolated but are, according to Levi-Strauss, "bundles" of "relations" that are "combined so as to produce a meaning" (1). For him, these relations are often oppositional. To determine the meaning of a myth, or other forms of cultural phenomena such as oral literature, one must examine all the work's contexts, that is "the totality of the variants", in Levi-Straussian terms (2). In essence, literature combines its parts to form meaning as language combines its phonemes in order to produce meaningful sounds or morphemes.

To illustrate his point on how context determines meaning, Levi-Strauss analyzes an American Indian tale. In one context, the eagle and the owl are opposites because they are day and night animals respectively. In another context however, they are both in opposition to the raven, because they are predators and it is a scavenger. Going further, the duck, a water-bird, is in opposition to the other three which are land animals. Through such examples, Levi-Strauss shows that one can create a 'universe of the tale' by defining its bundles "of differential elements" (3). Furthermore, M.H. Abrams states that people native to a culture, perhaps unconsciously, master the network of oppositions in their particular cultural phenomena (4). Natives of a certain cultural group do this in the same way as native speakers of a language understand its langue or linguistic inner system.

It is not enough however, to merely locate and define oppositional elements in a work; one must also transform or diffuse them so that imbalances may be corrected. Through his diagrams of the Cinderella tale, David Pace shows both the contradictory elements that cause imbalance in the story as well as the factors that reestablish its equilibrium (5). The resolution of the tale comes as its oppositions are mediated and a new social unit is formed through the marriage of Cinderella and Prince Charming. Levi-Strauss uses the idea of progressive mediation to describe the resolution of oppositional elements in cultural phenomena (6).

Drama is an integral part of language and literature and is particularly suited to a Levi-Straussian analysis because it is an imitation of human action and relationships. The audience quickly perceives any oppositional elements present because of the immediate interaction of the characters. In folk-drama, the genre of the mummung play, the contradictory relationships are even more striking than they are in a legitimate theater production. This occurs because the mummungers, their audiences, the plays' playing-space and the social environment of the productions are intertwined more closely than they are in a Broadway show, for example. To a great extent, the mummung plays reflect the institutions of their communities. This is true about English and Canadian plays as well as the Irish ones which concern us here. Yet whatever their context, all the mummung plays are variations on the same myth, namely, the victory of life over death. Levi-Strauss, speaking of all myths, says that there is no "true" version and "Every version belongs to the myth" (7).

In his essay, 'Structuralism and Folklore', Alan Dundes claims that "Folklore tends to cluster around times of anxiety be it in the individual life cycle or the calendrical cycle of the entire community" (8). The Irish mumming plays of County Fermanagh take place at such a time and we see the first oppositional element of the plays manifest itself. Since they take place at Christmastime, the warmth of the Yuletide season contrasts sharply with the deadliness of the cold, lifeless winter. This seasonal dichotomy also reflects the life-death motif of the plays themselves.

The next contradiction takes place between the mummers and their audience. Without the audience there can be no play because the play is performed in people's homes and the householders must give their consent to the mummers. According to Henry Glassie, the mummers are usually greeted warmly, and welcomed in (9). In Newfoundland however, mummers are often viewed with distaste and considered rowdies because they terrorize passers-by, and have street battles with other groups of mummers (10). In such a situation, the oppositional elements in the culture are not mediated, and the cultural activity is a failure because it alienates its community rather than renewing the spirit of fellowship.

Even when the mummers are successful in gaining entrance to a house, as in Northern Ireland, there is still a tension between actors and their audiences. There is a feeling of "Self" and "Other" that Roger Renwick sees as an interdependent relationship, but that I perceive as a more confrontational one at least at the beginning of the play (11). It takes time for "progressive mediation" to work. In any case, the mummers are in a sense intruders who have invaded the sanctity of the home. The mummer Captain lets us know that this play is rather unusual as it "has never been acted on any stage" (12). Because the setting is so intimate, the audience is much more involved in the action than they would be in a performance in a legitimate theater,

When householders do admit the mummers, they really put themselves under their control, if only symbolically. The first character who appears is Captain Mummer. He clears space so that the other mummers have "room to rhyme". Thus he decides the playing-space of the drama, not the people whose home it is. The playing-space is a rather sacred one in which no one but the players invade. It is as if the mummers are performing a rite, and only the initiates of the rite may enter the spot. The mummers themselves form a kind of ceremonial ring or semi-circle at the rear of the kitchen (although they also enter in turn from the door), and say their lines in the 'sacred' center space and then retreat back to the semi-circle (13). For their part, the mummers are not allowed to touch anything in the home where they are performing (14).

In the matter of audience, mummers and the setting of the play, there are some apparent oppositional elements at work. First, there is the idea that the mummers control the playing-space. Secondly, there is a mixture of the sacred and profane here. Not only is the playing-space 'holy', but the kitchen, the 'holiest' part of any house, is used as a stage where the epical death of mythical heroes is presented. Finally, the serious theme of life vs. death is acted comically by a group of quasi-hooligans.

Before discussing the play itself, one should mention one of its most important components that also acts as a contradictory element between the mummers and their audience. This is the mummers' disguise that in most cases completely covers their faces. In Co. Fermanagh, the disguises are made of ribbon or straw, and it is particularly noteworthy that however else the disguise has shrunk, the straw headgear is the last item to go (15). In many cultures, "the head is particularly sacred", and the dwelling place of spirits (16). Alan Gailley notes the mummers' sense of ritual and the importance of their headgear because after their performing season, they all throw "their straw masks on a bonfire" (17).

Even though the audience knows that the mummers are neighbourhood men, their disguises effectively make them strangers. Although in Co. Fermanagh, the audience makes informal responses to the mummers' antics, its tone becomes more formal as it comes to guess each mummer's identity (18). If someone guesses correctly, the mummer usually removes his disguise, but those who are not named go out as the same mysterious strangers as they were when they arrived. In short, the disguise is another manifestation of the opposing elements of "Self" and "Other".

Because they represent so many levels of culture, the characters of an Irish mumming play are probably its most significant items of opposition. The aforementioned Captain Mummer, who is really the leader since he controls the action, is followed by the character Oliver Cromwell. In Roman Catholic homes, Cromwell slays the hero, Sir Patrick, whereas in Protestant homes he does nothing (19). For the Catholics he is the archetypal villain who tried to destroy them. However, in both plays he is a comic figure with a copper nose. Cromwell is also the second character to clear the way for the other players.

It is not difficult to ascertain the dichotomy between the audience and the next character, Beelzebub. Although it is unprovable, he may be a descendant of the Vice figure from the medieval mystery and morality plays (20). He also may be a remnant from an old fertility ritual because he carries a phallic club and feminine dripping-pan (21). In any case, Beelzebub is an oppositional figure for he is either a devilish symbol who opposes goodness, or he is a pro-life image that defies death. As a relic with no lines however, he really is not an important character in the play although his club and pan may be intimidating to those who will not "clear the way".

Prince George is the following character to appear. He is the noble and brave hero of England. Although England and Ireland are traditional enemies, Prince George defends England and Ireland against the next person who arrives. This fellow is the Grand Turk who comes in with "wild springs and without permission". Through him we see the ancient animosity between Christians and Moslems. The Grand Turk may be a silly survival symbol from the centuries of wars between Western Europe and the Ottoman Empire. He may even be a throwback to the Crusades, the military excursions that defended Christianity against Islam. In any case, the Grand Turk represents an East-West dichotomy. He is a bonafide alien "Other" to the local citizens of Killesher, Northern Ireland.

Sir Patrick, the next character in line, is the villain in the Killesher text used here, but in a Catholic context he is the hero. The adversarial community relationship is readily apparent as Prince George calls him "St. Peter's stable boy", thus implying that the Catholic Church in Ireland is merely a servant of the papacy. Because of this insult, Sir Patrick runs his sword through Prince George and the Protestant hero falls.

Captain Mummer, the director, immediately calls for a doctor. Here enters the pivotal character of the play. He is like the trickster of North American Indian tales who according to Levi-Strauss, has a "mediating function" in Zuni myths. Like the Indian trickster, 'Coyote', the quack doctor of the mumming plays is an "intermediary" who functions "between two polar terms" (22). These terms in the folk-drama are life and death.

The Doctor is also a trickster in another sense. He is like the proverbial Yankee peddler who travels widely to escape his irate patients. The Doctor in the mummies' play also cures people of all sorts of ailments by means of a series of not only worthless, but truly nonsensical remedies. These 'medicines' are themselves oppositional elements because they are composed of animate and inanimate objects (which again reflects the life-death theme) such as: "The heart and liver of a creepy stool / The brains of an anvil, the giblets of a dishcloth". These items are placed in a "wren's bladder" and stirred with "a cat's feather". Such items as these latter ones are not only incongruous, but they are also inverted. The Doctor also states that his cure, to be effective, must be administered for "fourteen nights before day", thus creating still another opposition in the play.

The doctor is usually dressed in black, an appropriate colour for him since he is the mediator or arbiter of opposing elements and the source of their resolution. His function is to restore the harmony of the community by resurrecting the hero who is really the surrogate for the local societal group. Despite all this nonsense, the Doctor accomplishes his purpose, The hero, Prince George, rises and the celebration starts as "a reel is danced".

Yet the resolution of oppositional elements is not quite complete. As we had three characters clear the way at the beginning of the play, we now have three who carry out its denouement. The Wren character is a leftover from the indigenous life-death ritual of St. Stephen's Day, the day after Christmas (23). In this play the Wren character warns the audience that the players need a large treat (money or food) for their artistic endeavors since a small one "won't go round us all". We can now see the oppositions break down and coming to the fore the interdependence of mummies and audience. As Glassie notes,

there is now a reversal of roles and "the audience entertains the players with food and drink" (24).

To make certain that the mummers are compensated properly for their endeavors, the character of Miss Funny enters and demands money. Here is another dichotomy for the female character is acted by a man. She threatens death if the audience does not accede to her demands. Here we have the threat of renewed disharmony that will put everything in opposition once more. However, the audience pays for its entertainment, and for its generosity Miss Funny usually dances with the men of the house and also issues invitations to the Mummers' Ball at which time audience and mummers will enjoy their revived communality.

At the end of the play, Captain Mummer terminates the action that he initiated. With one more call for money, he wishes everyone a "Happy Christmas and New Year". All tensions are now alleviated. The mummers are heroes for they fought death, and through the mediation of their quack Doctor, won the battle, if only symbolically. As the players unmask, the audience also senses the oppositions between drama and life, and between appearance and reality. Through the ritualistic tone of the play and in keeping with the Levi-Straussian theories of structure in cultural phenomena, oppositions are diffused, imbalances corrected, and communal life rejuvenated as in the resurrected hero who is the community's surrogate. In essence, equilibrium in the tale and in life is restored, at least temporarily.

Today in many locales of Northern Ireland, mumming has died out. Perhaps it is because modern society has become too mobile for the continuation of local customs (25). Or maybe the tensions between Catholic and Protestant are too great to be overcome. Whatever the reason, it is unfortunate that these charming social rituals have disappeared from many Northern Irish communities. As Henry Glassie says, "The human needs it filled are no longer being met" (26). Even Levi-Strauss has no remedy for unresolvable oppositions.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

\*This paper was first read at the American Folklore Society Conference, October 1985.

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18. Glassie, 90.
19. Glassie, 14-15.
20. Alan Brody, The English Mummers and Their Plays (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970) 62.
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25. Glassie, 117 and 89.
26. Glassie, 138.

## B.B.C. MUMMERS - PART 1

Radio Times 20th December 1935 - Programme listing for Tuesday 24th December, 7.30 pm.

'St. George and the Champions'

A Traditional Christmas Mumming Play

Performed by

The Worthen Village Players

Directed by W.N.L.Rochardson

and

Relayed from Hampton Hall, Worthen.

### CHARACTERS

The Fool	The Queen of Egypt
Little Jack Dout	Hector
Old Father Christmas	The doctor
Dame Dolly	St. Andrew of Scotland
St. George of England	The Valiant Slasher
The dragon	St. David of Wales
Princess Sabra	The Turkish Knight
The Little Page	Saladin, a pagan giant of Palestine
St. Patrick of Ireland	
The Prince of Paradine	

Hampton Hall, Worthen, on the borders of Shropshire and Montgomeryshire, dates from the period of the Restoration. It has had a company of amateur players for about eleven years; they make their own costumes and scenery, and the plays are produced by Mr. Richardson, the village schoolmaster, who has produced for the Shrewsbury Amateur Dramatic Society. Productions have included a Chinese play, mimes, Shakespeare, The Rose and the Ring, and scenes from Mary Webb's novels dramatised by the producer. The Mary Webb scenes and St. George and the Champions have been broadcast.

## MUMMING AT CHADLINGTON (OXFORDSHIRE):

## A NOTE ON SOME RECENTLY-COLLECTED MATERIAL KEITH CHANDLER

Although my chief interest is in the historical aspects of morris dancing in Oxfordshire and the surrounding counties, in the course of oral interviews I try to record as much of the general social context that an informant is willing to reveal as possible. Knowledge of the mummers is a high priority, especially where the participants of the morris side were also involved with the mumming. Active researchers will be well aware of the limited amount of time which may be directed towards collecting, especially when the area of interest spans great distances. One method which can alleviate the problem is to conduct interviews over the telephone. This has both advantages and disadvantages, but for me contact in any form is better than none at all.

One method of collecting which I have long adopted is to glean from the register of electors and/or the telephone directory inhabitants of communities who bear the same surname as morris dancers earlier recorded in the same location. An ideal scenario would involve face-to-face contact with each, but this is clearly not always possible. Telephonic communication offers an alternative which is often cheaper in the long run than a visit to that community.

The mumming text from Chadlington is well known, having been frequently collected and having appeared at least twice in print (1). James Carpenter recorded three versions of the text during the 1930's (2). Fortunately for research, Carpenter recorded the names of his informants and those earlier mummers from whom the text was learned. For Chadlington, families who were involved with the mumming included the Cooper's, Lynch-buries', Betts', Burden's and Benfield's. One very important fact that Carpenter failed to record was that during his period of collecting activity the Chadlington Mummers were still in regular performance. Perhaps he was aware of this fact and did not follow it up because the contemporary incarnation was of little or no interest. Whatever the reason, in failing to record even the names of the then current performers he inadvertently hindered future research. This note is offered with the express wish that a researcher will, in the very near future, follow up the leads contained herein.

The following details were recorded almost accidentally. The Cooper family had been active in the morris side at Chadlington during the nineteenth century: three names of individuals who danced survive, and no doubt there were more who went unrecorded. I telephoned Mr. Harold Cooper on 9 June 1987 and enquired if he was related to the Coopers whom I named as morris dancers. He knew of no such relationship but offered the information that his father and uncle had been in the mummers. He thought this was probably 'seventy' years ago: he remembered seeing his father do it but the mummers stopped when he was a child. The mummers played 'all over' at Christmastime and 'came home rolling drunk by all accounts'. Among the venues at which they performed were Pudlicote House, Langstone and Greystones in the village itself, and Wyfold's House at Sarsden. He suggested I contact George Betts whose father had been in the mummers with his own father.

On 22 June 1987 I spoke to Mr. George Betts (born 1929), who was very interested in it and pleased that others should show an interest. When he was a child his father did the mumming, he thought as Father Christmas. He remembered when the mummers used to come round the village: he was frightened until he realised that his father was one of them. This would have been during the 1930's - 'just before the war'. He thought that they tried to get it going again after the war but couldn't. The only participant still living was a strange character and it would be unlikely that I could get anything sensible out of him. Mr. Betts' mother used to have a copy of the script but he did not know where it was now.

The names given by both informants as men involved in the mummers during the immediate pre-1939 period were as follows: Harold Cooper (born about 1900) and his brother Hubert Cooper. George Betts ('born about the turn of the century'), Joss Kitchen, Perce Dix, and a man named Hutchison or Hutchinson (neither informant could recall his first name) from nearby Pudlicote.

Clearly I have only scratched the surface of the material remaining to be collected. Other leads have turned up, both from these two informants and from telephone conversations with Chadlington inhabitants bearing the old surnames. Most research into mumming until recent years has exhibited the same problem as that made into morris dancing, namely a pre-occupation with the tangible artifact (the text or the dance forms and tunes). To my mind the historical, social and economic contexts have always been of greatest importance, and it is my firm belief that such material should be collected without delay while informants with first-hand knowledge (generally now in their old age) still survive.

#### NOTES

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2. James Madison Carpenter Collection, Library of Congress. Microfilm copy in Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, Cecil Sharp House, London. Reel 2, Box 1, Packet 3: frames 938-941/942-947/975-977.

NOTE: *In order to avoid the possibility of several researchers contacting Keith's informants at the same time, we suggest that anyone wishing to follow up Keith's leads (and we sincerely hope someone will), contact him first at 5 Evans Road, Eynsham, Oxfordshire (Tel. 0865 880385) [Eds.].*

## 'MUMMERING: THE SECOND REASON FOR CHRISTMAS'

From the Evening Telegram [St. John's, Newfoundland] 3rd January 1987

Column 'The View from Here' by Ed Smith.

"Let th' mummers in t'night?". About the only time you hear that question these days is when Simani sing their marvellous 'Mummers' Song'. Perhaps in some parts of the province, there's a pounding on the door, accompanied by the strains of a button accordion and strange-sounding voices, but in most places mummering, like so many other of our nobler traditions, has disappeared without so much as a whimper.

When I was a young gaffer growing up on the North East coast, mummering was the second major reason for having Christmas at all. What else was there to do after Boxing Day?

We couldn't get the American networks on television, mostly because we had no TV, but also because at the time there were no American television networks. There were no malls to visit, no roads going anywhere, and the radio battery had to be saved for the Geralstile news and 'Laura Limited'. Without mummering, the 12 days of Christmas would have been about as exciting as a 12-day Speech from the Throne.

#### TWO GROUPS

The community was divided into two groups immediately after Christmas: the mummerers and the mummerees. In other words, those who went mummering and those who were mummered unto. That is to say, those who dressed up and went out, and those who stayed home and answered the door. The makeup of the two groups was fairly flexible since everyone except the very sick, the very old and the more sensible tried both options at varying intervals.

The first thing for us youngsters was to choose with utmost caution the group you wanted to go mummering with. The actual number was important because too many and they wouldn't let you in, and too few and individuals tended to stand out, something no one in his right mind wanted. Even more important was that the members of the group be compatible. So you made sure there were a compatible number of girls, all carefully arranged beforehand, and an equal number of boys, one of whom was always the fellow whose father owned the hayloft. Winters were very cold back then, and a place where a little group such as ours could go to get warm after being out in the cold was an absolute essential. Hay, we discovered, had marvelous insulating properties.

#### ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

The act of "getting dressed up" was an opportunity for individual artistic expression. Costumes ranged from an old bed sheet thrown over the head and shoulders with two holes cut for the eyes, to a complete redressing of the person from drawers and longjohns to false manmeries. There were no plastic monster masks or vinyl Dracula capes. Everything was homemade and genuine.

The idea, of course, was to disguise yourself so completely that not even your closest neighbors could tell who you were. And if no one knew who you were, you could get away with some pretty gross stuff.

#### NOT THAT EASY

Fooling your neighbors wasn't as easy as it sounds. In an isolated little outpost of three or four hundred souls, even the hairs on the back of your head were numbered. If you had had a haircut for Christmas, everyone knew it. If you wore number 12 logans, or had a knee out of your briggs, forget it. Long legs? Big hands? You'd be pegged before you got through the door.

One of the most effective means of disguise was simply to have a bath on the day in question, thus removing the distinctive family odor that we carried with us through the winter. This method was considered dirty pool by the purists.

If you happened to be on the receiving end of mummering, letting them in, you had to be careful not to let the situation get out of hand. When some of the older boys and younger men had too many drops of good cheer. It was wise for the head of the household to exercise that privilege [sic] and keep the janneys in check. Sometimes they carried pieces of wood or splits as weapons, and if you ventured too near a sharp whack on the behind was your reward.

The mummies could also get a little aggressive towards the family females on occasion, making it necessary to lock up the wife, the daughter and the family cow. At the same time, physical familiarity far beyond the normal was not only tolerated but encouraged, usually under the guise of trying to discover at least the sex of the visitors.

Once your identity was discovered, custom demanded that you life [sic] your 'face' and reveal all. Then it was time to lower down a glass or two of Purity syrup and a couple of pieces of the Missus' fruit cake, and once again sally forth into the snow and bitter cold of a dark mid-winter night.

Back to the old hayloft.



## 'MUMMERS ARE MAKING A COMEBACK'

From the Evening Telegram [St. John's, Newfoundland] 3rd January 1987  
Contributed by Graham Shorrocks.

Mumming is against the law, technically, but the revival of the old Newfoundland tradition continued to spread through the province this Christmas, particularly in rural communities.

The practice of mumming, or jannying as it is also known to many, is particularly popular in communities along the Southern shore, in Placentia, Fortune, and St. Mary's Bays and St. John's East communities.

The custom, brought to the province from England and Ireland by the early settlers, died off over the years as communities and towns grew and people became uneasy about inviting masked and costumed people into their homes.

### SONG BRING BACK CUSTOM [sic]

One of the province's most requested Christmas songs during the past few years, The Mummers Song by the Newfoundland folk-singing group, Simani, is believed largely responsible for the recent rejuvenation of the custom.

A rule of mumming which has evolved with the practice is that the mummers should be people known to the hosts who, despite the costumes, may know the mummers by their habits of speech, walk and other actions.

But not all mummers partake of the custom in its intended spirit.

### WATCH OUT FOR SOME

Two mummers were apparently out for a quick take in the downtown area of St. John's on Wednesday. They said they were collecting funds on behalf of The Hub, the activity centre for the disabled. They carried a small bucket half full of nickels, dimes and quarters, but one businesswoman became suspicious when she detected a strong smell of beer from the disguised solicitors.

She made a quick check to The Hub and was informed by executive director Dave Scott that no one was authorized to collect funds on behalf of the centre.

That's an example of why mumming was forbidden by law in the early 1900s when it was discovered that a number of criminals were taking advantage of the privilege of going about masked to commit their crimes.

The law was gradually eased and mumming returned during the 1930s, but the popularity eventually faded again.

### TECHNICALLY AGAINST THE LAW

Technically, mumming is against the law as a person is not allowed to have his or her face masked if the idea behind the mask is to commit a crime.

But like kids on Halloween who dress up for trick or treating, adults look forward to Christmas in Newfoundland as the time they can go from door-to-door under disguise and kick up their heels.

Mummers have always entertained, and today as in the past, they usually bring along an accordian, guitar, harmonica or spoons. They often dance to music being played by one of their group, or maybe by their host.

Part of the mumming tradition consists of trying to unmask the mummers by guessing their identities. Another part of the custom is receiving food and drink from the hosts.

To most, the custom is merely having fun and frolic with friends and neighbors, but to all it's a way of keeping the spirit of Christmas alive.

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ROOMER: THE NEWSLETTER OF THE TRADITIONAL DRAMA RESEARCH GROUP

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Research in any field is, as often as not, hampered by the lack of communication between individual researchers, and Traditional Drama is no exception. We are acutely aware that there are many people doing valuable work who have little or no contact with others in this field and, consequently, no opportunity to compare notes or air their views.

ROOMER then is designed to fill this gap by providing an informal forum. It includes notes and queries, details of publications, out-of-the-way texts, information on work in progress, in fact anything that may be of interest to those working in the field of Traditional Drama. As such it relies heavily on participation by subscribers. Therefore, if you have any potential contributions we would be most grateful to receive them.

Back volumes of the newsletter are currently available at the cost of the annual subscription. For further information regarding ROOMER and the work of the TRADITIONAL DRAMA RESEARCH GROUP contact:

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