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Nature of Life

Justice and Injustice

Motif U10 and Various Motifs



Social psychologists point to the importance of a belief in justice as a motivating factor for the individual. Melvin Lerner writes, "People want to and have to believe they live in a just world so that they can go about their daily lives with a sense of trust, hope, and confidence in their future" (1980, 14). Moreover, Lerner observes, ordinary people value justice so highly that under certain circumstances they are willing to make exceptional investments in pursuit of it. In fact, he finds through meta-analysis of a series of experiments, "it is clear that people value justice more than profit, and at times more than their own lives" (175). Movement toward social equality has rested largely on a series of extensions of the expectation of just treatment to members of different groups, followed by each group's struggle to achieve such treatment.

Motifs dealing with justice and injustice fall under Chapter U, The Nature of Life. In *The Folktale*, Thompson begins a discussion of justice by remarking how the majority of folktales concern the contrast between evil deeds of malevolent persons and the commendable activity of the heroes or heroines, and "in such conflicts good shall eventually triumph and wickedness receive a fitting punishment" (Thompson 1977, 130). However, the location in the *Motif-Index* of justice and injustice under Life's Inequalities (U0-U99) is an indicator of the tenor of this topic in regard to formal or judicial justice. Here tales focus on the unfairness of life, exposing unjust judgments, disproportionate punishments, favoritism, and hypocrisy. Related motifs may be found under Q, Rewards and Punishments, but those under U are, as Thompson notes, "of a homiletic tendency. A tale is told with the sole purpose of showing

the nature of life. "Thus goes the world" is the text of such tales" (Intro., *Motif-Index*).

There are cross-references to various supernatural indicators of unjust decisions (D1318.1.1, "Stone bursts as a sign of unjust judgment"; D1318.2.1, "Laughing fish reveals unjust judgment"; and T575.1.1.3, "Child in mother's womb reveals unjust judgment"). One cluster of motifs (U11) centers on "small trespasses punished; large crimes condoned"—for example, U11.1, "Ass punished for stealing mouthful of grass; lion and wolf forgiven for eating sheep," and U11.1.1.2, "Penitent in confession worries about little sins and belittles the big ones." Elsewhere in this group such unjust outcomes are connected explicitly to social power and connections, as when a lion holding court and listening to the sins of other animals forgives all the powerful animals but punishes the meek (U11.1.1.1), and when he who steals much is called king, while he who steals little is called robber (U11.2).

The U15 complex concerns laughter as an appropriate response to rampant injustice, recalling physicist Niels Bohr's comment that there are some things so serious you just have to laugh at them. U18 presents a filial response to parental experience of injustice ("the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge"). Another cluster, U21 ("Justice depends on the point of view"), contains tales of hypocrisy in which characters commit the same acts for which they have condemned others. In one way or another, nearly all of the motifs Thompson cites here serve to assure victims of injustice that they are not alone. The stories imply further that the corruption of society is so pervasive that to be a victim of injustice may be taken as a sign of moral superiority.

POETIC JUSTICE

In folklore, on those occasions when justice is realized, it tends to be of the poetic sort rather than the judicial. Such examples of justice are cross-referenced under "Murder Will Out," (N271), which is found under Chance and Fate.

Singing Bones and Talking Birds

A very popular motif is E632, "Reincarnation as musical instrument. A musical instrument made from the bones of a murdered person, or from a tree growing from the grave, speaks and tells of the crime." It is also a tale type (AT 780, *The Singing Bone*). Thompson says that stories concerning murders revealed by some reincarnation of the victim are to be found in all parts of the world (1977, vol. 1:136). The motif is very common, for example, in central Africa. Often the story concerns the murder of one sister by another sister, or

one brother by another brother. "Sometimes a harp is made from various parts of the body, or a flute from a bone, or some other instrument from a tree which has grown over the murdered person's grave. The musical instrument is played in public and sings out the accusation of the murder" (Thompson 1977, vol. 1:136). Child collected numerous examples of the ballad "The Twa Sisters" (Child 10) (also known as "The Cruel Sister") from England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland and found versions in many other parts of Europe, particularly Scandinavia. The ballad was remarkably popular: over 120 versions were collected in the United States and Canada among descendants of early British settlers.

The Princess Who Murdered Her Child (AT 781) is a related story, which also shows versions in Africa. A man who can understand birds hears one in a tree above him say "The bones lie under the tree," and a murder is solved (B131.1, "Bird reveals murder"; N271.4, "Murder discovered through knowledge of bird languages. Birds point out the murder"). The Grimms include a version of AT 720, *My Mother Slew Me, My Father Ate Me*, as "The Juniper Tree." The story in its original form was not thought suitable for children so versions included in children's collections were considerably sanitized. A stepmother murders her husband's son, cooks him, and serves him to his father, who unknowingly eats the meal with great relish. The woman's daughter gathers up the boy's bones in a silk handkerchief and puts them under a juniper tree. A bird arises from the bones and sings the story of his murder (E613.0.1, "Reincarnation of murdered child as bird"). He eventually causes the death of his murderer and is then reincarnated again in his true form, and he, his stepsister, and his father live happily together without the evil stepmother. Child cites a popular tale about an innkeeper and his wife killing one of their guests for his money, burning the body, and using the ashes to make a dish, which speaks and denounces the murderers (1965, 126). Thompson lists Motif E633 ("Bones made into dish. These speak"). He lists an example from Japan.

THE JOKE OF JUSTICE

There is a widespread tradition of humorous tales concerning ineffectual judges meting out sentences that are unjust but follow a sort of logic. The following is an example from Yiddish tradition:

A great calamity befell Chelm one day. The town cobbler murdered one of his customers. So he was brought before the judge, who sentenced him to die by hanging. When the verdict was read a townsman arose and cried out, "If Your Honor pleases—you have sentenced to death the town cobbler! He's the only one we've got. If you hang him who will mend our shoes?"

"Who? Who?" cried all the people of Chelm with one voice. The judge nodded in agreement and reconsidered his verdict. "Good people of Chelm," he said, "what you say is true. Since we have only one cobbler it would be a great wrong against the community to let him die. As there are two roofers in the town, let one of them be hanged instead!" (Ausubel 1948, 337)

THE BELL OF JUSTICE

In this example of AT 207C (*Animals Ring Bell and Demand Justice*) from *Cento novelle antiche (The Hundred Old Tales)*, an Italian collection compiled at the end of the thirteenth century and published in 1525, a horse procures justice for himself.

In the days of King John of Acre [or Atri] a bell was hung for anyone to ring who had received a great wrong, whereupon the king would call together the wise men appointed for this purpose, in order that justice might be done.

It happened that the bell had lasted a long time and the rope had wasted, so that a vine clung to it.

Now it befell that a knight of Acre had a noble charger which had grown old, so that it had lost its worth, and the knight, to avoid the expense of its keep, let it wander about. The famished horse tugged at the vine to eat it. As it tugged, the bell rang.

The judges assembled, and understood the petition of the horse who, it seemed, asked for justice. They sentenced that the knight whom the horse had served when it was young, should feed it now that it was old. The king commanded him to do so under grave penalties. (Ashliman 1996–2004)

RELIGIOUS FOLKLORE

Direct redress, however, is not the only means of preserving confidence in ultimate justice. If justice cannot be had now, there may still be hope that it will come eventually. A promise that temporal injustice will be recompensed in an afterlife, so that the "last shall be first," is a central feature of many religious belief systems. A related motif is Doomsday (A1002). Motifs that profess belief in pervasive injustice in life may be seen as a secondary response to a need for predictability in life. If everything that happens is likely to be unjust, then at least one can avoid further disappointments and take cold comfort in having expected as much.

Religious folklore also includes a set of tales that emphasize the limitations of human observation in discerning divine justice (AT 759, *God's Justice Vindicated*). In these stories, "From his seat in the heavens, God looks down and bestows his blessings on the righteous and metes out stern justice

on all trespassers of the Divine Will. The ways of the Almighty often seem dark, but a real insight into his activities will always show perfect justice" (Thompson 1977, 130). Terrence Leslie Hansen cites a narrative from Argentina in which a foolish man sees two drunk and sleepy travelers misplace their money. Two other men find and take it. Meanwhile, the first pair stops and questions another pair of men who have not seen the money. Finding this response unsatisfactory, they beat one of them and kill the other. Based upon what he has just seen, the observer concludes that "the Lord is unjust." God appears and explains that the first men were thieves, the second were deserving poor, and that the dead man was a murderer who had so far gone unpunished. It is now apparent to the observer that "the Lord is just" (Hansen 1957, 88). Thompson remarks that a version of this type, "The Angel and the Hermit," was a very popular exemplum used by medieval priests (1977, 130). On a larger scale, the inscrutability of divine justice, and hence the need for faith, is central to the biblical story of the tribulations of Job.

In literature, the preoccupation with justice may show up in unlikely places, as in the episode of Don Quijote (1615) in which the knight encounters the famous bandit Roque Guinart. Guinart tells Don Quijote that after each robbery all the bandits are required to place whatever they have stolen in a communal pile from which he distributes equal shares. If he were not to do so, Roque explains, there would be no living with his men. When Sancho observes epigrammatically that justice is so good that even thieves find it necessary, the men take offense and only Roque's intervention prevents them from beating the squire (Cervantes Saavedra 1968, 980–981). The focus on social justice and/or injustice has been especially notable in the picaresque novel, which viewed the world through the lens of the young orphan who lived by his wits; in realism, which demonstrated the increasing influence of photography in its detailed portraits of the destitute and desperate, and in the testimonial social justice literatures that have arisen in response to particular instances of injustice: abolitionist narratives, for instance, narratives of the Holocaust, and accounts of civil wars in African and Latin America.

Kimberly A. Nance and Jane Garry

See also: Doomsday; Good and Evil; Origins of Inequality

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Miscellaneous