



## CUNNING CHARACTERS IN FOLKLORE: A COMPARATIVE NARRATOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE ENGLISH FOX AND THE UZBEK MONKEY

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**Abstract:** The trickster is a universal archetype in world folklore, yet its narrative treatment varies significantly across cultures. This article presents a comparative narratological analysis of two animal trickster tales: the English *The Fox and the Cat* (Joseph Jacobs, 1894) and the Uzbek *Maymun va Tulki* (*The Monkey and the Fox*, collected by M. Afzalov, 1965). Using Genette's categories of order, mood, and voice, as well as Bremond's logic of narrative sequences, the study examines how each tale structures deception, punishment, and moral resolution. Results show that the English fox fails and dies, reinforcing a pragmatic, individualistic worldview, while the Uzbek monkey succeeds and restores communal justice, reflecting the Central Asian concept of fairness. The findings suggest that the same archetype can encode opposite cultural values depending on narrative structure and focalization. This study contributes to cross-cultural folklore research and narratology by demonstrating how form follows cultural function.

**Keywords:** trickster, narratology, English folklore, Uzbek tales, comparative study, animal archetypes

### INTRODUCTION

The trickster is one of the most enduring and widespread figures in human storytelling. From the coyote of Native American myths to the spider Anansi of West Africa, from the Norse Loki to the Slavic Veles, tricksters break rules, defy authority, and often blur the line between hero and fool. As Lewis Hyde writes in his seminal work *Trickster Makes This World* (1998), the trickster is the boundary-crosser who creates possibility through deception. Yet, despite the archetype's universality, its moral and narrative functions are not uniform. Different cultures tell trickster stories differently and these differences reveal deep-seated values about intelligence, justice, and community. Most comparative studies of the trickster have focused on African, Native American, and



East Asian traditions. European and Central Asian tricksters, particularly from England and Uzbekistan, have rarely been analyzed together. This is a significant gap because both traditions possess rich collections of animal trickster tales, yet they emerged from very different social and historical contexts: pre-industrial England with its emphasis on individual pragmatism, and the Turkic-Persian cultural sphere of Uzbekistan with its strong communal and justice-oriented oral traditions. This study addresses that gap by conducting a comparative narratological analysis of two short, representative animal trickster tales: one from English folklore and one from Uzbek folklore. Both tales feature a clever animal who uses deception, but the outcomes are opposite.

The English tale selected is *The Fox and the Cat*, collected by Joseph Jacobs in his 1894 volume *More English Fairy Tales*. This is a brief fable-like story in which a boastful fox who claims to have “a hundred tricks” is caught and killed by hunting dogs, while the modest cat with only one trick – climbing a tree – escapes. The Uzbek tale is *Maymun va Tulki* (*The Monkey and the Fox*), from the standard collection *O‘zbek xalq ertaklari* edited by M. Afzalov (1965). In this cyclical tale, a fox repeatedly lies to a monkey to steal a pot of honey; the monkey eventually discovers the deception and uses a counter-trick to trap the fox, then shares the honey with other animals.

By comparing these two tales side by side, this article aims to demonstrate that the trickster archetype is not a fixed template but a flexible narrative tool whose meaning is shaped by local cultural logics.

## METHODS

This study employs a qualitative comparative design grounded in structural narratology. The analytical framework draws primarily from Gérard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse* (1980) and Mieke Bal’s *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (1997). Three core concepts are applied. The first is order, which refers to the temporal sequence of events in the narrative. A story can be strictly chronological or it can use flashbacks, prolepses, or cyclical repetitions. The second concept is mood, specifically focalization the perspective through which the narrative presents events. External focalization means the reader sees only external actions and dialogue, without access to characters’ inner thoughts. Internal focalization means the narrative adopts a character’s perspective, revealing their perceptions and thoughts. The third concept is voice, which concerns the narrator’s identity and distance from the story. A third-person omniscient narrator knows everything but may adopt an ironic or sympathetic tone. In addition to Genette’s categories, this study uses Bremond’s (1966) logic of narrative sequences. Bremond argued that every narrative unit consists of three stages: virtuality (a possibility or opportunity for action), actualization (the action itself), and



outcome (success or failure). For trickster tales, this framework helps identify whether the trick is performed, whether it achieves its intended goal, and whether the narrative rewards or punishes the trickster.

The selection of tales followed three criteria. First, the tale must feature a non-human animal as the primary trickster figure. This ensures comparability and avoids confounding variables related to human social roles. Second, the tale must be published in a standard, authoritative collection with established provenance. Third, the Uzbek tale must be available in English translation or be translatable by a bilingual speaker. The English tale was taken directly from Jacobs (1894). The Uzbek tale was translated from Afzalov (1965) by the author with assistance from a native Uzbek speaker to ensure accuracy of dialogue and cultural nuance.

Limitations of this study include the small sample size. With only two tales, the findings are not statistically generalizable. However, the goal is not statistical but interpretive – to demonstrate how narratological analysis can reveal cultural patterns. Another limitation is the reliance on translated text. Oral performances of the Uzbek tale likely include rhythmic repetitions, tonal shifts, and audience interaction that are lost in the written translation. Future research should incorporate audio recordings.

## RESULTS

The analysis revealed systematic differences between the English and Uzbek tales in narrative order, focalization, voice, outcome, and moral orientation. These are described below in plain text, first for the English tale, then for the Uzbek tale, followed by a comparative summary.

In Jacobs's version, the story begins with a chance encounter between a fox and a cat in a forest. The fox immediately begins boasting, asking the cat how many tricks she knows to escape from enemies. The cat humbly replies that she knows only one – to climb a tree. The fox then proclaims that he knows a hundred tricks, and furthermore carries a bag full of them. He offers to teach the cat, but before he can do so, a pack of hunting dogs appears with hunters. The cat immediately climbs a tree and survives. The fox, however, stands frozen, trying to decide which of his hundred tricks to use. While he hesitates, the dogs catch him and kill him. In terms of narrative order, the tale is strictly linear. Events unfold in chronological sequence without any flashbacks or cyclical repetitions. The boast precedes the danger, and the danger precedes the death. There is no return to an earlier moment. This linear structure creates a sense of inevitability: once the fox brags, his fate is sealed. The outcome for the trickster is death. The fox is punished not because he is evil but because he is foolish. His cunning is purely verbal and never actualized. In Bremond's terms, the trick remains at the level



of virtuality (the boast) and never reaches actualization. Therefore, the narrative punishes the absence of genuine action, not the action itself. The moral orientation is individualistic: the fox's boasting serves only his own ego, and his death benefits no one else. The cat survives, but she does not gain anything from the fox's death. There is no communal dimension.

In Afzalov's collection, the tale begins when a monkey and a fox find a large pot of honey in the forest. They agree to share it. However, the fox repeatedly deceives the monkey. First, the fox says he has been invited to a rich man's wedding and must leave. While he is gone, he eats a large portion of the honey. Second, the fox says a neighbor has invited him to a feast. He leaves again and eats more honey. Third, the fox says his cousin is gravely ill and he must visit. He leaves once more and finishes almost all the honey. Each time, the monkey trusts him. When the monkey finally checks the pot and finds it nearly empty, he realizes he has been tricked. The outcome for the trickster the monkey is success. He not only traps the fox but also shares the honey with the community. The greedy fox is punished, but the punishment is not death; it is humiliation and entrapment. The moral orientation is explicitly communal. The final line of the tale in Afzalov's collection states that the monkey "shared the honey with all the animals, and they lived in friendship." The trick serves justice, not personal gain. The English fox fails because his cunning is only claimed, never performed. The narrative structure is linear, focalization is external and ironic, and the outcome is death. The moral is individualistic: one reliable skill is better than a hundred boasts. The Uzbek monkey succeeds because his cunning is patient, dialogic, and restorative. The narrative structure is cyclical with a reversal, focalization shifts to build suspense, and the outcome is communal sharing. The moral is justice-oriented: intelligence should serve the community, not the greedy individual. These differences are not random. They correspond to deeper cultural patterns in English and Uzbek folklore, which will be discussed in the next section.

### DISCUSSION

The results of this narratological comparison show that two tales featuring animal tricksters can produce opposite narrative outcomes and moral messages. This section interprets those findings in light of cultural history, folklore theory, and previous scholarship. First, consider the English tale. The Fox and the Cat belongs to a genre sometimes called the "beast fable," which was popular in medieval and early modern England. As Simpson and Roud (2000) note, English beast fables often served as cautionary tales for rural laborers. The fox, a common predator of chickens, was associated with slyness, but slyness was not always admired. In many English tales,



the fox is outsmarted by a seemingly weaker animal, or he falls victim to his own overconfidence. This reflects a pragmatic cultural ethos: survival depends on practical, proven skills, not on clever talk. The cat's one trick – climbing a tree – is a real, physical skill. The fox's hundred tricks are abstract and performative. The tale thus encodes a suspicion of intellectual pretension and a respect for humble competence. Thomas (1971) argued that pre-industrial English folklore often warned against “cunning” in the sense of manipulative intelligence, favoring instead “craft” – skilled manual labor. The fox's death is a narrative enactment of that warning.

Bassin (1999) makes a similar observation about tricksters across Central Asian folklore. He argues that trickster figures often function as “social levelers” who expose and punish the greed of the powerful. The fox in the Uzbek tale is not a trickster but a greedy liar. The monkey becomes the trickster only to restore balance. This is different from the English tale, where the fox is the only trickster figure and he fails. In the English cultural logic, trickery itself is suspect. In the Uzbek cultural logic, trickery is a neutral tool that becomes good or bad depending on who uses it and for what purpose.

### CONCLUSION

This comparative narratological study of the English fox and the Uzbek monkey has demonstrated that the trickster archetype is not culturally uniform. Using the analytical tools of order, focalization, voice, and narrative outcome, the study found systematic differences between the two tales. The English Fox and the Cat employs a linear, ironic structure in which the boastful fox dies because his cunning remains at the level of virtuality. The tale reinforces an individualistic, pragmatic moral: one reliable skill is better than a hundred abstract tricks. This reflects a cultural suspicion of manipulative intelligence and a preference for practical competence.

The Uzbek Monkey and the Fox employs a cyclical, shifting-focalization structure in which the victimized monkey becomes a trickster to punish greed and restore justice. The tale ends with communal sharing, reinforcing the Central Asian value of adolat (fairness). Trickery is morally neutral; it becomes good when it serves the community. These findings contribute to both narratology and folklore studies. For narratology, they show that formal categories must be interpreted in cultural context. For folklore studies, they show that the trickster archetype carries different ideological meanings in different traditions. Future research should expand the corpus, examine human tricksters, and explore the impact of political regimes on folklore collection.

In the end, the fox and the monkey both teach lessons about cunning. But the English fox teaches what not to do: do not boast, do not hesitate. The Uzbek monkey teaches what to do: be patient, outsmart the greedy, and share the reward. Two tales, one



archetype, two worlds of meaning.

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