

The Blacksmith and the Devil: A Sociolinguistic Analysis

by
Susan McCullough

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
Languages of Storytelling - READ 5190-201
Dr. Joseph Sobol
Instructor

East Tennessee State University
April 28, 2012

The Storyteller and the Story

Richard Martin is an Englishman who moved to Germany in 1976 in his mid-twenties to spend a year there with his German fiancée. That year extended to a lifetime of teaching English to speakers of other languages and storytelling, often in combination. A perusal of his website indicates that most of his tales are folktales, told in a lively manner for audiences around Germany, other European countries and even North America. He offers workshops on Storytelling in ESL, the classroom and in other areas. His main workshop clients seem to be universities, instructional institutions and language schools, judging by the current workshop schedule on his website (Martin, n.d.).

Martin is unusual among storytellers in that his website offers a number of stories for the visitor to view and hear at no charge. He is generous with his work, so that those unfamiliar with storytelling can get, not only a taste, but a nice size sample of his telling and hear several complete stories. The videos are recorded from live performances while the audio performances are from his CD's.

The story under analysis is *The Blacksmith and the Devil*, Aarne-Thompson tale type 330A, *Supernatural Adversary* (MacDonald, p. 348). Martin's performance can be found in video format on his website (Martin, blacksmith). The bones of the story are

St. Peter in disguise is fed by the smith. He grants three wishes. The smith asks that anyone sitting in his chair stick, anyone holding his hammer stick, that anyone touching his thornbush be pulled into bush and held. Two little devils and Satan are thus vanquished. The smith is refused entry to heaven by St.

Peter. At hell's gate he is given a coal to go make his own place. (MacDonald, p. 348.)

Involvement Strategies

Martin makes extensive and effective use of direct quotes (Chafe, p. 48), or rather, dialogue since it is a folktale, in this story. The conversations between Jack the blacksmith and St. Peter and later between Jack and the various devils are full and rich, adding to the character of Jack as a heedless, boorish and contrary individual. Martin, through the dialogue, is able to place Jack right in front of us, making him someone we can see and experience.

That's one wish for a start

That old rocking chair.

It is **so** comfortable that **a::nyone** who comes in here

into this forge to give me the little bit of work

why...they think they can sit in that rocking chair

and **rock** and **rock** and **rock**

whilst I hammer away on the anvil.

Ah.. that makes me so mad.

My first wish is anyone.. who sits in that rocking chair

that rocking chair will start rocking, rocking, **rocking**

so hard their head will **bang** on the floor [audience laughter]

and will **bang** on the wall [audience laughter]

and it will carry on til I tell it to stop.¹

When Martin speaks as Jack, he is loud and there is heavy, varying emphasis on

¹ Underscore indicates emphasis. **Bold** indicates strong emphasis.

different words throughout nearly every sentence. His voice roughens and thickens, becoming gruff and almost burly, in a sense. Martin describes Jack as contrary and his dialogue and quotation shows a character who revels in his contrary nature. In this voice-giving, Martin demonstrates what Tannen calls a character who takes on life and breath (2007, p. 106).

Martin also involves his audience by monitoring the flow of information (Chafe, p. 47). This can be seen in several places such as when he first mentions that the story revolves around a blacksmith. Many folks may not know exactly what a blacksmith did, even if they are familiar with the word, so Martin, almost parenthetically and briefly explains:

It's a tale... that starts with a blacksmith.

You know?

The man who has the forge with the fire

He checks in with the audience, asking if they know what a blacksmith is. He manages this in a way that does not patronize his listeners, especially since the elements of his definition, i.e. the forge, the anvil, and horseshoes, are mentioned several times later in the story.

Martin tells us later that Jack offers a beggar, St. Peter in disguise, charity simply because no one else in the village had, just to be contrary and awkward, and made sure to do it loudly in a manner that insulted his neighbors.

“Come in, beggar! I’ll give you to eat and drink even if no one else in the village will.

Huh.”

Ya see?

He was like that.

Again, Martin uses this brief phrase, “ya see” to monitor his audience, to see if they have understood why such a rude and contrary cuss as Jack was offering kindness to the old ragged beggar. It is a skillful use of the strategy at this point, to slow the story down just enough for the listeners to assimilate the fact that an unkind person was performing an act of kindness.

Later still in the story, Jack has been warned to think of his soul when making his wishes.

“But Jack, when you wish, think well on your eternal soul”.....

Jack.. the sort of person that he was.....

do you think he thought of his eternal soul at all?Of course he didn't. [small ripple of laughter from audience]

The long pause at the end of the first line is reflective; the audience has time to think about this statement and realize that this is a futile command from St. Peter. So, even when Martin asks the question, “do you think...?” and answers immediately on the heels of it, it doesn't matter because he has allowed the audience to deduce the answer before the question was even asked and is still able to get a laugh. He is still involving them in the process of evaluating Jack's character and monitoring the flow of information.

Martin makes very limited use of first-person reference, but this is to be expected in a folktale. It is only in the opening where he is framing his story and telling his

audience where he first heard the tale that he refers to himself. Even in the closing of the story, there is no first-person reference. This is appropriate. If there were, it would distract from the story itself.

Martin makes minimal use of emphatic particles (Chafe, p. 47) per se in this story although he employs interjections throughout the story, such as “huh” “ah” and “ha”, which serve much the same purpose. In the above sample where Jack is calling to the beggar to come in, Martin has a short “huh” at the end of Jack’s statement, which has a “so there!” tone to it. In the passage where he is making his first wish for the rocking chair (above), Jack says,

“Ah..that makes me so mad.”

This is one of the few places we find an emphatic particle, “so”, but also the “ah”, which is short and truncated and serves to emphasize the emotion in the rest of the sentence.

The other involvement strategies mentioned by Chafe, speaker’s mental processes (p. 46) and fuzziness (p. 48) were not observed in this story.

Repetition

Repetition is found throughout the story and brings a sense of rhythm and builds anticipation. Martin uses immediate repetition, where words are repeated right away, such as

He could see that old man
going from door to door,
house to house
knocking, knocking.

He could see he was a beggar.

“Door to door”, “house to house” and “knocking, knocking” all serve to show the rhythmic, measured movement as the old man worked his way through the village until he arrived at the forge.

In this next sample, Martin uses the phrase, “a deal is a deal and a wish is a wish”.

Jack Jack Jack,
not what I wanted to hear
but a deal is a deal
and a wish is a wish
and those three are yours.

That phrase, or a variation of it, is heard each time Jack uses one of his wishes and expresses regret at the nature of his wish. The repetition *of* the phrase and the repetition *within* the phrase itself builds the tension around those wishes and the eventual consequences to Jack. Intensity is suggested by the repeated use of Jack’s name at the beginning of the sample (Tannen, 2007, p.76).

In the following sample, several forms of repetition can be seen in close proximity.

As soon as his devil’s bottom touched that chair,
whoo!
it started rocking.
His head banged on the wall.
It banged on the floor.

And Jack,
he just looked and he looked
and he laughed and he laughed.

Ha! Ha! Ha:a!

“Let me go! Let me go! Let me go:o!” [falsetto]

“I’ll let you go

if..

you promise to get back down to hell

and never trouble me again.”

There’s the patterned rhythm of “banged on the wall-banged on the floor” (Tannen, 2007, p. 75) and a run of immediate repetition with “looked and looked”, “laughed and laughed” and the “let me go” series. Put together, it makes for a funny sequence that builds to a climax while setting the pattern for the next two infernal visits.

Martin makes extensive use of all of these sorts of repetition throughout the tale, which could become tedious except they flow naturally through his speech, greatly adding to the story for the listener rather than detracting.

Paralinguistics

The character of Jack is greatly enhanced by Martin’s use of voice. As mentioned before, Martin’s voice often becomes gruff and loud, his tone deeper, when quoting Jack. He also speaks a good bit faster, with his tempo increasing, and expresses hearty satisfaction at the idea of his neighbors and customers “getting theirs”

through his chair, hammer and thornbush wishes. Little of this is actually verbalized. Most of it is demonstrated through the tempo and pitch of his voice.

He speaks more calmly and slower for St. Peter and even the Devil has an overall calmer non-verbal presence than Jack, even when impatient and frustrated. This creates a strong contrast to Jack with his crass wishes and low-down motivation.

Martin's delivery of the story is smooth; the only "uh" or "um" at the very beginning, when he introduces the story:

...first time I'd seen it
and the next day, at home,
a-an old man, Peter [?] was his name,
he came a-around, he used to help in the garden...

Martin uses his facial expressions to emphasize and expand on the verbal aspects of the story. For example, after Jack makes his first wish, St. Peter expresses dismay and disappointment through Martin's expression as well as his words. At time marker 4:54, his eyes grow round, his eyebrows rise and his jaw drops open. At 5:22, when Jack is complaining that he can never find his hammer because "every Tom, Dick and Harry" has borrowed it, Martin's eyebrows lower and his lips purse in a marked glower.

Gestures that are easy to spot from the Cassell and McNeill article (2004) are iconic, metaphoric and diectic. Examples of iconic gestures can be seen when he is hammering at the anvil with his forearm moving up and down (4:30), and picking a rose, using his hand to reach out and pluck an invisible rose (6:05). Metaphoric gesture is

demonstrated when Jack's life comes to an end (11:30-42) and Martin, with both hands open, offers them outward in what Cassell and McNeill describe as a "process" gesture (p. 133). Martin utilizes a number of deictic gestures; three of these are pointing towards the rose bush when Jack makes his third wish (5:52) and gesturing to the chair, hammer and rosebush when telling about the trouble caused by the three wishes (6:48). At 8:44, the Devil gestures upward, from Hell to Jack, when directing his son to go and get Jack.

Comparing the Performance to the Conversational Story

Both Martin and my friend Bob told engaging stories. Martin clearly demonstrated a stronger "story sense" although Bob can certainly spin a yarn. Martin knew where his story was going and how he was going to get there. He had no extraneous wording, hesitations or details, nor was there a lack of clarity in his narrative; there was no need to ask questions for additional understanding.

Martin's use of gesture was intentional, enhancing and complementing the story. Bob's gestures were those of conversation and discourse; he used them without thought or intention. Martin's characters, though fictional and stereotypical, if not archetypal (the blacksmith, the saint, the devil), were more interesting than Bob's Ms. Fitzgerald and Tommy McNamara, who were easy to dislike but not entertaining. It was the character of Bob himself who was the main interest in his story. Being able to interact with Bob while he told his story and being able to interject comments made for a greater level of social involvement and connection although I was just as engaged while listening to the Martin story, though not in a social sense. None the less, Martin's

storytelling style feels like he is simply talking to people, not "*Performing*", although he is obviously much more polished and accomplished than any conversational, kitchen table storyteller.

Narrative Structure

This story is, on the surface, a *pourquoi* tale of why we have “Jack o’ Lanterns”, or “will o’ the wisps”. It’s also a trickster tale where a man outwits the Devil, or in some cases, Death.

I have chosen to examine how Martin structures his telling based on Scheub’s “First Principles”: Image, Narrative, Rhythm, and Trope in order to look for the emotional context of this story and see if I can find a deeper meaning than what appears on the surface (Scheub, 1998).

Image

A Blacksmith. Saint Peter. The Devil. Three main characters, all strong images. A blacksmith works at his forge, strong and alone, wielding fire, using it to mold and form iron, one of the hardest substances around, to his will. This particular blacksmith, is contrary and obnoxious, the type who will go out of his way to annoy his neighbor. Through his use of gestures and tone of voice, Martin creates a blacksmith who shows great pleasure in owning a rocking chair who will rock people into the wall and the floor (miming the rocking), a hammer that will cause them to beat their own heads in (iconic gesture) and a thornbush that will painfully prick and poke them (iconic hugging). The three items become scary images in their own right as the story progresses, inanimate objects that grab a hold, injure, and do not let go.

The saint, a pure soul from heaven. In this story, it is St. Peter, who holds the keys to the Gates of Heaven. He is walking the earth in disguise looking to reward an act of kindness with three wishes. The three wishes is also strong image. While in most stories, this gift is meant to be used wisely and benevolently, it seldom works out that way. Based on the tales I have read over a lifetime, they often cause more trouble than they are worth, but we don't learn that until it's almost too late. Isn't that what we all want? Three wishes, secretly planning to use the third to "wish for more wishes". In the stories, we end up with sausages on our noses instead and are lucky to end up back to our normal shape.

The Devil coming to collect a soul to take back to Hell. The most evil character we could ask for in a story and the opposite of the saint. He takes not only our life, but locks our soul into eternal torment.

The tension created by these characters is off set by the humor created by the situation. Martin makes full use of the humor inherent in the story and successfully elicits audience laughter.

Narrative

Martin sets up the story by telling us of strange lights he witnesses one evening over the marsh and how he learned the story of "Jack o' Lantern". He then flows into the traditional tale where we have an irascible blacksmith who does a good deed for all the wrong reasons, earning himself three wishes. Despite being warned before each wish to think of his eternal soul, each time, he wishes for something that will potentially cause harm to others and anticipates how much he will enjoy watching this. Martin

depicts this both verbally but especially through his gestures, his movements. Despite the saint's disappointment, he grants these wishes. Years pass and the Devil sees that it is time to collect the blacksmith's soul. He sends first one little devil, then another and finally has to go himself, but Martin shows us how all three are overcome by the blacksmith's wit and use of three objects of his wishes. It seems that the blacksmith's wishes have saved his soul after all. But Martin takes us further. The blacksmith may have cheated the Devil but he can not live forever and one day arrives at the Pearly Gates. We learn, through St. Peter, that he has only one good deed to his name: the act of charity that earned him the wishes. The kind act that he committed for unkind reasons. St. Peter checks his bad deeds and finds page after page. Indeed, the blacksmith has not taken any care for his soul and is sent away to The Other Place. Hell. The problem is that the devils see him coming and, in fear, shut him out, leaving him to walk the earth alone with a single burning piece of coal, of "hellfire" for light, to be forever known as Jack o' Lantern.

Rhythm

The story has the classic set of three upon which it is patterned. Three main characters, three wishes, three visits from devils. This is the rhythmic framework of the story. Within that are the smaller choruses: good deeds are rewarded, meanness also has its own sort of reward. Martin's use of repetition, described above, adds to the rhythm of the story, building, a beat and pattern of expectation and anticipation of what is to come for the blacksmith at the end of the story. From the "Jack o' Lantern" set up

of the story, we have the added suspense of waiting for the story to come full circle, of waiting for that final beat.

Trope

Searching through this story for its tropes, we find the three wishes, the reward for good deeds and punishment for bad deeds, a classic humorous devil character and St. Peter at the Gate. Scheub says the purpose of trope is to “harness the emotions of the members of the audience” (p. 127). The tropes listed here embody the emotions of hope and fear. (The Devil may be humorous, but I would suggest this is to make the concept of Death and Hell less frightening.) The trope that is less obvious, because it is part of the “punchline” of the story, the answer to the *pourquoi*, is Jack o’ Lantern, himself. A solitary, lonely character with whom many people can identify. He is unlovable, which is a fear of many lonely people. Unacceptable to heaven and unwanted even by hell, he is left to wander alone, in the dark, no less, for all eternity.

So, though humorous, this is a tale that touches on our deepest fears: not fitting in, being alone, being unwanted, being an outcast and being cast out. It is also a warning tale. St. Peter tells us three times in the story: take care for our souls.

Bibliography

- Cassell, J. & McNeill, D. (2004). Gesture and the Poetics of Prose. In Marie-Laure Ryan (ed.), *Narrative across media: the languages of storytelling* (pp. 108-137). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Chafe, W. (1982). Integration and Involvement in Speaking, Writing, and Oral Literature. In Deborah Tannen (ed.), *Spoken and written language: exploring orality and literacy*, 35-53.- Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- MacDonald, M. R. (1982). *The storyteller's sourcebook: a subject, title, and motif index to folklore collections for children*. Detroit, Mich.: Neal-Schuman Publishers in association with Gale Research.
- Martin, R. (n.d.). Richard Martin Storyteller. Retrieved April 27, 2012, from <http://www.tellatale.eu>
- Martin, R. (n.d.). Richard Martin Storyteller: The Blacksmith and the Devil. Retrieved April 23, 2012, from http://www.tellatale.eu/tales_blacksmith_devil.html
- Scheub, H. (1998). *Story*. Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Tannen, D. (2007). *Talking voices: repetition, dialogue, and imagery in conversational discourse* (2. ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.