

## BOOK REVIEWS

### GENERAL

DOLBY STAHL, SANDRA. *Literary Folkloristics and the Personal Narrative*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989. xi + 148 pages. Figures, appendix, bibliography, index. Cloth US\$25.00; ISBN 0-253-33515-9.

In his review of the folkloristics of the last few decades, Roger D. Abrahams characterized American research as "experience-centered": "As folklorists, we were primarily concerned with everyday exchanges, and with the ways in which those expectations became more self-evident and self-reflexive under conditions of performance and celebration" (ABRAHAMS 1992, 35).

Sandra Dolby Stahl (at the time this book was written an associate professor at the Indiana University Folklore and American Studies Department) followed this trend when she used the methods of literary folkloristics to analyze personal narratives. According to Stahl, literary folkloristics is a "perspective, . . . an interpretive scheme that capitalizes upon the complexity of and basic similarity among the theories of folkloristic performance, deconstructive criticism, and reader-response theory, . . . an integrative criticism which identifies the many private or collective traditions that function as meaningful allusion in the reader's or the listener's interpretation of a literary or folkloric text. Exploring the relationship between these traditions and the listener's/reader's interpretation of the text is the objective of this kind of criticism" (1).

This definition shows many similarities with Fernando POYATOS's definition of literary anthropology: "[a] research area . . . based on the anthropologically oriented use of the narrative literature of the different cultures, . . . as they constitute the richest sources of documentation for both synchronic and diachronic analyses of people's ideas and behavior. From the early epics to the contemporary novel, the various types of realism we can differentiate can be systematically studied as invaluable sources, often the only ones . . . for documentation of a) sensible systems, i.e., verbal language, paralinguage, . . . culture specific kinesics, . . . proxemics, . . . and b) intelligible systems: from religious thought, rituals, celebrations" (1988, xii-xiii).

Although Stahl does not directly use Poyatos's work or Poyatos's approach (which she derives from Richard M. Dorson, and which is based on the identification of folklore in literature) or employ the traditional folkloristics that approaches verbal texts as though they were literature, she sees these as forming the background of her research. Literary folkloristics, apart from revealing the traditional elements that occur in the text, emphasizes the meaning these references have for the listener: the process of listening to a text is a creative activity "in which the listener's own large store of cultural and personal resources is used to produce a unified resonance of meaning" (2). The author thus stresses the *performance*; she analyzes those personal narratives that were "collected" by her, that is, those narratives that she actually heard, so that she herself was a participant in the experience of listening to the story. Perhaps because of this, she is an expert on all the references, both obvious and hidden, that the story

contains. The subject of her analysis is not the written text but the heard text, a genre of text that has only recently been acknowledged by folkloristics.

Stahl's theoretical introduction to the book embraces the topics of text versus context (with an enumeration of contextualist thought); hearing the text (the conflict between emic and etic analysis); allusion (because the listener of a personal narrative can perceive tradition by hearing allusions, he or she does not need as great a store of specific knowledge as the reader of a sophisticated poem); literary folkloristics, and natural inquiry.

In chapter 2 the genre of personal narrative is introduced by defining its structure, function, and stable content (characters, values and events, thematic and structural types). One of the more remarkable statements appearing in this chapter is that "the overall function of the personal narrative is to maintain the stability of an individual personality rather than an entire culture" (21).

Chapter 3 deals with the interpretation of the personal narrative text through exploration of the interpretive context. The folk-group categories, each of them situated along the esoteric-exoteric axis, have stressed roles. The author demonstrates how an intimacy can emerge between the narrator and the audience, citing a case in which conditions were appropriate for esoteric allusion. She holds that the folklore scholar has an important role to play: only a trained interpreter of this type can recognize all of the references in a personal narrative, even those that (according to later analysis) both the narrator and the audience were unaware of.

Chapters 4 and 5, comprising more than two-thirds of the volume, are an analysis both grand in scale and microscopic in accuracy of two individual texts. Basing her analysis on the models worked out in her theoretical chapters, Stahl creates an instructional text in analytical segments—a text that allows the interpreter to document contextuality. She encloses a summary list of analytical codes adapted from Alan DUNDES (1980) for each segment of the text.

Stahl's analytical method is worthy of application in various fields of folkloristics. Her book also makes for exciting reading, since studies of folklore theory rarely contain usable source analyses. My principal concern is that the thoroughness of her textual interpretations, though approachable by other scholars, may in the end prove unreachable. For all their expertise, folklorists are rarely able, even when researching their own family, friends, and native culture, to understand every reference better than the participants themselves. It is precisely through the analysis of narratives that the outside observer would like to gather information when researching other cultures.

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