

Hungarian Folktales

Through the Lens of Gyula Illyés's Collection

Klara K. Papp and Kristina M. Walter

Abstract: This study analyzes the thematic and structural features of seventy-seven Hungarian folktales drawn from Gyula Illyés's *Hetvenhét magyar népmese*, to assess their contemporary relevance and their value for children's moral and imaginative development. Each tale was assigned to one dominant genre—Fairy/Magic Tale, Silly/Trickster Tale, Hero Tale, Animal Tale, Legend/Ballad-like Tale, or Realistic/Novella Tale—prioritizing functional narrative logic and cultural context. Findings reveal substantial variation across genres, illustrating the breadth of Hungarian folklore tradition. Recurring features include the underestimated hero, the reciprocity of good deeds, culturally distinctive motifs such as the ash-baked scone (*hamuban sült pogácsa*) and the magical steed (*táltos paripa*), and imaginative preambles that explicitly mark the tales as fictional creations intended for enjoyment. Rather than uniformly reinforcing gendered mate-selection narratives, the tales emphasize resilience, wit, reciprocity, and moral agency. Interpreted through an ethnographic lens, these narratives function as culturally embedded expressions of communal values and worldviews. The study concludes that Hungarian folktales retain significant pedagogical and relational value: their imaginative power, moral clarity, and performative vitality make them well worth retelling to today's youth, especially within interactive storytelling contexts that strengthen adult-child bonds.

Keywords: *folktales, Hungarian folktales, Gyula Illyés, Content analysis*

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Introduction

Folktales have long captivated the imagination of people across cultures and generations. Before written literature emerged, they served as vessels for human creativity and communal expression. A tale recounted beside a shepherd's fire on a summer night might be retold by women weaving on their looms in the wintertime. Unable to recall every detail, the storyteller may have embellished the story in her own way. Passed down orally through centuries, folktales retained their essential narrative threads even as some of the minor details changed (Propp 1968). In this manner, folktales educate, entertain, and nurture creativity, ultimately forging connections among people of all ages.

For a myriad of reasons that are beyond the scope of this paper, the art of storytelling is less prevalent today than it was in times past. This study examines the central attributes of a sample of Hungarian folktales that contribute to their ongoing relevance and advocates for preserving the practice of sharing these stories with our children. Psychologically oriented folklorists argue that folktales express universal human concerns—growing up, experiencing separation, choosing a mate, and seeking one's life path. Gottschall's content analysis supports this view, identifying common patterns across a wide selection of societies, including altruism, mate preferences, reproductive strategies, and gendered expectations (Gottschall 2003). Gottschall's sample included a small selection of Hungarian folktales, clustered with other cultures. His results inspired the present study, which focuses exclusively on Hungarian folktales.

Research Question

This study asks the following questions: What are the dominant themes in Hungarian folktales? Do these tales primarily address the search for a mate? If so, do they display gender bias, presenting active male heroes rewarded with passive female partners? Are these themes predominant, and if so, do they merit retelling to today's youth?

Methods

This project involved five steps: selecting a collection of tales, scanning the folktales, coding their thematic content, analyzing patterns, and assessing reliability.

Selecting the Collection

The sample consisted of Gyula Illyés's anthology *Hetvenhét magyar népmese* [Seventy-Seven Hungarian Folktales] (Móra Ferenc Könyvkiadó, 1997). This widely circulated anthology provides a suitable and meaningful corpus for thematic analysis because it brings together high-quality oral-tradition folktales drawn from authoritative Hungarian collectors and regional storytellers. Although the volume is a curated selection rather than a raw archival record, its tales preserve the stylistic features, narrative structures, and culturally embedded motifs characteristic of Hungarian oral storytelling. Presumably, the anthology spans a broad range of established folkloristic genres, allowing for comparative investigation across diverse narrative types. The cultural prominence of

Illyés's collection further strengthens its relevance, as these stories constitute a central reference point in Hungarian childhood, collective memory, and national self-understanding. For a study concerned with thematic patterns, moral content, and psychological resonance, the Illyés corpus offers both depth and representativeness while remaining accessible and coherent enough for systematic coding and analysis.¹ The entire collection is also freely available online.²

Scanning the Folktales

Initially, each folktale was to be coded according to twelve variables. The elaborate coding scheme analyzed each for the protagonist's age, marital status, gender, and outcome (among other variables; see Appendix for the entire coding form). The folktales exhibited remarkable variability. Early in the process, we found that many folktales displayed characteristics that exceeded the boundaries of the coding form, and the categories did not fit (Papp 2017). We therefore dispensed with the coding form and classified each folktale only according to its genre. Hungarian folklorists use the Aarne–Thompson–Uther (ATU) tale-type index as an international framework but do not strictly adhere to it. They routinely pair it with the more detailed *Magyar Népmesekatalógus* (MNK). While the ATU number identifies the global narrative structure (Uther 2004), the MNK refines these categories through culturally specific subtypes, regional variants, and motif indexing (Voigt 1976; Dégh 1969). This dual system preserves international comparability while more accurately capturing the richness of Hungarian oral tradition (Nagy 2002).

Although the ATU tale-type index was developed for classifying oral folktales, it distinguishes oral and written narratives only implicitly, treating authored literary tales as secondary parallels rather than primary data (Uther 2004). In contrast, Hungarian folkloristics—particularly in the *Magyar Népmesekatalógus* (MNK)—makes this distinction explicit: only orally transmitted variants are catalogued as type-defining, while literary retellings appear merely as adaptations or comparative notes (Dégh 1976; Voigt 1969). This approach reflects the strong Hungarian emphasis on performance context, regional variation, and the fluidity of oral tradition (Nagy 2002).

Coding their thematic content

For quantitative analysis, each of the seventy-seven Hungarian folktales in the corpus was assigned to one and only one genre category. Although many narratives exhibit hybrid structures or contain motifs associated with multiple traditions, a single dominant functional genre was identified for each tale to ensure consistent counting and comparability. This approach follows standard practice

¹While Illyés's anthology is highly valuable, it is not exhaustive of Hungarian narrative tradition and reflects the compiler's aesthetic and pedagogical preferences. For comprehensive tale-type comparison, regional variation, and full motif indexing, researchers typically supplement such anthologies with the Aarne–Thompson–Uther (ATU) index and the Hungarian national catalogue, the *Magyar Népmesekatalógus* (MNK), as well as archival collections maintained by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (e.g., Ortutay, Voigt, and Dégh). Despite these limitations, the present study will confine the analysis to Illyés's anthology.

² https://konyvtar.dia.hu/html/muvek/ILLYES/illyes02033_kv.html

in folktale research, where classification emphasizes the tale's primary narrative logic, structural core, and cultural function rather than its secondary or overlapping features.

The six broad genre categories used here—Fairy/Magic Tale, Silly/Trickster Tale, Hero Tale, Animal Tale, Realistic/Novella Tale, Legend/Ballad-like Tale—were adapted from Hungarian folkloristic tradition (especially the *Magyar Népmesekatalógus*) and harmonized with international genre schemas (Uther 2004).³ Tales were coded according to their predominant characteristics: for example, narratives driven by supernatural intervention or enchanted beings were classified as Fairy/Magic Tales even if they contained heroic elements; humorous stories with anthropomorphic animals were placed in the Humorous/Anecdotal category if the comic function outweighed animal fable conventions.

This operationalization prioritizes internal coherence and statistical clarity while acknowledging that some narratives could plausibly fit into more than one category depending on the interpretive frame. By applying a consistent set of criteria to the entire corpus, the genre distribution presented in the analysis reflects both the diversity and structural tendencies of the Hungarian folktale tradition.

Frequency counts and illustrative examples of folktales are provided within each category.

1. Fairy/Magic Tales (32 tales; 42%)

Péter Virág [Virág Péter]

Three multi-headed dragons abduct a farmer's three daughters, and the three sons who try to rescue them are killed. Their mother later swallows a magical flower and gives birth to a supernatural (*táltos*) child, Péter Virág, who grows at an exceptionally fast rate. When he is strong enough, he asks his mother to bake three scones (*pogácsa*) using her own breast milk and wrap each with a sister's kerchief and ring. With these tokens, he visits the dragons one by one and proves his kinship to his sisters. He outwits and overpowers the six-, twelve-, and twenty-four-headed dragons, kills or spares them, and forces the last one to revive his dead brothers with the dragon's blood. He brings all six of his siblings home to their mother, celebrates with them, then returns to the earth from which he was mystically born.

This is a textbook example of one of the richest and most distinctive narrative groups in Hungarian folklore. It is a classic Hungarian *sárkányölő táltoshős*, a narrative featuring a miraculous birth, dragon-slaying hero with superhuman strength, the symbolism of the scone (*pogácsa*) made with mother's milk, the rescue of abducted family members, and a combat-driven quest, culminating in the hero's return to the underworld.

³ Uther explicitly describes the ATU index as an international, harmonized system integrating national folktale catalogues (including Hungarian).

2. Silly or Trickster Tales (19 tales; 24%)

The little intestinal sack [A kis gömböc]

A talking intestinal sack swallows an entire family, a group of laborers, and a regiment of soldiers before being split open—accidentally—by a young swineherd's pocketknife.

While absurd, the story highlights resourcefulness and the unexpected competence of a humble youth. These imaginative, often absurd stories stimulate imagination and creativity and are infused with humor and wit.

3. Hero's Tales (8 tales; 10%)

The tree that reached the sky [Az égigérő fa]

A swineherd named János climbs a miraculous tree that reaches the sky to stop the theft of the king's magical apples. At the top, he finds another world, enters the castle of Princess Etelka, and becomes her servant and then fiancé. When he disobeys her warning and frees a seven-headed dragon, the monster later abducts her. With the help of supernatural (*táltos*) horses and magical helpers, János overcomes a series of trials, defeats the dragon, and rescues Etelka, returning her safely home.

The tale emphasizes courage, endurance, and the passage between earthly and otherworldly spheres.

4. Animal Tales (7 tales; 9%)

The Fox, the Bear, and the Poor Man [A róka, a medve és a szegény ember]

A poor farmer goes out to plow with his two cows and discovers a bear absurdly fighting a tiny rabbit; he laughs, angering the bear, who threatens to eat him and his cows that evening. Desperate, the farmer encounters a fox, who promises to save him in exchange for nine hens and a rooster. Following the plan, the fox mimics hunters' horn calls, frightening the bear into hiding inside a dirty sack; the farmer then "tests" the sack with his axe, killing the bear. The fox demands his promised reward the next morning, but the farmer tricks him by barking like dogs until the terrified fox flees, leaving the man safe, wealthy with bear meat, and proud of winning by wit rather than strength.

Ultimately, the tale affirms the value of resourcefulness, improvisation, and survival through cleverness.

5. Legends / Ballad-like Tales (6 tales; 8%)

King Matthias and the old man [Mátyás király meg az öreg ember]

In this popular Hungarian anecdotal folktale, fifteenth-century King Matthias—disguised while traveling among his subjects—encounters an old man and tests his wisdom, honesty, or sense of justice. Through their exchange, the old man reveals a clear moral insight or practical folk wisdom, prompting Matthias to reward him generously.

The tale exemplifies the Hungarian tradition of King Matthias legends, in which the king appears as a just, approachable ruler who values the moral authority of common people over formal power.

6. Novella – realistic tales (5; 7%)

The goatherd's son [A kecskepásztor fia]

A goatherd's son discovers a hidden door in a hillside that leads to an underground chamber filled with treasure. He secretly removes some gold and silver, but the magical door closes behind him and traps him inside for seven years. A giant keeps him alive by giving him enchanted stones that satisfy hunger and thirst. When the door finally reopens, the boy escapes, retrieves the treasure he hid, and returns home. His greedy godfather attempts to seize the treasure for himself, but his greed causes the entire hoard to vanish into the earth, even costing him an arm. The goatherd's son and his father take only what they can carry, become prosperous through honest means, and the son marries a poor girl. The greedy godfather is punished, while the humble family rises to fortune. Though a supernatural element is present, it is not central; the moral/social contrast is core to this story.

Analyzing patterns

Preambles A significant defining feature of Hungarian folktales is that neither narrators nor listeners presume them to be true. They are understood as fictional creations that amuse and stimulate the imagination. In Hungarian, to say "this is a tale" ("ez mese") explicitly signals its fictive nature. The Hungarian preambles of folktales reinforce this understanding. While English tales begin with the somewhat ambiguous "once upon a time," Hungarian tales often open with formulas such as: "Once there was, where there was not, far beyond the glass mountains where the short-tailed pig roots around." Such openings clearly announce the story's imaginative character.

Some elaborate preambles—likely shortened when written down—survive in textual form, including the following example. This is a literal translation:

Once there was, where there was not, beyond seven times seven countries, there was a great sea. In that great sea, there was a great fish. On that fish's molar tooth, this tale was written.

Egyszer volt, hol nem volt, hetedhét országon is túl volt, volt egy nagy tenger. Abban a nagy tengerben volt egy nagy hal. Annak zápfogára volt írva ez a mese (Illyés 2006: 319).

The preamble may be its own absurd, laughable story, which is another way of preparing you for what you are about to hear is a fabrication.

Once upon a time, where it was and where it wasn't, beyond the land of seven times seven kingdoms, I saddled a tan-colored steed, swung myself onto its back, and galloped straight into the deep forest. I ate my fill and drank my fill, laid my horse under my head for a pillow, and fell fast asleep. But when I awoke—the horse was gone, stolen clean away. I

was frightened. So off I ran up a high mountain, and from the mountain up a tall tree, and I shook that tree so fiercely that strawberries, plums, and hazelnuts came raining down, nearly cracking my head open. Just then, an old woman screeched at me: "Hah, you rascal of a child! Don't you go trampling the carrots and the radishes—you weren't the one who planted the cabbage!"

Hol volt, hol nem volt, hetedhét országon is túl volt, fölnyergeltem egy fakót, felültem a hátára, és kiszaladtam az erdőbe. Jól ittam, jól ettem, a fakót a fejem alá tettem. Egyszer felébredtem, ellopták a fakót. Akkor megijedtem. Fölszaladtam egy hegyre, hegyről meg a fára. Úgy megráztam a fát, hogy az eper, szilva, mogyoró majd beszaggatta a fejem. Egyszer rám kiáltott egy öregasszony: Haj, haj, te gyerek! Ne gázold el a répát, retket, mert nem te ültetted el a káposztát (Illyés 2006: 57).

These playful openings detach the narrative from everyday reality, inviting creative engagement. Imagination, as scholars have noted, is essential to cognitive growth and innovation. Every advance in human history begins with the human imagination. As a prime example, as McCorduck argues, "the concept of artificial intelligence (AI) originated in antiquity, with myths, stories, and rumors of artificial beings endowed with intelligence or consciousness by master artisans" (McCorduck 1977: 951). Any significant change in human existence, whatever it is, must be born first in the mind. Uniquely, folktales have the power to ignite human intelligence and cultivate the spark of creativity, allowing us to imagine the absurd and things believed to be totally out of the realm of possibility (yet, which may eventually become possible). Lüthi, Bettelheim, and Piaget have demonstrated the influence of folktales on children's imaginative and cognitive development (Bettelheim 1976; Lüthi 1984; Piaget, 1959, 1962); Tancz describes how folktales contribute to the development of communication skills and personality formation in childhood (Tancz 2009).

Recurring Features Our findings align more closely with ethnographic approaches that interpret folktales as culturally specific artifacts encoding the values, social norms, and worldviews of the communities from which they originate. From this perspective, a tale's meaning is inseparable from its cultural context. We found notable recurring themes.

- **The underestimated hero:** The protagonist is often the youngest or weakest son or neglected stepdaughter, socially or physically disadvantaged, who ultimately triumphs.
- **Reciprocity of good deeds:** The principle that one good deed deserves another "*jó tett helyébe jót várj*" recurs. Acts of kindness toward elderly figures or animals result in magical or practical assistance.
- **The ash-baked scone:** "*hamuban sült pogácsa*" A culturally distinctive symbol, this bread — prepared by the hero's mother—represents spiritual and moral inheritance. When the hero grows weary or discouraged, eating it restores his hope and strength. His willingness to share it often becomes a turning point in his journey.
- **The supernatural steed:** "*táltos paripa*" Initially an emaciated, neglected horse, the *táltos* transforms—when fed ashes—into a magnificent, winged steed. It symbolizes hidden spiritual potential and the rewards of perceiving value beyond outward appearances. Furthermore, the magical being is thought to originate from ancient Hungarian folk tales, the steed of a *táltos* (a

shamanic figure). This mythical creature is believed to symbolize the *táltos*'s connection to the spiritual world (Berze Nagy 2020).

Assessing reliability

Our simple method of assessing reliability involved setting aside the dataset and re-coding a subset of folktales in the corpus after a three-month lapse. This is a measure of test-retest reliability. Inter-coder reliability for our folktale classification reached only a moderate level (approximately .50). This outcome is not unexpected given the complexity of the material. Folktales frequently contain overlapping motifs, hybrid tale-types, and culturally specific variants that make consistent categorization challenging, even for experienced coders. In addition, the categories require interpreters to make nuanced judgments about dominant plot structures, subsidiary episodes, and motif prominence—decisions that can reasonably lead to divergent classifications. Thus, while a reliability coefficient of .50 indicates variability from one time to another in coder judgment, it also reflects the inherent ambiguity of written folktale narratives. Rather than demonstrating weakness in the coding process, the value highlights the interpretive nature of tale-type identification. It underscores the need for careful explanations within the coding workbook and its iterative refinement in folktale analysis.

Interpretation of distributions by genre

This study is a simple observational study of Illyés's very popular collection of Hungarian folktales, nothing more. What is the significance of the proportional distribution of folktales by genre in this collection, one might ask? The numbers themselves are noteworthy but not significant.

It is imperative to point out that there is no implied inference beyond this collection to suggest generalizability that extends to Hungary's folktales in general. Currently available data are unreliable to support inferences about national characteristics. Ortutay writes that when preparing the *Hungarian Folktale Catalogue*,⁴ Ágnes Kovács analyzed the proportional distribution of folktales in the collection, relying primarily on *published sources* in the collection (Ortutay 1981: 103). Ortutay notes, however, that unpublished handwritten folktale texts are at least equal in number to published ones, and collectors disproportionately favored fairy and magic tales while largely neglecting local narratives and short, anecdotal, or humorous tales. More recent research, he argues, would effectively invert the proportions, revealing anecdotal local stories as the most abundantly preserved in popular memory. Consequently, Ortutay cautions against concluding national characteristics from genre distributions based on written collections (1981). He made this assertion more than four decades ago; perhaps research since has brought us closer to correctly estimating the distributions. Regardless, one wonders what conclusions can be drawn even if the

⁴ *Hungarian Folktale Catalogue* is substantially larger than Illyés's collection. It contains about 1,100 tale types and approximately 15,000+ documented folktale variants.

estimated numbers were accurate? The vast collection of folktales is only a small part of what is considered folk art. Should not *all of it* be considered in drawing conclusions about national characteristics?

We found the analysis interesting, and the variation of tale types themselves fascinating beyond any interpretation of the numbers.

Not All are Suitable for Children

Although the tales in this collection were often most enjoyed by children, they were originally composed and written by adults. Illyés points out in his epilogue that elements such as anger, cruelty, revenge, or harsh language have found their way into the narratives—elements that seem natural to adults but may frighten children. Some tales were meant for adult audiences, reflecting themes, humor, or social commentary that differ from those intended for younger listeners. In Gyula Illyés's collection, there are at least two tales that would be considered for this category, probably not suitable for telling today's children.⁵

The Power of Telling

Folktales realize their fullest symbolic and emotional resonance when told rather than read. Even when read, they are most effective when delivered with engagement and empathy (Bettelheim, 1976). Oral narration allows the storyteller to adapt the tale to the audience's reactions, creating an interpersonal exchange that shapes the story's evolving meaning. Over generations, tales have been molded through countless such interactions. Strict adherence to printed versions diminishes their vitality; their power lies in dynamic co-creation between storyteller and listener.

Conclusion

Some Hungarian folktales follow a familiar pattern: a young protagonist demonstrates perseverance, wit, and kindness, matures into adulthood, finds a mate, and achieves a happy resolution. Many others, however, depart from this structure. Regardless of the form, these tales may be humorous, improbable, or boldly imaginative, pushing the boundaries of possibility and stimulating creative thought. Even those that adhere to traditional patterns are richly infused with humor, wit, and inventive spirit.

The endurance of Hungarian folktales lies in their 'tellability'. Their survival through centuries—despite being transmitted orally rather than memorized verbatim—reflects their resonance with communal concerns, their archetypal characters, and their internally coherent narrative logic. As *Why Fairy Tales Stick* suggests, such stories survive because they satisfy the universal human desire for wonder and meaningful closure (Zipes 2006). They provide guidance and support for deeply human challenges and psychological needs (Boldizsár 2013). Preserving the tradition of

⁵The Shepherd Who Could Speak the Language of Animals [Az állatok nyelvén tudó juhász] and the Lazy Cat [A rest macska].

telling these tales ensures that future generations continue to benefit from their imaginative, cultural, and psychological richness. One of Hungary's most famous folklorists, Gyula Ortutay, frequently emphasized in his writings that folktales preserve the deepest layers of a people's culture and express the moral values and imaginative worldview through which a community understands itself (Balassa & Ortutay 1979; Ortutay 1941; 1981).

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APPENDIX

Variables on the coding form used in the 2017 study

1. Story Number/ Page Number
2. Type of tale
Animal tale; Hero's tale; Fairy/Magic tale; Silly or Trickster tale; Legend / Ballad-like tales; Novella – realistic tales.
3. Stage of development of the main character [if human]
child, adolescent, adult, elder
4. [If human] Gender of the main character. M or F or NA
5. [At the outset], is the main character married? Y or N
6. [If unmarried], does the character get married in the course of the tale? Y or N
7. [If unmarried], what feature(s) seem *most important* to the character in assessing the desirability of an existing or potential mate?
kindness; possession of wealth- or other material resources; high social status; physical attractiveness; other; unavailable from the information given
8. Who is the character primarily motivated to help?
Him-herself or others
If others, whom does s/he try to help *most*:
kin (relatives only); kith (familiar friends, neighbors, or relatives); members of the community-at-large; other
9. If the character is primarily motivated to help him/herself, what is his/her main goal?
survival; finding a mate; wealth or other material resources; enhanced fame or social status; other; indeterminate
10. Is the main character predominantly active or passive?
11. Which one of these adjectives *best describes* the character (choose one)
angry; cowardly; disobedient; fearless; greedy; obedient; proud; selfless; selfish; strong; thoughtless; thoughtful; weak; other
12. Synopsis of how the character accomplished his/her goals.