

The Grateful Dead

Introduction

The grateful dead is a motif found in many folktales and literary tales around the world. It is defined as a the spirit of a deceased person who benefits the one responsible for his burial. In the prototypical story, the protagonist is a traveler who encounters the corpse of a debtor, to whom the honor of proper burial has been denied. After the traveler satisfies the debt, or, in some versions, pays for the burial, he goes on his way. He is soon joined by another traveler, sometimes in the form of an animal, or an angel who helps him. In many versions, the companion offers to aid the hero, but only on condition that they divide the prize. At the end of a story, the companion reveals himself as the grateful spirit of the deceased whom the hero helped to bury, and departs.

The term Grateful Dead was coined in 19c. Germany by folklorists; however, the motif of the grateful dead is very old, and can be traced to the story of Simonides, a Greek poet, born in 556 B.C., as described in Cicero's (1st c. B.C.) *De Devinazione*: Simonides saw a body of an unknown man on the street, and gave it a proper burial. Later, when Simonides was about to board a ship, he saw a vision of the dead man, who warned him about an impending shipwreck. The ship sailed without Simonides, and was lost a sea.

The other well known story is the apocryphal Book of Tobit, which was written down probably around 300 B.C., where Tobit/Tobias buried dead men, and his son was aided by angel Raphael in marrying beautiful Sara, whose previous seven husbands were killed by demon Asmodeus on their wedding night(s). Here an angel replaces the ghost of the dead man, but according to some sources (Ethiopian Enoch 20:3) Raphael is a watcher angel appointed over the souls of the dead, so the continuity with the motif is preserved. Interestingly, this story surfaces later changed in a Sicilian folktale, *Tobia and Tobiola*, where Tobia's wife is called Sara, the Demon is Romeo, and the angel is Gabriel.

This motif was very popular, with many instances documented in period, and new variants of the motif were recorded as late as 1960's. It is popular in both folk and literary tales, and can be encountered by itself, as in the story of Simonides, or as a part of a more involved tale,

Tale Types

The motif of the grateful dead is most frequently encountered in conjunction with three others:

Monster's Bride / the Monster in the Bridal Chamber/ the Serpent Maiden (sometimes also known as a Poisoned Maiden), corresponding to the 507 A,B, and C tale types.

A young man set out to seek his fortune, with a small amount of money, given to him or inherited from his father. He uses all or most of his capital to pay for the debts of an unburied and/or abused corpse. On his way he meets a fellow traveler, and they continue the journey together, with the hero promising half of the gains to the traveler (occasionally, if a hero set out to obtain the princess, the price of the hired help is also his future's wife's first kiss). They arrive to a city together, where there is a famous beauty/princess who had multiple husbands who either died on the wedding night in uncertain circumstances, or were executed by the princess as they were unable to answer her riddles. The hero decides to try his luck, and the traveling companion either obtains the answers to the riddles for him, and/or on the wedding night, shows up in the bridal chamber demanding his half. When the princess is thus threatened, or occasionally, actually cut in half with a sword, snakes or serpents fall out of her body, and after they are killed, the princess is brought back to life, the enchantment is over, the hero's friend explains that he's the ghost of the corpse, and disappears.

Variants of this story include the book of Tobit, Sicilian folktale *Tobia and Tobiola*, and Andersen's *Travelling Companion*. The *Poisoned Maiden* is also a separate motif in an Alexander the Great Story from *De Secretis*

Secretorum, c. 1300, where he was sent a maiden from India, who was fed with snake poison, with the idea that he will die in her embraces.

Rescued princess (type 506)

In these stories, a merchant's son or a prince spends all his money on paying debts of a corpse and burying him. Second time, he spends his money on ransoming a slave girl, who ends up being a princess. His parents cast him out for money mismanagement, and the couple lives by selling the princess' painting or embroidery. Later, the young merchant travels to her homeland, where the princess' work is recognized. He is asked to bring her back, and is cast overboard on the way by a jealous sailor, general, or a former suitor. He is saved and reunited with his bride with the help of the dead man. The dead man demands half of spoils, including princess and/or any children. When hero agrees, the dead man reveals his identity and disappears.

This motif appears in multiple folktales from Eastern and Western Europe.

Spendthrift knight (type 508)

Once wealthy knight who wasted his fortune in chivalrous exercises, hears about a princess offered as a prize in a tourney. He set out to win her, and on his journey encounters a body of a knight (rarely a merchant) unburied and mistreated due to debt. The knight gives the last of his money or money and horse/equipment to pay the debts, and for the burial of the dead knight, and sets out broke and on foot. He then encounters a mysterious knight (a White Knight) who gives him either money for the horse and equipment, or gives him a new horse and armor on the condition of dividing the spoils of the tourney. When the hero wins the tourney, the knight appears and insists on dividing the prize, but stops the hero short of actually cutting the princess in half, saying that he was only testing him. Then he explains that he is the dead knight the hero buried and disappears.

This motif is common in period adventure romances, such as *Richars Li Biaus*, 13th c., *Lion de Bourges*, 14th c., *Novella di Messer Dianese*, 14th c., and *Sir Amadas*, a 15th c. story.

This story is more common in literary interpretation, although there are some folktales, as well. In Afanasyev's collection of Russian folktales, the tale no. 176 is of a prince who buries a corpse of a *bogaty*r (a knight), and gives him a wake. The knight appears to him and tells him where to find his magic horse and armor, with the help of which the prince wins the princess in a tourney. Occasionally, the hero finds and buries only a knight's head, which then helps him out. The motif of the dead head is common: Odin and the head of Mimir in *Edda*, a talking horse's head in Grimm's *Goosegirl*, and the witches head in the *Robber with a Witches's Head* in Gonzenbach's Sicilian tales.

Variations on the Grateful Dead theme

The grateful dead can appear as ghosts, or they get replaced by saints or angels (in this case, the hero spends all his money restoring or building a church of a particular saint. In a Portuguese story, the hero buys relics of Christian saints. Generally, the saints in fairy tales can be considered, broadly, as helpful, if not grateful, dead.

Occasionally, the grateful dead get replaced by animals, commonly foxes in Western Europe (especially in French tales), and wolves in Russia. In the this case, the tales become very close to the thankful beasts tales, such as *Puss in Boots*, where the good deed the hero has done – either saving the animals, or not eating/killing them, is rewarded. Another common trait between the grateful dead and the thankful beast fairy tales is the sometime motif of decapitation of the helper as a way to break an enchantment. In the case of the grateful dead, the spirit is released and is departed, in the case of the grateful beast, the beast turns into a human being.

There is a broad connection between the grateful dead and grateful ghost motif. Although, the ghost stories are legends rather than fairy tales. However, the ghosts may or may not be helpful. Usually, the ghost is a nuisance, and only after something is done: a debt paid, a body buried, or a murderer brought to justice, the ghost leaves, with or without rewarding a human helper. Interestingly, in Welsh folklore, if a person had buried money or treasure, it

finds no rest after death, and will haunt the world of the living, and only after the money is found (and, sometimes thrown or scattered in the river) the ghost can move on.

Grateful dead vs. vampires

Grateful dead motif contrasts with the motif of malevolent revenants, most commonly vampires. Why would there be two conflicting traditions of revenants? Grateful dead and vampires inhabit different genres: grateful dead are creatures of fairy tales, and the vampires are the creatures of legends. There are few cross-overs between the two genres: for example, in a Romanian fairy tale, the grateful revenant is referred to as a vampire, but he is still benevolent. Additionally, there is a Russian fairy tale in which a grateful dead helps the hero to defeat and marry a princess who is a vampire. Overall, the two traditions remain contemporaneous, but separate.

In the vampire stories, we almost always are told of the unnatural and violent death of the revenant – murder, illness, drowning, etc. In the Grateful Dead stories, the mode of death is not mentioned, just the fact that the person died in debt. Even in the death of a knight, the death is probably peaceful, as the hero then receives the knight's horse and armor, safely stored elsewhere. The fact that the grateful revenant lives out his life is significant – it means he has no reasons to wander the earth after death, and only the lack of proper burial rites prevents him from moving on. The vampire's life, on the other hand, is usually interrupted, and, as such, he is more dangerous. In some accounts, the younger the person at time of death, the more dangerous he/she would be if returned as a vampire. However, as an unburied corpse, the grateful revenant is still potentially dangerous and hostile. When the hero buries it, and it is always a proper burial, not just a disposal, the danger is eliminated, and the revenant pays its debt to the hero.

Both males and females vampires were possible, although the males are more common. The Grateful Dead are mostly male, especially in European variants. In Asian versions of the story, there is an occasional female revenant, most commonly a fox spirit paying a karmic debt, but males still predominates. This could be because the knowledge from beyond the grave and uncanny powers make the revenant similar to a trickster figure, and they are predominantly male in all cultures.

Another feature that makes the grateful dead similar to the trickster figure, is their bizarre position in the world: As dead, they do not belong to the world of the living, but for the lack of burial rituals they do not belong to the world of the dead. This makes them liminal, or marginal figures, a trait also shared by the tricksters, fairies, and fox spirits.

The grateful revenants are described as living people. In no story does a hero ever suspect his traveling companion or servant to be dead. In contrast, the vampires are always seen as corpses haunting the world of the living, and features consistent with decomposition/decay are mentioned in the accounts of vampire infestations.

In contrast to literary vampires, the folkloric vampires, have no supernatural abilities, other than to kill their living relatives and friends, being very strong, hard to dispose off, and turning others into vampires. Russian vampires were thought to induce draught, especially if the vampire had died by drowning. Their actions are more random, and less purposeful. The cunning vampires with aspirations for world domination are the invention of 19th c. literature and 20th c. Hollywood.

The Grateful Dead of fairy tales, however, have supernatural abilities: they can fly, turn invisible, recruit people with superpowers, recognize disguised monsters, exorcise demons, do magic, etc. In short, they have the powers that a fairy tale hero would have had he crossed the threshold into the world of the dead in the Quest type fairy tales. In the Grateful Dead type of tales the hero is an ordinary human being. What makes him extraordinary, is his

willingness to sacrifice the last of his money to see a corpse buried without expectation of any reward, and it's that act of basic human decency that puts the power of the knowledge from beyond the grave at his disposal.

Very brief historical notes

To bury bodies one of the duties of the living. The burial rituals existed in prehistoric times, and there are numerous accounts of them in ancient Greek and Roman Literature, as well as the accounts of the dead reproaching the living for leaving the bodies unburied, especially during wars or epidemics. Disruption of burial rituals can bring on dire things for both the dead person, and a person withholding the burial. For, example, a lack of proper burial is one way to become a vampire.

Is there any historical evidence that burial can be withheld for lack of money? Herodotus mentions that in Egypt, at the time of rule of king Asukhis, ...” law was made for the Egyptians allowing a man to borrow on the security of his father's corpse; and the law also provided that the lender become master of the entire burial-vault of the borrower, and that the penalty for one giving this security, should he fail to repay the loan, was that he was not to be buried at his death either in that tomb of his fathers or in any other, nor was he to bury any relative of his there.” In *Monarchie*, Scottish poets David Lindsay (1490-1555) condemned church for withholding the burials until the families came up with sufficient sums. A real-life contemporary case from Florida featured an unscrupulous funeral home director who was disposing of bodies of indigent people on his property, as opposed to burying them – later stating that the government paid subsidy was too little to cover the burial costs.

If you would like to read some Grateful Dead Tales:

One of the best known tales is by Hans Christian Andersen, which is a reworking of a Norwegian folktale. You can read it at <http://hca.gilead.org.il/travelng.html>

There are two Grateful Dead tales which didn't make into the Brothers' Grimm main collection. They could be found in "*Grimm's Other Tales*"

The Robber with a Witch's Head and *Tobia and Tobiola*, from *The Robber with a Witch's Head: More stories from the Great Treasury of Sicilian Folk and Fairy tales*, collected by Laura Gonzenbach, translated by Jack Zipes., Routledge, 2004.

The Dead Man's Gratitude, from Dora Yates' *Gypsy Folk Tales*, Barnes and Noble Books, 1995.

Fair Brow from Thomas Frederick Crane's *Italian Popular Tales*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

Period tales:

The Facetious Nights of Straparola or *The Merry Nights of Straparola* in numerous editions, originally published in 1550-1553, *Night the Eleventh: Second Fable: Bertuccio and Tarquinia*.

http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/facetiousnights/night11_fable2.html

Lion de Bourges, 14th c. http://www.chanson-de-geste.com/lion_de_bourges.htm, in French.

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Olivier de Castille et Artus D'Algarbe, was written before 1467, attributed to Philippe III le Bon, duc de Bourgogne (1396–1467), modern edition by Regnier-Bohler, Danielle, *Édition et étude critique de "L'histoire d'Olivier de Castille et Artus d'Algarbe"*, Université de Paris IV-Sorbonne, 1994. (in French only)

Novella di Messer Dianese e di Messer Gigliotto, a 14th c. story, published by d'Ancona and Sforza, 1868. (no modern reprints, may be available through interlibrary loan)

Richars Li Biaus, a 13th c. tale, see Anthony J. Holden, ed., *Richars Li Biaus: Roman Du Xiiiè Siècle, Classiques français du moyen age*. Paris, 1983. (in French)

Sir Amadas 15th c., <http://www.elfinspell.com/EER2Amadas.html>, From Early English Romances: Done Into Modern English by Edith Rickert: Romances of Friendship, Chatto and Windus: London, Duffield & Co.: London, 1908; pp. 49-67, 174-175.

For an excellent compilation of the Grateful Dead stories, please consult G. H. Gerould bibliography to “*The Grateful Dead, The History of a Folk Story*” available online at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/etc/gd/gd04.htm>

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*please note that all the links in this handout are valid as of September 14, 2016.