

ANALYSIS OF EARLY FORMS OF THE NOVELLA IN FOLKLORE: TALE AND ANECDOTE

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Abstract. This article examines the early folkloric origins of the novella genre based on the fundamental work of Eleazar Moiseevich Meletinsky, “The Historical Poetics of the Novella” (1990). Particular attention is paid to the analysis of two primary folkloric forms: the novellistic tale and the anecdote. In the context of the historical poetics of narrative genres, studying the transformation of the fairy tale into the novellistic tale and the structural features of the anecdote is of great importance. The paper discusses theoretical approaches to distinguishing between magical and novellistic tales and identifies the complementary relationship between the novellistic tale and the anecdote. The findings of the study may be used for further research in folklore, literary theory, and the historical development of short prose forms.

Keywords: novella, folklore, novellistic tale, anecdote, fairy tale, trickster, historical poetics, Meletinsky.

Introduction. The novella is one of the most important genres of world literature. However, its roots are found not only in written literature but also deeply in oral folklore. In contemporary literary theory, the question of how the classical novella emerged from folkloric sources remains highly relevant [1]. Russian and international scholarship has long recognized that fairy tales, everyday tales, and anecdotes contain the structural and thematic foundations of the later literary novella [5].

One of the most comprehensive studies in this field is E. M. Meletinsky’s *The Historical Poetics of the Novella* (1990) [1]. Meletinsky argues that the novella did not arise from a single source but rather from the interaction of two distinct folkloric traditions: the novellistic tale and the anecdote [1, p. 12]. These two forms differ in content, structure, hero typology, and the nature of the conflict, yet they complement each other.

The relevance of this research is enhanced by the fact that modern narratology and genre theory increasingly turn to historical poetics. Understanding how the novella evolved from folklore helps literary scholars and students of culture analyze later literary forms more accurately [1, p. 8]. Furthermore, genre theorists such as Todorov emphasize that literary genres should be viewed as evolving systems rather than fixed categories [6]. The study of folkloric roots is also essential for national literary traditions seeking to understand their narrative heritage, including Uzbek oral literature [7].

The purpose of this study is to analyze Meletinsky’s theory regarding the early forms of the novella in folklore, identify the transformation mechanisms from fairy tale to novellistic tale, define the structural features of the anecdote, and determine the complementary relationship between these two folkloric genres [1].

Materials and Methods. To achieve the objectives of the study, descriptive, comparative-typological, and structural-analytical methods were employed. The descriptive method was used to summarize and interpret Meletinsky’s theoretical positions [1]. Comparative analysis made it possible to identify similarities and differences between the fairy tale, the novellistic tale, and the



anecdote. Structural analysis, informed by Propp's morphology [4] and Genette's narratological approach [6], was applied to examine plot organization, character functions, and mechanisms of narrative resolution.

Special attention was given to the role of the protagonist in different narrative forms. In the fairy tale, the hero often relies on magical helpers and supernatural intervention [4]. In the novellistic tale, however, success depends primarily on intelligence, resourcefulness, and luck [1]. In the anecdote, the central figure is typically either a trickster whose cleverness generates the plot or a simpleton whose foolishness creates comic effects [1]. This typology provides a systematic framework for tracing the evolution of narrative forms.

The study also adopts a comparative perspective that considers the broader applicability of Meletinsky's model beyond European folklore. Insights from research on Uzbek narrative traditions [7] were taken into account to highlight the potential relevance of the novellistic tale and anecdote for comparative folklore studies. The methodological approach therefore combines historical poetics, structural analysis, narratology, and comparative folklore research, ensuring a comprehensive examination of the early folkloric forms of the novella [1–7].

Results. The analysis of Meletinsky's work revealed a clear structural transformation from the fairy tale to the novellistic tale, as well as a distinct set of features characterizing the anecdote [1]. The findings indicate that the novellistic tale and the anecdote are not random collections of stories but form a coherent system based on complementary oppositions [1, p. 28].

1. Transformation from Fairy Tale to Novellistic Tale

The classical fairy tale, according to Meletinsky (building on Propp [4]), is structured around rites of passage (initiation) [1, p. 12]. The hero leaves home, encounters a donor or magical helper, overcomes a villain, and returns transformed. In contrast, the novellistic tale centers on an "unheard-of event" – an exceptional but non-magical occurrence [1, p. 14].

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of the Fairy Tale and the Novellistic Tale

Feature	Fairy Tale	Novellistic Tale
Core content	Formation of the hero (rites of passage / initiation)	An individual, exceptional event ("an unheard-of event")
Primary force	Magical forces, a miraculous helper	The hero's own intelligence, cleverness, chance (luck)
Hero's activity	Relatively passive (aided by magical forces)	Active (acts through own wit and resourcefulness)
Type of "adversary"	Dragon, Baba Yaga, sorcerer	Forest bandits, wicked old women, human antagonists
Type of "helper"	Magical animal, magical object	Wise counselor (if the function is retained at all)
Resolution	Magical victory, transformation	Practical success, marriage, wealth

For example, in tale types such as AT 881 [2], the hero uses no magic. He solves riddles or tells stories until the princess laughs [1, p. 16]. The miraculous helper is absent; human intelligence replaces supernatural aid.

2. The Structure and Thematic Groups of the Anecdote

If the novellistic tale emphasizes wisdom and luck, the anecdote is structured around the opposition between wit and folly [1, p. 19]. Meletinsky characterizes the anecdote by its paradoxical nature, brevity, and extremely simple composition [1, p. 19].

The analysis identified three main thematic groups of anecdotes in Meletinsky's work [1, pp. 20–24]:

Group 1: Numskull Stories (AT 1200–1349, 1675–1724) [2]



The heroes violate elementary logic. Meletinsky gives examples such as: “swimming in a field, sowing salt, milking chickens, filling a bowl with wine through a hole in the bottom” [1, pp. 20–21]. These stories create laughter through pure absurdity.

Group 2: Stories about Tricksters (Rogues / Pluts) (AT 950, 1525–1530) [2]

These depict clever thieves and swindlers. Their skill is described with admiration rather than moral condemnation [1, p. 23]. Meletinsky’s example: “A thief drops one boot after another on the road to distract his victim” [1, p. 23]. The trickster’s intelligence is presented as entertaining, not evil.

Group 3: Stories about Wicked Wives (AT 900–904, 1355–1384) [2]

These anecdotes mock unfaithful, stubborn, or wicked women [1, p. 24]. The humor arises from the husband’s failed attempts to control his wife.

3. The Mechanism of Paradox in the Anecdote

The core device of the anecdote is paradox and abstract absurdity [1, p. 25]. The comic effect is achieved by breaking logical connections from real life. Table 2 illustrates this mechanism using Meletinsky’s example of the “Shorn – Stacked” anecdote (see also Appendix C for a detailed breakdown).

Table 2. Mechanism of Paradox in the Anecdote

Stage	Event	Expected Logic	Anecdotal Paradox
1	Husband and wife argue over whether grain is “shorn” (strizheno) or “stacked” (zaskirdovano)	Quarrel ends verbally	Wife stubbornly insists on her opinion
2	Enraged husband cuts out wife’s tongue	Wife loses ability to argue verbally	Wife gestures with fingers, indicating “stacked”
3	Wife continues gestural argument	Physical punishment should end dispute	Paradox: Physical punishment cannot resolve logical contradiction; absurdity remains the source of laughter

This example demonstrates that in the anecdote, even extreme violence does not resolve the conflict. The absurdity is the point [1, p. 26].

4. Complementary Relationship Between Novellistic Tale and Anecdote

One of Meletinsky’s most important findings is that the novellistic tale and the anecdote are not opposed but complementary [1, p. 28]. They form a system of paired oppositions that together provide the foundation for the classical novella (see Appendix B for visual representations of these oppositions).

Table 3. Complementary Relationships Between the Novellistic Tale and the Anecdote

Concept	Novellistic Tale	Anecdote
Core opposition	Wisdom / Luck	Wit / Folly
Manifestation of intelligence	Wisdom (mudrost’), logical solution	Cunning (plutovstvo), slyness
Negative hero	Cruel robbers, bandits	Tricksters (clever thieves admired for skill)
Female character	Faithful and virtuous wife	Unfaithful, stubborn, wicked wife
Tone	Serious, wondrous	Comic, sharp, paradoxical



The analysis shows that no single folkloric form alone could generate the classical literary novella. Instead, the novella arose from the interaction of these two traditions: the novellistic tale provided the “exceptional event” and the serious tone, while the anecdote provided the sharpness (pointe) and comic conflict [1, pp. 247–248].

Discussion. The findings of this study confirm that Meletinsky’s theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the folkloric origins of the novella. One of his most important contributions is the concept of complementarity between the novellistic tale and the anecdote. The analysis shows that the transition from the fairy tale to the novellistic tale involves a gradual reduction of magical elements, as supernatural helpers are replaced by the protagonist’s intelligence, ingenuity, and practical wisdom. This transformation reflects a shift toward a more realistic worldview while preserving key narrative structures inherited from the fairy tale tradition.

The study also demonstrates that the anecdote is more than a simple humorous narrative. Its structure is based on paradox and the disruption of logical expectations, where humor arises from contradiction and absurdity rather than from a happy ending. Likewise, the trickster figure occupies a distinctive position within anecdotal narratives, often evoking admiration for cleverness rather than moral condemnation. These features later became important components of novella poetics and contributed to the development of narrative surprise and social observation.

A particularly significant finding is the complementary relationship between the novellistic tale and the anecdote. While the novellistic tale provides extraordinary events, narrative complexity, and serious themes, the anecdote contributes comic tension, paradoxical resolution, and narrative economy. Their interaction laid the foundation for the classical literary novella. Although this study focuses primarily on Russian and European traditions, Meletinsky’s model can also be applied to other folkloric cultures, including Uzbek oral literature. Comparative research on genres such as *latifa*, *nasr*, and *dastan* may further enrich our understanding of the universal and culture-specific features of novella development.

Conclusion

This study examined the early folkloric forms of the novella based on E. M. Meletinsky’s *The Historical Poetics of the Novella* (1990). The findings show that the novella emerged through the interaction of two complementary folkloric traditions: the novellistic tale and the anecdote. The novellistic tale developed from the classical fairy tale, replacing magical assistance with human intelligence, ingenuity, and practical experience. The anecdote, in turn, is built on the opposition between wit and folly and is characterized by paradox and unexpected resolution.

The study confirms that these two narrative forms jointly laid the foundation for the classical literary novella. While the novellistic tale contributed the motif of the extraordinary event, the anecdote provided the sharp narrative turn that later became a defining feature of novella poetics. Furthermore, Meletinsky’s historical-poetic approach proves to be an effective method for tracing the evolution of literary genres. The findings are relevant to folklore studies, literary theory, and narratology, and may serve as a basis for future comparative research on non-European and Uzbek folkloric traditions.

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