Original Article

Exploring the Story Structure of Filipino Fantasy Films Through Propp's Theory

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Abstract. This study applies Vladimir Propp's Morphology of the Folktale to analyze narrative structures in selected Filipino fantasy films from the Metro Manila Film Festival (MMFF). Aiming to address limited academic research on Philippine cinema in education, it identifies recurring narrative patterns and character functions that help students and viewers understand film meanings. Using qualitative textual analysis, the films were examined based on Propp's seven-character roles and thirty-one narrative functions. Findings show that the films consistently employ core heroic functions that reflect Filipino cultural values, such as resilience, moral responsibility, and communal identity. Although the films vary in their adherence to Propp's full narrative sequence, Ang Panday adheres most closely to it. Despite differences, all films maintain essential functions that support heroic storytelling. The study concludes that Propp's framework is effective for analyzing Filipino fantasy cinema and can enhance film literacy, providing future English educators with a practical approach to integrating cinematic texts into literature instruction.

Keywords: *Cinematic narrative; Filipino fantasy films; Metro Manila Film Festival; Propp's Morphology; Structural analysis.*

Film analysis is essential for understanding narrative construction and meaning-making in visual storytelling. Specifically, examining film structure—including plot progression, character development, and thematic emphasis—enhances students' comprehension and engagement (Liu, 2021). Nevertheless, many students struggle with critical film analysis because they lack knowledge of narrative structures and storytelling techniques (Datulio, 2023). In this regard, Vladimir Propp's Morphology of the Folktale provides a systematic framework to analyze narratives, identifying recurring character types and functions that shape heroic storytelling (Al-Emad, 2020).

Moreover, challenges in narrative analysis are observed globally. For instance, in Indonesia, students struggle with complex plots and character relationships (Hasibuan, 2024), while Malaysian viewers struggle to appreciate interconnected plot and character elements (Rozaroi, 2021). Similarly, learners in the United States report challenges with following film plots and forming emotional connections (Zhang, 2023), indicating that these issues are widespread. Turning to the Philippines, Filipino students exhibit similar difficulties. For example, Ilocano students struggled with character analysis in film assessments (Baptista et al., 2025), and learners from Sara

National High School misinterpreted the narrative structures of foreign films (Opriasa, 2024). Taken together, these findings suggest a persistent gap in students' narrative literacy, especially in film analysis.

Local educators further corroborate this issue. English teachers in Tagum City report that students often lack understanding of key narrative elements such as plot and character development, which in turn affects both classroom performance and informal film viewing. This situation underscores the need for structured analytical frameworks to support comprehension. However, despite these valuable studies, a significant research gap persists. Recent studies have applied Propp's Morphology of the Folktale to modern films, demonstrating its continued relevance. For instance, Haq and Masroor (2024) analyzed traditional cultural archetypes. They selected morphological functions in Disney animated films such as Brave (2012) and Frozen (2013), while Suwarno and Suparto (2023) examined narrative functions in The Northman (2022). Nonetheless, these studies primarily focused on identifying morphological functions and were restricted to foreign films. Crucially, there is a notable absence of research on Filipino blockbuster fantasy films—particularly those from the Metro Manila Film Festival—even though these films are culturally significant and widely influential in Philippine cinema.

Moreover, these studies have largely overlooked how students and film viewers struggle to understand plot progression, character development, and narrative structures, leaving an important pedagogical and audience-centered problem unaddressed. This double gap highlights the need for research that not only analyzes Filipino films using Propp's framework but also examines their relevance for improving narrative literacy and comprehension among local viewers. To address this gap, the present study adopts a structuralist approach grounded in Propp's Morphology to analyze selected MMFF fantasy films. Specifically, it examines narrative structures, character roles, and morphological functions, thereby highlighting Filipino cultural values and heroic ideals. Ultimately, the study aims to support students, educators, and curriculum developers, while also promoting critical literacy and engagement with Filipino cultural texts in line with SDG 4 on quality education.

Methodology

Research Design
This study employed a qualitative research design using a structuralist approach to literary analysis, which is appropriate for exploring meanings, patterns, and structures in cultural texts (Creswell, 2014, as cited by Amelia, 2022). Vladimir Propp's Morphology of the Folktale served as the primary framework, identifying seven character roles and thirty-one narrative functions that shape heroic storytelling (Phindane, 2019). This approach allowed for systematic analysis of plot and character organization in Filipino blockbuster fantasy films, highlighting cultural values and heroic ideals.

Research Materials and Sampling Technique
The study analyzed four Filipino fantasy films from the Metro Manila Film Festival (MMFF): Gandarrapiddo! The Revenger Squad (2017), Ang Panday (2017), Fantastica (2018), and Penduko (2023). Purposive sampling was used based on criteria including: Filipino-made fantasy genre, MMFF entry between 2017–2023, box-office earnings ≥₱100 million, complete narrative elements, MTRCB rating of G or PG, minimum runtime of 1 hour 30 minutes, and educationally relevant themes. Each film was segmented into multiple narrative units, yielding 30–45 textual corpora, aligning with recommended sample sizes for literary analysis (Hu, 2011, as cited by Mamayabay, 2020).

Data Sources
The primary data sources were the four selected Filipino fantasy films. These films were analyzed directly to identify cultural archetypes and morphological functions based on Propp's framework. Noting that the primary sources were chosen because they provide firsthand and contextually rich data essential for accurate literary analysis (Bello, 2023). Also, secondary data sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, books, theses, and credible academic publications related to structuralism, Propp's theory, film studies, and Philippine cinema. These sources provided theoretical grounding and contextual support for interpreting the primary data (Pederson et al., 2020; Kara, 2023).

Data Gathering Procedure
Ethical clearance was obtained from the SMCTI Research Ethics Committee, and institutional authorities were informed. Film companies were contacted for permission; in the absence of a response, analysis proceeded under Section 185 of RA 8293 (Philippine Intellectual Property Code), which permits fair use for research. Films were

repeatedly viewed, segmented into narrative units, and converted into scripts. Propp's framework guided the identification of character roles and narrative functions, and expert debriefing validated the interpretations.

Data Analysis Procedure
Qualitative coding assigned each character role a code (e.g., CA-Hero) and each narrative function Propp's original symbol (e.g., β for absentation). Patterns across films were identified, and expert consultation and triangulation minimized researcher bias. Analysis focused on how narrative functions and cultural archetypes interact to construct heroic storytelling. Data collection and analysis were conducted from January to February 2025.

Trustworthiness of the Study & Ethical Considerations
Credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were ensured using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Prolonged engagement, expert debriefing, triangulation, audit trails, and detailed procedural documentation supported trustworthiness. Ethical compliance included obtaining informed consent, respecting intellectual property, maintaining transparency, and ensuring fairness. All copyrighted materials were used under fair use for academic purposes, and sources were properly cited to maintain academic integrity.

Results and Discussion

Types of Cultural Archetypes
Vladimir Propp (1968) identified seven cultural archetypes, each associated with specific spheres of action that correspond to his 31 morphological functions. The presence of any spheres of action indicates that the character fulfills their respective roles. The archetypes are as follows: (1) the hero, a member of a family who leaves home and who fights for justice and social order in a community, the sphere of action includes departure on a search (Ct), reaction to the demands of the donor (E), and ultimately marriage or reward (W). The first function (C) is characteristic of the seeker-hero, while the victim-hero performs only the remaining functions; (2) helper archetype, whose sphere of action involves providing guidance (G), eliminating misfortune (K), rescuing (Rs), solving tasks (N), and transfiguration (T); (3) villain operates within the sphere of villainy (A), struggle (H), and pursuit (Pr); (4) false hero archetype, whose sphere of action includes claiming the hero's role (L), responding to the donor (E), and exposure (Ex); (5) donor is involved in providing the first function of the donor (D) and offering a magical agent (F); (6) dispatcher archetype, whose sphere of action is sending the hero on a quest (↑): and (7) princess or prize, is linked to the spheres of solution (N), victory (J), exposure (Ex), recognition (Q), punishment (U), and marriage/wedding (W).

Table 1. *Types of Cultural Archetypes and Their Spheres of Action in the MMFF's Blockbuster Filipino Fantasy Films*

Types of Cultural Archetypes	MMFF Film	Screenshot	Spheres of Action
Hero	Gandarrapiddo!		Emerson "Emy" Mariposque / Gandarra **(Vice Ganda)** H, D, E, F, G, J, N, W
			Chino Mariposque / Rappido **(Daniel Padilla)** T, I, η, θ, N
	Ang Panday		Flavio Batumbakal III **(Coco Martin)** B, C, ↑, D, E, F, H, I, J, K, ↓

	Fantastica		Belat Dela Cruz **(Vice Ganda)** C, Rs, B, ↑, G, D, E, F, H, J, K, ↓, N, W
Helper	Penduko		Pedro Penduko **(Matteo Guidicelli)** ʙ, y, Pr, F, δ, ↑, D, E, G, H, K, θ, ↓, ζ, M, Ex, Rs, J, N, T
	Gandarrapiddo!		Flawlessa / Bokbok **(Lassy Marquez)** G, Rs, N
	Fantastica		Daks **(Ronnie Alonte)** G, Rs, N
	Penduko		Apo Tisot **(John Arcilla)** K, Rs
Villain			Liway Basa **(Kylie Verzosa)** N, Rs
	Gandarrapiddo!		Kweeny **(Pia Wurtzbach)** H, A
	Ang Panday		Lizardo **(Jake Cuenca)** H, A

	Fantastica		Queen Umuulan (Fairy Godmother) **(Bela Padilla)** H, A
	Penduko		Gat Blanco **(Albert Martinez)** H, A
			Mon **(Daniel Oke)** H, Pr
False Hero	**Gandarrapiddo!**		Madman / Renz **(RK Bagatsing/ Gandarrapiddo!)** L
	Penduko		Saki **(Arron Villaflor)** E, L
			Gat Blanco **(Albert Martinez)** Ex
Donor	**Gandarrapiddo!**		Barna / Peppa **(Karla Estrada)** D, F
			Kweeny **(Pia Wurtzbach)** F

	Film		Character	
	Ang Panday		Ang Matanda / The Old Man **(Joonee Gamboa)**	D
	Fantastica		Boylet **(Milo)**	D
	Penduko		Dayang Aurora **(Candy Pangilinan)**	D
Dispatcher	**Panday**		Ang Matanda (The Old Man) **(Joonee Gamboa)**	↑
	Fantastica		Prince Pryce **(Richard Gutierrez)**	↑
	Penduko		Wendy **(Phoebe Walker)**	↑
Princess/ Prize	**Gandarrapiddo!**		Racer Guy **(Jeremy Jauncey)**	W
	Panday		Maria **(Mariel De Leon)**	W
	Fantastica		Princess Maulani **(Maymay Entrata)**	W

The results reveal that Filipino fantasy films emphasize cultural values, common character archetypes, and narrative patterns, while allowing some deviations across stories. The table above illustrates the distribution and roles of key archetypes—such as the seeker-hero, helper, villain, donor, false hero, dispatcher, and

princess/prize—highlighting both recurring patterns and variations in spheres of action. These findings demonstrate how the films balance traditional storytelling structures with adaptations that reflect contemporary narrative flexibility, cultural priorities, and heroic ideals in Filipino cinema.

Hero (Seeker Hero)
The seeker-hero is the most common archetype across all four MMFF Filipino fantasy films, embodying Filipino values such as resilience, courage, bayanihan, and a strong sense of responsibility toward the community. These heroes undertake transformative journeys, accept assistance from allies, confront and overcome obstacles, defeat villains, gain recognition, and often marry or receive rewards. The number and type of spheres of action vary per character: Gandarrapiddo! features Emerson "Emy" Mariposque / Gandarra with 8 codes (H, D, E, F, G, J, N, W) and Chino Mariposque / Rappido with 5 codes (T, I, η, θ, N); Ang Panday presents Flavio Batumbakal III with 12 codes (B, C, ↑, D, E, F, H, I, J, K, ↓); Fantastica showcases Belat Dela Cruz with 15 codes (C, Rs, B, ↑, G, D, E, F, H, J, K, ↓, N, W); and Penduko highlights Pedro Penduko with 19 codes (Ƅ, y, Pr, F, δ, ↑, D, E, G, H, K, θ, ↓, ζ, M, Ex, Rs, J, N, T). Notably, the absence of a victim-hero emphasizes the preference for active, morally upright protagonists whose courage and perseverance restore social harmony (Lawther, 2024).

Helper
Helpers appear in all films except Ang Panday, performing essential actions such as guiding the hero, resolving misfortune, rescuing, assisting with tasks, and enabling transformation. Their presence clearly illustrates the value of bayanihan, in which collective effort, cooperation, and mutual support are crucial to success. Helpers' contributions demonstrate that personal accomplishments are often intertwined with communal support, emphasizing interdependence and solidarity. Furthermore, variations in the prominence of helpers reflect narrative flexibility, balancing individual heroism with collaborative effort (Weller, Brown, & Clarke, 2021; Sherman & Koven, 2021).

Villain
Villains are present in all films, driving conflict through acts of struggle and pursuit. They act as catalysts for tension, enabling the hero to display bravery, resilience, and strategic thinking, which are admired qualities in society. Importantly, contemporary portrayals depict villains as multidimensional characters shaped by social context rather than purely evil, highlighting the complexity of human behavior and moral ambiguity (Sas, 2023).

False Hero
The false hero appears in Gandarrapiddo! and Penduko, performing actions such as feigning virtue, claiming the hero's achievements, and ultimately being exposed. In effect, this archetype reflects lessons on honesty, integrity, and discernment, emphasizing that true merit is revealed through deeds rather than appearances. By creating tension and contrast with the true hero, the false hero reinforces the significance of moral uprightness in narrative resolution (Ramakrishnan, 2022; Barbour, 2020).

Donor
Donors appear in all films, providing the hero with magical tools, guidance, or advice essential for transformation and narrative progression. As such, they reflect respect for mentorship, wisdom, and guidance from elders or knowledgeable figures, highlighting the value of learning from others and seeking support in life's challenges. It is also worth noting that the donors reinforce the principle that personal success often depends on humility, preparation, and collaboration (Fithrotin, 2022; Tama & Dhani, 2022).

Dispatcher
Dispatchers appear in most films but are absent in Gandarrapiddo! They motivate the hero or send them on quests, demonstrating the importance of direction, guidance, and communal encouragement. Nevertheless, their occasional absence shows that heroes can exercise personal initiative and self-reliance, independently taking responsibility for their journeys (Anwar, 2023; Murmahyati, 2022).

Princess/Prize
The princess/prize appears in Gandarrapiddo!, Ang Panday, and Fantastica, serving as the hero's motivation, goal, or reward—often through victory or marriage. In Penduko, this archetype is absent, reflecting narrative flexibility. Consequently, the princess/prize underscores ideals of aspiration, reward for virtue, and societal

recognition, representing both personal achievement and acknowledgment of the hero's efforts (Sari et al., 2023; Hourihan, 1997; Yeoman, 1999; Vučković, 2018).

Types of Morphological Functions

The thirty-one functions of the Vladimir Propp contain (1) "β," absentation; (2) "γ," interdiction; (3) "δ," violation; (4) "ε," reconnaissance; (5) "ζ," delivery; (6) "η," trickery; (7) "θ," complicity; (8) "A," villainy; (9) "B," mediation; (10) "C," counteraction; (11) "↑," departure; (12) "D," first function of the donor; (13) "E," reaction; (14) "F," acquisition; (15) "G," guidance; (16) "H," struggle; (17) "I," branding; (18) "J," victory; (19) "K," liquidation; (20) "↓," return; (21) "Pr," pursuit; (22) "Rs," rescue; (23) "o," unrecognized arrival; (24) "L," unfounded claims; (25) "M," difficult task; (26) "N," solution; (27) "Q," recognition; (28) "Ex," exposure; (29) "T," transfiguration; (30) "U," punishment; (31) "W," wedding. (Karsten 2019, as cited by Masanat et al., 2021).

Table 2. *Morphological Functions in the Structure of MMFF's Blockbuster Filipino Fantasy Films*

Morphological Functions	Four Filipino Fantasy Films TimeStamp			
	Gandarrapiddo! (2017)	**Ang Panday (2017)**	**Fantastica (2018)**	**Penduko (2023)**
β	-	06:10-09:30	15:15 - 24:55	2:29
γ	-	-	-	15:50; 1:16:35
δ	-	-	-	16:30; 1:38:04
ε	21:49	-	-	-
ζ	-	-	-	1:20:22
η	1:01:05; 1:09:43	-	-	-
θ	1:15:35-1:17:35; 1:21:27	-	-	1:01:18
A	1:21:29	31:20	30:09 - 30:30	1:22:37
B	-	44:25	1:22:39	-
C	-	47:44	37:47 - 45:45	-
↑	-	50:14	1:22:58	17:35; 1:08:19
D	25:19	56:09	1:37:36	28:05
E	25:00-28:08	57:22	1:37:44	30:58; 1:01:32
F	30:25; 1:23:23	1:18:31	1:37:40	12:35
G	50:49	-	1:23:55 - 1:35:00	2:33; 21:55; 32:01-39:05
H	3:52; 53:00; 1:26:38-1:34:49	1:34:33	1:39:00	44:12; 50:53; 1:03:24; 1:17:24
I	55:30	2:00:05	1:38:09	-
J	1:41:00	2:02:03	1:40:00	1:41:14
K	-	2:03:03	1:40:42	56:55; 1:03:00 - 1:14:47
↓	-	2:03:17	1:44:09	1:11:24
Pr	-	-	-	8:00
Rs	1:38:36	-	38:23	15:11; 52:27; 1:38:42
o	14:25; 1:04:07	-	-	-
L	59:37	-	-	1:06:48 - 1:08:13
M	46:15-48:10; 1:40:30	-	-	-
N	1:42:49	-	1:45:00	1:42:58
Q	-	-	-	-
Ex	-	-	-	1:22:07
T	46:08	-	-	1:46:24
U	-	-	-	-
W	1:46:36	-	1:48:08	-
A Total of **31** Morphological Functions	**18** out of **31** Morphological Functions	**13** out of **31** Morphological Functions	**17** out of **31** Morphological Functions	**21** out of **31** Morphological Functions

The table above indicates that Filipino fantasy films generally incorporate Propp's morphological functions, though the extent of their use differs from film to film. In particular, many films adopt complex, non-linear narrative structures that do not strictly follow Propp's original sequence. For example, Gandarrapiddo!, Fantastica, and Penduko feature mixed sequences of functions. This narrative flexibility, in turn, enables viewers to engage more deeply with characters' motivations and backstories, thereby enhancing the overall viewing experience (Barinova, 2024; Saberi, 2024). In contrast, among the four films, Ang Panday adheres most closely to Propp's linear structure. It includes 13 functions, beginning with absentation and ending with return, reflecting traditional storytelling even in modern settings (Indradewi & Jayantini, 2024; Chamalah et al., 2019). Similarly, studies on other films, such as the Taiwanese horror film The Tag-Along, demonstrate sequential use of 18 of Propp's 31 functions, supporting the continued relevance of linear narrative structures (Hsieh & Chang, 2019).

Furthermore, analysis highlights that only a subset of functions—villainy (A), first donor function (D), hero's reaction (E), receipt of magical agent (F), struggle (H), and victory (J)—consistently appear across all films. This recurrence emphasizes hero-driven narratives, where conflict, assistance, and resolution remain central to storytelling (Fajrin & Lestari, 2021). In particular, the struggle function (H) emerges as the most dominant, with Gandarrapiddo! and Penduko featuring four instances each, while Ang Panday and Fantastica include fewer. As a result, this function propels the story forward and facilitates the hero's transformation, confirming its role as a core element in Proppian morphology (Khoirunnisa & Khoirunnisa, 2023).

When comparing the films, Penduko features 21 functions arranged in a comprehensive, non-linear pattern, while Gandarrapiddo! and Fantastica include 18 and 17 functions, respectively. As a result, modern Filipino fantasy films often feature complex narrative structures that retain key Proppian elements. In contrast, Ang Panday follows a simpler, linear sequence with 13 functions, adhering more closely to traditional models, a characteristic also noted by Agustin et al. (2023). Moreover, Filipino cultural values and traditions are evident in the morphological functions, as reflected in mythological creatures (aswang, manananggal, engkanto, tikbalang) and in practices such as *bayanihan*, respect for elders (*paggalang*), strong family ties, and moral principles like courage and loyalty. This illustrates how contemporary films not only entertain but also reinforce cultural awareness and identity (Magsalin & Roquel, 2022).

Finally, all four films conclude with the hero attaining victory (J), reinforcing the central role of the seeker-hero. Accordingly, the narratives highlight the stages of departure, struggle, and return, which align with the findings of Haq and Masroor (2024) and Dayana et al. (2024), who showed that character roles are defined by their actions. This pattern is consistent with Propp's framework and mirrors similar observations in Disney films, demonstrating the universality of morphological functions in structuring heroic narratives.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Vladimir Propp's structuralist framework remains relevant for analyzing modern Filipino blockbuster fantasy films. Specifically, beyond identifying archetypes and narrative functions, the research shows how traditional folktale structures persist and adapt within contemporary, often non-linear cinematic storytelling. By applying Propp's spheres of action and morphological functions to popular Filipino films, the study bridges classical narrative theory and modern media, offering a culturally grounded framework for understanding Filipino cinematic narratives. Moreover, the findings have clear pedagogical value for English, literature, and media classrooms. Many students struggle to analyze films beyond surface-level entertainment. In this context, the research provides teachers with a structured approach to examine narrative structure, character roles, and plot development, helping students develop critical viewing, analytical writing, and interpretive skills. In addition, using films as instructional texts supports multimodal learning and the development of 21st-century skills. For instance, film-based structural analysis encourages active viewing, discussion, collaboration, and higher-order thinking, making literature instruction more engaging and accessible. Consequently, it strengthens media literacy while aligning classroom activities with students' real-world media experiences.

At the curriculum level, this study supports the inclusion of film analysis alongside traditional literary texts in English and humanities programs. Educational institutions and curriculum developers may consider integrating structuralist frameworks, such as Propp's theory, into competencies for the analysis of literature and media. Doing so legitimizes film as a serious object of literary study and aligns classroom practices with contemporary learners' media consumption habits, while still grounding instruction in rigorous theoretical foundations. Furthermore, this research contributes to Philippine literary and film studies by expanding Propp's Morphology beyond folklore and Western texts to contemporary Filipino cinema. It also offers a replicable model for culturally contextualized analysis and opens avenues for interdisciplinary research in literature, film, and education. Looking ahead, future studies may explore other genres, Philippine epics, or alternative qualitative and quantitative approaches to deepen understanding of narrative structures, cultural meanings, and audience reception.

Overall, the study confirms that traditional narrative structures continue to shape modern Filipino storytelling. Thus, applying Propp's framework enhances critical engagement with film as literature, underscores the relevance of archetypes in cultural expression, and provides educators with practical guidance to help students appreciate films beyond mere entertainment, recognizing their deeper narrative and cultural significance.

Contributions of Authors

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