



## A Vladimir Propp Analysis of *The Cursed Pocket Watch*

Julie Abiya Putri<sup>1</sup>, Misrita<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Universitas Palangka Raya, Indonesia

E-mail: [julieabiya170@gmail.com](mailto:julieabiya170@gmail.com)

Article Info	Abstract
<b>Article History</b> Received: 2025-05-13 Revised: 2025-06-23 Published: 2025-07-09  <b>Keywords:</b> <i>Vladimir Propp;</i> <i>Character Functions;</i> <i>Narrative Analysis;</i> <i>Horror;</i> <i>Storytelling.</i>	This study analyzes the short story <i>The Cursed Pocket Watch</i> using Vladimir Propp's eight character types to explore how traditional narrative roles are adapted within a modern psychological horror context. The analysis identifies Laila as the hero, the bullies as villains, and the haunted hut as the donor, among other character functions. The study highlights the dual role of the pocket watch as both helper and false hero, illustrating the complexity of magical objects in contemporary tales. Findings reveal how Propp's framework remains relevant by accommodating symbolic representations, such as the abstract "princess" representing peace and acceptance. This paper demonstrates the flexibility of Propp's theory for analyzing modern stories that address themes of bullying, isolation, and unintended consequences of power. Suggestions for future research include integrating psychological perspectives to enrich the understanding of character roles and thematic development in contemporary narratives.
Artikel Info	Abstrak
<b>Sejarah Artikel</b> Diterima: 2025-05-13 Direvisi: 2025-06-23 Dipublikasi: 2025-07-09  <b>Kata kunci:</b> <i>Vladimir Propp;</i> <i>Fungsi Tokoh;</i> <i>Analisis Naratif;</i> <i>Horror;</i> <i>Penceritaan.</i>	Penelitian ini menganalisis cerita pendek <i>The Cursed Pocket Watch</i> dengan menggunakan delapan tipe tokoh menurut Vladimir Propp untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana peran naratif tradisional diadaptasi dalam konteks horor psikologis modern. Analisis ini mengidentifikasi Laila sebagai tokoh pahlawan, para pembully sebagai tokoh penjahat, dan gubuk berhantu sebagai pemberi, di samping fungsi-fungsi tokoh lainnya. Studi ini menyoroti peran ganda jam saku terkutuk sebagai penolong sekaligus pahlawan palsu, yang menggambarkan kompleksitas objek magis dalam kisah kontemporer. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kerangka kerja Propp tetap relevan dengan mengakomodasi representasi simbolik, seperti "putri" yang bersifat abstrak dan merepresentasikan kedamaian serta penerimaan. Makalah ini menunjukkan fleksibilitas teori Propp dalam menganalisis cerita-cerita modern yang mengangkat tema perundungan, isolasi, dan konsekuensi tak terduga dari kekuasaan. Saran untuk penelitian selanjutnya adalah mengintegrasikan perspektif psikologis guna memperkaya pemahaman terhadap peran tokoh dan pengembangan tema dalam narasi kontemporer.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is an important teaching resource that has been present in all societies since the development of human language. It plays a vital role in communication, education, and cultural transmission (Phillips, 2000). Literature, as a form of storytelling, serves as a medium through which authors express their thoughts and ideas (Swarniti, 2020). Over time, the form of storytelling has evolved. Initially rooted in oral traditions, it progressed into written narratives and eventually transformed into visual formats with the invention of television and digital screens (Rauf & Saqib, 2023). Today, digital platforms such as YouTube have become popular media for storytelling, allowing for the integration of sound, image, and text to deliver modern narratives in engaging ways.

Despite the changes in medium, the structural patterns of stories often remain consistent. The development of the plot and the central characters are fundamental components that contribute to a strong and coherent narrative (Kennedy & Gioia, 1983). Characters play a crucial role in determining the flow of the plot since their motivations, actions, and development shape the overall story (Brahman et al., 2021). As such, understanding and analyzing character functions is a central focus in literary studies.

Vladimir Propp, a Russian folklorist, made a significant contribution to the study of narrative structure. After analyzing hundreds of Russian fairy tales, Propp identified a consistent pattern of narrative functions and proposed a theory that categorizes characters based on the roles they

play within the plot (Shahbaz et al., 2024). In his work *Morphology of the Folktale*, Propp (1968) introduced 31 narrative functions along with eight typical character types. These include the Hero, who is the central figure of the story; the Helper, who assists the hero; the Villain, who opposes the hero; the False Hero, who pretends to be the hero but creates further complications; the Donor, who provides magical assistance or knowledge; the Dispatcher, who initiates the hero's quest; the Princess, who may be the goal of the quest or a reward; and the Princess's Father, who may guide or constrain the quest.

Propp's model remains relevant in analyzing both traditional and contemporary narratives. His framework helps scholars understand how character functions contribute to the overall structure and meaning of a story. In the context of education, the storytelling method has also proven to be an effective tool. According to Huda et al. (2022), storytelling not only enhances language skills but also promotes character development by presenting real-life values. Maureen (2018) further observed that digital storytelling, especially through the use of internet-based videos and fairy tales, significantly improves children's speaking skills. These developments are supported by the creativity that grows along with individual and technological advancements in society (Dara & Simanjuntak, 2022).

This study aims to apply Propp's narrative theory to a modern horror-fantasy story titled *The Cursed Pocket Watch*, published on the YouTube channel *Snarled*. The story follows a young girl named Laila, who experiences bullying and comes across a mysterious object that alters her reality. By examining the transcript of this digital story, the research identifies and interprets the character functions based on Propp's eight roles. Through this analysis, the study explores how Propp's classical model can still be used to understand plot development and thematic meaning within modern digital storytelling formats.

## II. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to examine character functions within a contemporary horror-fantasy narrative, utilizing Vladimir Propp's theory of narrative functions and character roles as the central analytical framework. The primary data source was a digital video titled "*The Cursed Pocket Watch // Scary Story Time // Something Scary / Snarled*", published on the YouTube channel

*Snarled*. The video's transcript served as the textual material for analysis, allowing for a detailed breakdown of its narrative structure.

The analysis began with the transcription of the video content to ensure the availability of a complete and accurate script for interpretation. From this transcript, a close textual reading was conducted to identify the presence and manifestation of Propp's eight character roles: the Hero, the Helper, the Villain, the False Hero, the Donor, the Dispatcher, the Princess, and the Princess's Father. While Propp initially developed this morphological model in the context of Russian folktales, scholars such as Dundes (1965) and Booker (2004) have demonstrated its wider applicability in modern storytelling, including popular culture, cinema, and digital media.

The process of interpretation involved mapping each character or narrative element to its functional role as described by Propp. This allowed for an understanding of how narrative progression is guided by the interplay of these character functions. According to Forster (2020), modern adaptations of classical narrative theory like Propp's help researchers trace enduring structural patterns across different genres and platforms. Furthermore, Ryan (2006) emphasizes the flexibility of narrative frameworks in transmedial contexts, noting that character roles often transcend their original cultural boundaries and evolve in response to new modes of storytelling.

The findings of this study were discussed in relation to how Propp's character roles contribute to plot development, narrative tension, and the evocation of emotional or psychological themes within the horror genre. This method enabled an in-depth exploration of the continued relevance of Propp's structuralist theory in contemporary digital narratives. As Jenkins (2006) notes, the increasing prevalence of user-generated and digital-native content calls for classical theories to be re-evaluated and re-applied in innovative ways to understand narrative complexity in the age of participatory culture.

By applying Propp's framework to a modern horror story disseminated through a digital platform, this study not only assessed the narrative structure of the chosen text but also reflected on the adaptability of traditional literary theories in analyzing current forms of storytelling.

### III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### A. Result

This section identifies the eight character types in the story *The Cursed Pocket Watch* based on Vladimir Propp's character theory. The analysis focuses on how each character or element fits into Propp's categories.

##### 1. The Hero

The hero is Laila. She is the central character in the story, and the entire narrative revolves around her experiences, from being bullied to discovering the cursed object and eventually breaking the curse. The reader follows her emotional and psychological transformation.

##### 2. The Helper

The pocket watch initially appears to act as a helper. When Laila is distressed, she finds some calm and power in the watch. It seemingly protects her from her bullies and gives her control over her situation. However, this role shifts as the story progresses.

##### 3. The Villain

The villains are Christina, Emma, Jessica, and Jasmine. These girls torment Laila repeatedly through verbal and physical bullying. Their cruel actions serve as the primary external conflict Laila must endure and overcome.

##### 4. The False Hero

The pocket watch also plays the role of the false hero. While it first seems to help Laila deal with her problems, it is eventually revealed to be a cursed object that causes serious harm to others. It misleads Laila by presenting itself as a solution, while secretly escalating the conflict.

##### 5. The Donor

The hut or the mysterious environment serves as the donor. It provides the hero with a magical object (the pocket watch), even though there is no character explicitly granting it. The donor's function is fulfilled through the eerie setting that offers the means for Laila's transformation.

##### 6. The Dispatcher

The dispatcher role is played by Laila's suffering and isolation due to bullying. These emotional and social pressures compel her to seek change and lead her to the haunted hut. Although there is no person who sends her on a quest, the situation itself performs the dispatcher function.

##### 7. The Princess

The princess is represented in an abstract form. It is not a person but the normalcy, peace, and acceptance Laila longs for. Her "reward" at the end is not love or marriage, but freedom from the curse and the bullying, as well as a newfound fear-based respect from her peers.

##### 8. The Princess' Father

Absent. There is no character in the story who sends the hero on a quest to win or save the princess, nor is there any figure who guards or controls the "prize" (peace/acceptance).

These findings demonstrate that even within a modern horror tale, Propp's character functions can be identified and used to structure a comprehensive folktale analysis.

#### B. Discussion

The analysis of *The Cursed Pocket Watch* using Vladimir Propp's character theory reveals a nuanced interaction of traditional narrative roles adapted to a modern, psychological horror context. Laila, as the hero, embodies the classic protagonist archetype who undergoes significant transformation through conflict, supernatural intervention, and internal struggle. Her journey reflects not only the structure of folktale progression but also engages with real-world psychological themes. Laila's alienation, caused by bullying, mirrors the initial misfortune or lack Propp identifies as a common trigger for heroic action. In this case, the bullying serves as both a literal and symbolic dispatcher—pushing her from a familiar world into the unknown, thereby initiating her narrative arc.

What makes this narrative particularly compelling is the complexity of the pocket watch as a plot device. Serving simultaneously as a helper and a false hero, the watch initially grants Laila a sense of agency and power, but ultimately leads to darker consequences. This duality adds layers to Propp's model, which traditionally treats character functions as distinct and stable. Scholars such as Tatar (2009) and Zipes (2012) have noted that magical objects in folklore often symbolize deeper psychological forces. In this narrative, the watch functions as both a gift and a curse—illustrating the dangers of unchecked power and the blurred lines between empowerment and corruption. Such

ambiguity is particularly resonant in contemporary storytelling, where protagonists are frequently depicted as morally complex and their decisions carry unintended consequences.

The absence of a traditional “princess” and “princess’s father” underscores a significant shift in modern narratives from external goals (such as marriage or social status) to internal quests for peace, identity, and self-acceptance. In this story, the “princess” can be interpreted metaphorically as Laila’s longing for emotional safety and social belonging. This reflects what Booker (2004) describes as the “inner journey,” a hallmark of modern narratives where psychological transformation replaces literal reward. Thus, Propp’s roles are not discarded but reimagined, illustrating how structuralist theory can still be applied meaningfully in postmodern or digital contexts.

Equally notable is the role of the donor. In classical tales, the donor appears as a character who tests the hero and bestows a magical aid. Here, however, that role is filled by a location—the graveyard hut. The eerie setting becomes a silent donor, presenting the magical object (the pocket watch) without dialogue or interaction. This adaptation emphasizes atmosphere over agency, aligning with horror genre conventions where settings often play an active role in advancing the plot. As Ryan (2006) and Forster (2020) argue, narrative functions can be transposed onto non-human or environmental elements in modern narratives, demonstrating the plasticity of structural frameworks in evolving media.

The bullies in the story clearly fulfill the role of the villains. They function as catalysts for Laila’s transformation, their cruelty not only isolating her but also inadvertently triggering the supernatural events. Their eventual downfall—suggested to be the result of the cursed watch—serves as poetic justice, a narrative device frequently used in folklore to reestablish moral balance. This adherence to Propp’s villain role reinforces the idea that, despite shifts in form and medium, certain narrative patterns remain deeply embedded in human storytelling traditions.

Furthermore, the psychological horror genre allows for a blending of internal and external antagonism. The bullies represent societal cruelty, but Laila’s internalized pain and eventual moral ambiguity complicate the

binary opposition between hero and villain. As Todorov (1973) notes, the fantastic genre often destabilizes clear moral categories, and this story is no exception. Laila’s transformation involves not just overcoming obstacles but confronting the darker impulses within herself—making her both a subject of sympathy and a cautionary figure.

Overall, the story demonstrates how Propp’s structuralist model, though rooted in traditional folktales, remains relevant when applied flexibly to contemporary digital narratives. By interpreting character functions symbolically and contextually, the analysis reveals a layered understanding of how classical roles adapt to modern themes such as trauma, isolation, identity, and the consequences of revenge. This case study also supports broader scholarly arguments that narrative functions, while historically fixed, can evolve to reflect the complexities of current human experience and storytelling modalities.

#### IV. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

##### A. Conclusion

*The Cursed Pocket Watch* demonstrates how Vladimir Propp’s character types can be applied to a contemporary psychological horror story. The narrative effectively adapts classic roles such as the hero, villain, and donor while transforming others, like the princess, into symbolic concepts rather than literal characters. This shows that Propp’s framework remains relevant and flexible for analyzing modern stories that explore complex social and emotional issues like bullying and isolation.

##### B. Suggestion

For further research, it is recommended to combine Propp’s morphological approach with psychological or sociocultural theories to gain deeper insights into character development and thematic layers in similar contemporary narratives. Additionally, analyzing other modern tales using Propp’s functions may reveal new ways traditional folklore elements evolve in today’s storytelling.

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