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# The Significance of the Numbers Three, Four, and Seven in Fairy Tales, Folklore, and Mythology

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HNR 499

Senior Project Final

The Significance of the Numbers Three, Four, and Seven in Fairy Tales, Folklore, and  
Mythology

**INTRODUCTION**

“Once upon a time ... a queen was sitting and sewing by a window with an ebony frame. While she was sewing, she looked out at the snow and pricked her finger with the needle. Three drops of blood fell onto the snow” (*Snow White* 81). This is a quote which many may recognize as the opening to the famous fairy tale *Snow White*. But how many would take notice of the number three in the last sentence of the quote and question its significance? Why, specifically, did three drops of blood fall from the queen’s finger? The quote from *Snow White* is just one example of many in which the number three presents itself as a significant part of the story. This pattern also occurs across other fairytales, folklore, and mythologies; often the number three is involved, but the numbers four and seven are also quite popular. While this is a common enough occurrence that it can be quite easily spotted, there is little information about *why* these numbers are so significant. Is it simply tradition? Does it relate to the culture or religion practiced by the people who live in the area the tale originated from? Is it something related to storytelling as an art? Or is does the answer lie in hidden psychological meanings? These were only a few of the questions that I pondered as I began this project.

Fairytales, folklore, and mythologies all carry with them the values and beliefs of their culture of origin. This was one of the main observations that I made during this research. As certain regions share only certain aspects of their cultures, I will be going through story by story, analyzing the occurrences of three, four, and seven in each one and then moving on to a different story in that region, until I have analyzed all of the selected stories for that region. The regions the stories come from are Europe, Eurasia, North America, and Latin America. I feel I must disclaim here that not all of the connections I make will be sourced. This is a topic that has surprisingly little written in the way of scholarly texts, so many of the conclusions I draw will be my own. This is especially true for the European tales, as I delve into my personal knowledge of the Bible for many of the connections.

### **European and Eurasian Tales**

The stories that are most widely familiar in the United States are likely those of European or Eurasian origin which were recorded in the last few centuries. One of the fairy tales that I chose was from the country of France: *Beauty and the Beast* in the version “best known to Anglo-American audiences” by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont (Tatar 59). Two of the stories I selected are of German origin, *Rumpelstiltskin* and *Snow White* both by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. *Molly Whuppie* by Joseph Jacobs is of English origin, as *The Story of the Three Bears* by Anonymous may have also been. Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe published the Norwegian folktale *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*. The last fairy tale I will address from this region is *Vasilisa the Fair* by Alexander Afanasev.

#### **i. *Beauty and The Beast***

Though many are familiar with Disney's version of *Beauty and the Beast*, Disney does have a history of altering the events of popular fairy tales. In the version by Madame de Beaumont, the girl known as 'Beauty' is the youngest of three daughters (61). She also has three brothers and a father, making a family of seven – the fairy tale ideal, which likely stems from the Christian belief that seven is the perfect number – the number of the attributes of God (Schimmel 132-3). As is the case with most fairy tale families with three daughters, the older two are jealous of their younger sister, as she garners the most attention. This is a fairly common motif used to contrast the ideal – the youngest, beautiful sister who is compassionate and works hard – with the less-than-ideal older sisters who let their jealousy consume them and who resort to deceit and ill-intent for their sister. This is also a theme in the popular story *Cinderella*, as well as in the story known now as *Toads and Diamonds*, originally titled *Les Fées* or *The Fairies* by Charles Perrault; a story in which the youngest and best daughter is blessed with jewels falling from her lips when she speaks and the older two daughters are jealous and eventually cursed with toads and snakes falling from their mouths when they speak (Perrault). The usage of three in this case is to showcase the contrast between the daughters' personalities.

In this version of the story, the father is going on a trip, so the older sisters beg him to bring back expensive presents such as furs and laces. Beauty asks simply for a rose, in an effort to not cause her sisters to dislike her further for making them look bad by not asking for anything (Leprince de Beaumont 63). When he finds a rose outside of a mansion he has spent a rainy night in, he picks one without a thought. It is then that the Beast appears and demands the father's life in return for stealing his roses. He begs the Beast not to kill him, so the Beast relents and tells him that if one of his daughters is willing to die in his place he will forgive him, but he has only three days to return (65). Tasks performed in fairy tales often come in sets of three or must be

completed within three days. Beauty takes the place of her father, but is not killed. She stays with the beast and is content for three months. The use of three when used to measure time of events is a popular motif in fairy tales. The use of three days is usually used by cultures where the prevailing religion is Christianity, and is perhaps a reference the three days Jonah spent in the belly of the whale praying that he would not die there or the three days of darkness that came over Egypt (Schimmel, 69).

After the three months have passed, Beauty confesses to the Beast that she misses her father so badly she feels she might die. The Beast allows her one week – that is, seven days – to return to her family (Leprince de Beaumont 73). The number seven in the Bible is said to be the perfect number, and there are many occurrences of it therein. Perhaps, in this case, the seven days Beauty is away from the Beast are meant to signify the seven days that the dove Noah sent out stayed away from the Ark (Schimmel, 132). The return of the dove signified the end of the flood, as Beauty's return was to signify the end of the Beast's suffering in his loneliness. However, Beauty's sisters scheme together and convince Beauty to stay an extra three days. She dreams on the last night that she has killed the Beast by not returning to the castle and leaving him in loneliness and depression (Leprince de Beaumont 74). When she returns, she finds him in the garden, almost dead. When she agrees to marry him, the curse he was under is lifted and he transforms into a handsome prince. The transformation and recuperation after starving himself for three days could very well be a parallel to Jesus rising from the grave three days after his crucifixion (*New International Version*, Luke 24.6).

## **ii. *Rumpelstiltskin***

*Rumpelstiltskin* is a tale by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm that follows number motifs similar to those of *Beauty and The Beast*. When a father gives his daughter over to a king after claiming she can spin straw into gold, she is told that if she cannot perform her task, she will be killed. A “tiny little man” walks in and asks the girl why she is crying (*Rumpelstiltskin* 126). He offers to spin the straw into gold for her in exchange for her necklace. This happens twice more, but on the fateful third night, he demands the girl’s firstborn child as payment. The concept of a major event occurring on the third repetition is not a new one, though in Christianity it is more generally a positive event.

The Grimm brothers sought the original tale from beneath all of the changes it underwent from various oral retellings, so it is likely that this tale holds firm to German beliefs (Michaelis-Jena 5-6). In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries, one of Germany’s predominant religions was Christianity (Becker-Cantarino 11). This occurrence in particular could be a reference to Peter denying that he knew Jesus three times before the rooster crowed in the morning, as Jesus said he would (*New International Version*, Mark 14.72). It is also similar to the tenth Plague God cast over Egypt, when all the firstborn sons from families who did not paint their doorways with lamb’s blood were killed (Exodus 12.29). As the death of the firstborn was what finally drove the Pharaoh to desperation enough release the Jews, the prospect of losing her firstborn to the ‘little man’ and effectively becoming dead to her makes her desperate to keep the baby by any means. The girl agrees to this arrangement out of desperation, but when the time comes, the girl – now queen – begs him not to take away her child. He makes a new deal – he will not take the child if the queen can guess his name in three days (*Rumpelstiltskin* 28). Each day she guesses three names, to continue the motif of threes. At the end of the three days, she correctly guesses his name. When this happens, Rumpelstiltskin tears himself in two. This could be a direct reference

to the death of Jesus. In the gospel of John, when Jesus is on the cross, he speaks three times before he gives up his spirit (*New International Version*, John 19.26-30). When he dies, the veil of the temple is torn in two (Mark 15.38).

### iii. *Snow White*

*Snow White* is one of the most well-known fairy tales (Bettelheim 199), and therefore one of the most well-documented. This may also be due to the abundance of themes one can draw from the story. As far as the numerology motif extends, *Snow White* provides many opportunities to analyze the occurrences of the numbers three and seven. The story begins with Snow White's mother pricking her finger while she is sewing. Three drops of blood fall to the snow, and the queen wishes for a child "as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of the window frame" (*Snow White* 81).

Bruno Bettelheim suggests that the three drops of blood set the stage for the main problems in the story:

"...sexual innocence, whiteness, is contrasted with sexual desire, symbolized by the red blood. Fairy tales prepare the child to accept what is otherwise a most upsetting event: sexual bleeding, as in menstruation and later in intercourse... the child learns that a small amount of bleeding – three drops of blood (three being the number most closely associated in the unconscious with sex) – is a precondition for conception, because only after this bleeding is the child born. Here, then, (sexual) bleeding is closely connected with a 'happy' event; without detailed explanations the child learns that without bleeding no child – not even he – could have been born (Bettelheim 202)."

Bettelheim explains that the number three is most closely related to sex in the unconscious because both biological sexes – male and female – have three visible sex organs each (220).

When the three drops of blood splash against the snow, the queen is taken away by the beauty of the contrast between the red and white. The contrast that Bettelheim speaks of is between sexual innocence and sexual desire. It is when she reaches the age of seven that her step-mother's mirror recognizes her as the fairest in the land. This signifies the end of Snow White's childhood, as in earlier centuries childhood was much shorter, ending even before puberty (Tatar 83).

Though she is still sexually innocent, she is no longer a child and the mirror recognizes her as one who will be the object of sexual desire for many in the land due to her beauty. Black is a color generally used to denote evil, and could very well be a foreshadowing of the sad events Snow White shall have to endure and the evil that her step-mother intends.

In the article "Red as Blood, White as Snow, Black as Crow: Chromatic Symbolism of Womanhood in Fairy Tales" by Francisco Vaz da Silva, the author notes that it is highly significant that the three colors used are black, white, and red, as according to a study done by Berlin and Kay, if a language has terms for only two colors, those colors are black and white; if it has only three, the colors are black, white, and red (qtd. in Vaz da Silva 241). There is a pattern that continues on in this fashion from there, but our focus is on the original triad. These colors often carry with them a specific cultural importance, though the exact significance varies from culture to culture. In this tale, the reference to the colors appears to be an acknowledgement of Snow White ideal nature, even before she is born. This tricolor pattern appears as the typical ideal for women in various cultures, such as our own, for years to come.

Even now, this color pattern is recognized in media. In Snow White's story, she has hair as black as ebony, skin as white as snow, and lips as red as blood. Though black hair is no longer

culturally considered an absolute ideal, black still incorporates itself into the ideal of womanly beauty. Some of the most basic makeup products sold are lipstick (red), mascara (black), and powder or foundation (white). Our culture continues to perpetuate this color triad as the ideal.

Though Snow White is an innocent girl, her step-mother is not fazed at all by this information as she orders the girl's death. However, she is not killed, but released into the forest (*Snow White* 83). She stumbles upon a house in the woods, where she finds small sets of seven set up all over the house: seven chairs at the table, seven plates of food, and seven glasses of wine. She takes a few vegetables from each plate and a drop of wine from each glass, so as to not take all that was there from any one place setting. Snow White tries to sleep in the bed of each of the seven dwarves, but they are all too short or too long, until she tries the seventh bed.

Bettelheim calls attention to the fact that Snow White puts herself in a vulnerable position by laying in not one but all seven beds that could – and did – belong to men (Bettelheim 209). However, instead of viewing this as an act of potential promiscuity, it is instead attributed again to her innocence (the whiteness). When the seven dwarves arrive home, however, they see her in the bed and wonder who she is. They let her stay the night because she is so beautiful (because of the red – the sexual desire – though the dwarves pose no threat to Snow White's innocence). The seventh dwarf sleeps with the other dwarves, an hour in each bed until morning, rather than getting into his own bed where Snow White laid (*Snow White* 87). This is an act that shows the integrity of the dwarves, which is not surprising considering that the number of them is seven, as seven is the number of perfection.

Bettelheim suggests that the reason there are seven dwarves dates back to Teutonic lore, when dwarves were workers of the earth (Bettelheim 209). Indeed, in this story, they are miners

who work hard all day within the earth. He also suggests that there may be seven dwarves because Snow White herself seems to be distantly derived from the sun, suggested by her whiteness and consequently her radiance. “According to the ancients, seven planets circle the sun, hence the seven dwarfs (209).”

This is not the only theory for why the dwarves are seven in number. As stated above, seven is often considered to be the number of perfection. Though that does beg the question of whether Snow White has found the perfect hiding place or whether she is intruding upon an already established perfect home. It appears, for a time, to be the former. She lives in harmony with her seven dwarves, and does all their housework, as an ‘ideal woman’ would. Also, the evil queen must travel over seven hills to reach the home of the seven dwarves, another indicator of the perfection of the house (*Snow White* 88). However, while the dwarves are away, Snow White is fooled three times by her stepmother in disguise who wishes to do her harm, despite the repeated warnings of her guardians. In other words, while that which symbolizes perfection (seven) leaves her to herself, she cannot protect herself, despite the repetition of the events (three times). Strangely enough, despite Snow White’s predisposition toward being fooled, she is not regarded as being stupid or gullible, but rather it is again her innocence that is being displayed as she trusts a stranger again and again. She is beautiful (red) and innocent (white) and therefore acts of disobedience (black) are overlooked.

While Snow White appears to be dead from having eaten the poisoned apple, the dwarves mourn for three days (*Snow White* 91). This is likely a reference to the mourning that took place during the three days that Jesus was dead, before he rose again (*New International Version*, Luke 24.6). The poisoned apple itself is likely a reference to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, when they eat the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. After they eat the

fruit, they know many things about the world, including that they are naked, and their mortality is made known to them (*New International Version*, Genesis 3.7). While Snow White is asleep in her coffin made of glass, she is visited by three birds: an owl, a raven, and a dove. “The owl symbolizes wisdom; the raven – as in the Teutonic god Woden’s raven – probably mature consciousness; and the dove stands traditionally for love” (Bettelheim 213). The visiting of these birds, according to Bettelheim, is a sign that Snow White’s time spent in the coffin is a time for her to finish maturing and to gain knowledge of the world when she awakes. The number three in this case is likely a reference to the three gifts given to the baby Jesus by the wise men (*New International Version*, Matt. 2.11). When she wakes, she will, after all, be more wise and know more about the world.

#### **iv. Molly Whuppie**

The tale of Molly Whuppie is of English origin and comes from Joseph Jacobs, a folklorist who sought to remedy “the absence of a standard work of British folklore” (Tatar 201). The story begins with Molly Whuppie’s father abandoning his three youngest children in the woods, as he has too many children and cannot feed them all (Jacobs 202). The abandonment of the three youngest may be a reference to the siblings Aaron, Moses, and Miriam in the Bible; in that story, the youngest, Moses, is the one who is first abandoned (*New International Version*, Exodus 2.3). However, later all three of the siblings are in danger and it is the youngest who is able to lead them out of danger (Exodus 12.31). This is very similar to the role Molly Whuppie, also the youngest, plays.

The siblings, who we are later told are sisters, are taken in by a family of giants. These giants let them stay the night, but placed straw ropes around the necks of Molly Whuppie and her

sisters, while the father giant placed gold chains around the necks of his own daughters. The three straw ropes are quite like nooses, but Molly Whuppie changes out the straw ropes for the gold chains, so that when the father giant came to kill Molly and her sisters during the night, he felt for the straw ropes and instead beat his own girls to death (Jacobs 203). This idea of dying in the place of another could be related back to Christianity. The concept of sacrifice to cover one's sin is a major theme in the Old Testament, which carries over into Jesus' life. We often think of the main events of Jesus' life to be his birth, death, and resurrection (another set of three). At the very least, these are the three events of his life that we celebrate, as Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter, respectively.

After this, the girls flee to a king's house and the king gives Molly tasks to complete, and for each one that she completes, one of her sisters (and finally herself) will be wed to one of the king's sons. She is tasked to steal three items: the giant's sword, the giant's purse, and the giant's ring (Jacobs 203-4). These are all symbolic of a king: a sword for warring and claiming other lands; a purse, full of money to run a kingdom and enjoy the full splendor of gold; and a ring, likely reminiscent of a signet ring, a sign of the authority a king wields over his people. These three items allow the king to truly be the authority figure, though the young Molly Whuppie is the channel through which he obtains these items. Therefore, he gives her to one of his sons, allowing her to share in the authority she has helped grant him.

#### ***v. The Story of the Three Bears***

Also known as *Goldilocks* or *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, this tale carries a subtextual theme of self-discovery through repetition of the number three. Bettelheim addresses that there are first three ways that Goldilocks tries to enter the cabin in the woods. First, through

looking in the window to sate her curiosity; then, through the keyhole, anxiously wondering if anyone is home; and finally lifting the latch to let herself in, the final step in which she gives in to her curiosity and enters the strangers' home (Bettelheim 219).

The number three is incredibly significant to the role that Goldilocks plays in this tale because the family of bears that she places herself in is a stark contrast to herself. Each of the three bears in this nuclear family knows where they stand, what fits them, where they belong. Goldilocks goes into the house and tries the chairs, the porridge, and the beds, trying to fit herself into one of the roles so that she can discover her place in life (*Three Bears* 247-9). Bettelheim states that "The number three is central in 'Goldilocks'; it refers to sex, but not in terms of the sexual act. On the contrary, it relates to something that must precede mature sexuality by far; namely, finding out who one is biologically (Bettelheim 220)." Indeed, three, as discussed earlier, is the number most closely related to sex by our unconscious. This is because, according to Bettelheim, of the three visible sex organs on the male and female bodies (220). This means that Goldilocks must determine her biological role in a family – mother, father, child, etc. – before she can move on. Ultimately, the three bears arrive home, and Goldilocks must leave, as this is not her proper place; she does not belong in this already established family of bears. She runs away then, leaving the perfectly balanced family of three to itself.

#### **vi. *East of the Sun and West of the Moon***

This tale is a personal favorite of mine, though I had not before thought to look into the symbolism the numbers present. This is the only tale that I selected that is of Norwegian origin, and the values and legends of the Norse people are much different than those of the French, German, and English. Though the German tales had hints of old gods, they were mostly

Christianized by the time they were published. Norse stories tend to hang on to their roots, however. The story begins very precisely on a Thursday evening late in the fall (Asbjørnsen and Moe 187). Fall, being the third of the four seasons, has already set the stage for the importance of these two numbers in this story. Norse mythology tends to follow patterns of ancient gods but also of nature. The four seasons and the four cardinal directions are incredibly vital to this tale, and to many others. Four is a significant number to many people groups, but especially to those that live close to nature. The four seasons, the four cardinal directions, and the gods that reign over these make four a number worth exploring. In the tale, the year has not yet ended, and suddenly there are three taps on the window pane. This occurrence of three foreshadows the next event: a white bear is at the door and asks for the youngest daughter's hand in marriage. According to Tatar, "Ogres and animal suitors always seek the youngest of three daughters, perhaps because... the youngest daughter was, in all likelihood, the most attractive. The older sisters still around had generally not been successful, for one reason or another, in making a match (Tatar 188)."

Exactly seven days later, one week, the bear returns and fetches the girl. If this were a tale from a Christian-oriented society, I might say that these seven days during which the daughter prepares to face an entirely new life and new world alongside the bear parallel the seven days of creation of the world. However, as this is a Norse tale, it may instead be a nod to the three realms (Asgard, Midgard, and Nilfheim) overlaid with the four cardinal directions (North, South, East, and West) to make seven (Lindow 61).

After she has arrived at the bear's home and spent much time there, the girl grows sad because she wishes to see her father and mother and brothers and sisters (Asbjørnsen and Moe 190). That she takes the time to name each of the four categories of her family suggests that she

feels excluded from her position in one of the four important family roles, now that she lives alone with the bear. Her family still has their four, but she is not part of it.

The white bear allows her to visit her family but warns her against being alone with her mother, lest she tempt her to do something that will bring a curse down upon the both of them. Her mother tells her that to see the face of the creature that is hopefully a man and not a troll, she should hide a candle stub in her nightgown and light it when he has gone to sleep. She warns her very explicitly, however, to be very sure to not drip tallow onto his shirt (Asbjørnsen and Moe 191-2). Of course, as is usually the case in fairy tales, this warning is a foreshadowing of exactly that: the girl drips three drops of tallow onto the shirt when she sees the handsome face of the man in bed and leans over to kiss him.

No explanation is given for why there are three drops of tallow spilled, but we soon find out that the man was bewitched into a bear by his stepmother (Asbjørnsen and Moe 193). Tatar explains that his beastly form has been viewed by psychologists as a way of implying to children the “‘beastliness’ of sex (Tatar 193).” Therefore, the three drops of tallow may relate to sex in the same way that the three drops of blood in *Snow White* are meant to signify sexual bleeding. The story supports this theory, as the girl has cursed them both by doing so and the man must go to a kingdom East of the sun and West of the moon to marry a different girl, “with a nose three ells long,” or about 135 inches long, an exaggeration that shows how loathe the man is to marry this other woman (Asbjørnsen and Moe 193). The drops of tallow as a metaphor for premarital sex is a logical one, as after it occurs, the girl who simply ‘could not control herself’ and wait a full year is deemed to be ‘unclean’ and they cannot wed. That is, they cannot wed until the girl who has been cursed (with ‘sexual uncleanliness’) proves herself worthy of marrying the man that she was sleeping with because she ruined the plan he had for them.

The girl journeys to find the kingdom East of the sun and West of the moon, though she cannot get there alone. Magical assistance comes first in the form of three old women who each give her a golden item and each let her ride their horse to the next place she needed to go. The three gifts in this instance could be related back to the Norse legend of the gods giving gifts to the humans: ““Odin gave mind, Hönir soul, Lodur light and color (Schimmel 61).”” The motif of three old women offering objects is one that does not always end well, but in this case the gifts from the women are useful to the girl as she is able to use them to bargain her way into a room with the prince for a night for each item after she finds help in the form of the four winds, who offer her rides on their backs across the sky, each more powerful than the last, to get her to the kingdom.

Staying the night for three nights in the prince’s room finally proves useful on the third night. He had been drugged the other nights, but some good people staying in the castle told him they heard a girl crying to the prince for two nights, and he throws the sleeping potion over his shoulder instead of drinking it. He tells the girl on that third night that she arrived just in time, as the wedding was to be tomorrow. This could be a reference to the Norse legend in which for three days Audhumla licked the salt block of Ginnungagap until Búri was freed (Lindow 247).

The prince decides to have a contest in which the woman who can scrub the tallow off of his shirt satisfactorily shall be his bride, knowing that only the girl who spilled it can make it clean again. The ugly woman he does not want to marry tries first, and only succeeds in making the spots wider and darker. The woman’s mother tries second, and fails like her daughter. Finally, the prince calls the girl over and asks her to try. Because she is the one who spilled it (and the third to try, as the saying goes that “third time is the charm”) and the one who can remove it. Indeed, when she dips the shirt into the bucket to clean it, it immediately becomes

bright and shining white (Asbjørnsen and Moe 199). And thus, her innocence and integrity is restored.

**vii. *Vasilisa the Fair***

This tale is a sort of Cinderella story, though it is Russian in origin. It follows the same beginning pattern where the mother of the youngest daughter dies, leaving the husband and daughter alone. The father decides to remarry a widow that has two daughters almost the same age as Vasilisa (Afanasev 173). Generally, the stepmother is somewhat cruel but leaves most of the cruelty to the daughters. Not so in the story. The stepmother is also jealous of Vasilisa's beauty, as she is more beautiful than her or her daughters. The three join forces against the one, making the female balance of power in the house uneven. In this tale, however, the youngest daughter's birth mother has bestowed a gift to her daughter, a doll that can give her advice when she feeds it. Thanks to this doll, she passes her years in relative ease, until her father must go away on a journey (175).

When the father is away, the other three women scheme to get rid of Vasilisa. They send her to the hut of the witch Baba Yaga under the guise of needing fire, as none of the flames in the house are lit. In reality, they send her in hopes of the witch killing Vasilisa (Afanasev 176). There are three horsemen that ride past Vasilisa, and though she is frightened of them, she continues to the hut like the good girl she is. When she is in the hut, the doll completes her tasks the witch gives her for three days. She also sees that the witch has three pairs of hands that appear to do her bidding. She asks Baba Yaga about the three horsemen, and learns that they are the bright day, the red sun, and the dark night, her faithful servants (these also follow the pattern

of black, white, and red that is discussed in *Snow White*, though different meanings have been applied to the colors as the culture is different).

Vasilisa wants to ask about the hands but refrains, as the witch has told her that “If you know too much, you will soon grow old,” and she recognizes it for the warning that it is (Afanasev 181). The witch would have eaten her if she had asked. Instead, the witch asks how she has gotten all her tasks done and throws her out with the fire she desires when Vasilisa says that it is thanks to her mother’s blessing, as the witch does not want any blessed ones in her house. The fire is a vengeful, purifying one, and burns up the evil stepmother and stepsisters when Vasilisa returns home (183). Eventually the girl spins some incredible fabric and makes beautiful garments for the prince and is then asked to marry him. She, of course, lives happily ever after with her father, an old woman who gave her shelter, and the doll by her side (183-5).

#### **vii. “A Gaelic Eschatological Folktale, Celtic Cosmology and Dumézil’s ‘Three Realms’”**

This article by John Shaw details the variants of the classic tale categorized as “ATU 20C,” wherein death and disaster are befalling the earth, generally in a pattern that includes the earth, the sea, and the sky. The character who discovers that the world is ending often says something along the lines of “My ear has heard, my eye has seen and my foot has felt,” to confirm to the other characters that death may soon be upon them (Shaw 251). The use of three senses in this part of the story is to emphasize the danger. One sense may be a figment of the imagination, two perhaps a mistake, but three is hard to argue against. It is through this that the character convinces the others to go with them.

The doom that awaits the characters has been observed to have a set pattern that makes up the medieval Irish motif known as the Threefold Death (Shaw 259). The destruction comes

from what has come to be known as three realms – the heavens (the sky), the sea, and the earth itself. “As to the order of the three regions, the sky as a rule is first, with some variation in the sequence [of] earth and sea; but the prevailing pattern in the examples studied is the descending order of heaven – earth – sea” (260). Shaw observed some variance in the final order of earth then sea or sea then earth, but this is a trait that does not greatly affect the flow of the stories. It is interesting to note, however that the change of order of these events eventually occurred due to the introduction and influence of Christianity (261).

It is also interesting to note that “the formulaic nature of the earliest Irish evidence provides an indication that the concept of a tripartite cosmic structure whose realms correspond to three elements may well be an inherited one” (Shaw 262). Shaw explains that relating the three elements – water, earth, and sky – to the three realms – the sea, the Earth, and the heavens, respectively – is a tradition that appears to have been passed down the Indo-European storytelling methods for a long, though unspecified, amount of time (262). Therefore, its use in this particular style of tale may simply be tradition.

Shaw also addresses an oath in the *Odyssey* by Homer. The oath is used several times over, displaying its importance. The oath that Odysseus takes is this: “Now let the earth be my witness in this, and the wide heaven above us, and the dripping water of the Styx, which oath is the biggest and the most formidable among the blessed immortals” (qtd. in Shaw 265). Again, three realms are mentioned, but rather than the sea, the river Styx is called upon. This gives new context to the pattern, as the earth is the dwelling place of mortals, the heaven belongs to (most of) the gods, and the river Styx is in the underworld, where Hades keeps watch over the souls of the dead. In this case, the realms, still related each to their own element (earth, sky, and water), also portray the different levels of beings, calling upon the entirety of the world, mortal,

immortal, and spirit, to bear witness. The number three encompasses what makes up this entire world; it is a small number, but more than sufficient.

## **Native North American and Latin American Tales**

### **i. “The Seven Sisters”**

This is an article by N. Scott Momaday about the cosmology of the Seven Sisters in the legends of the Kiowa, which he heard as a child when he visited his Kiowa grandmother in Oklahoma. The story he focuses on is about eight siblings – seven girls and one boy. One day, they were out playing and the brother was pretending to be a bear while the girls ran away from him. Sometime during their play, the brother actually turned into a bear, and chased them with the intent to kill them. They ran and ran, and when they passed a tree stump, it called out to them and told them it could save them if they climbed on top of it. The girls climbed on top of the stump and it rose high into the air, out of reach of the bear. It rose all the way into the sky, and the seven sisters became the constellation known today as the Big Dipper (Momaday 33).

The use of the number seven in this story plays a role that has not yet been addressed in this paper – the role of explaining the land and sky surrounding a people group. The Kiowa explained the mesa as the tree stump that had borne the girls into the sky, and the girls themselves as the seven stars which make up the Big Dipper. By doing this, “they also related themselves to the stars; never again would the stars be the far reaches of the universe – the Kiowa had relatives in the night sky” (Momaday 33). The big, open world around them had been humanized. What had they to fear when their relatives surrounded them and looked down on them each night?

## ii. “The Importance of the Number Four as an Ordering Principle in the Worldview of the Ancient Maya”

This is an article written by Ruth Gubler that details the significance of the number four to the way of life of the Mayan people. The number four appears in many forms – the organization of territories, the systems of architecture, the arrangement of the Mayan calendar, their religion, and even in the social organization (23). She says that although some other numbers have significance, “it is the number four which appears most frequently and which seems to have been imbued with the most sacred and mystical character” (24). This is in part related again to the four cardinal directions (North, South, East, and West). The world is said to have come from the four corners of the universe, according to the Maya (26). From there came the concept of time, which is ordered according to four parts – day and night, and sun and moon. This foursome also establishes a connection between space itself and time (27).

The chromatic system of numbers also comes into play here, as the four foundations established in each cardinal direction are all given a color – red, white, black, and yellow. It is said that “Four messengers were linked to this spatial-chronological ordering: the red, white, and yellow Piltec and Lahun Chan, the idol with the ugly teeth. They were set up at the four world-quarters...” (Gubler 28). The number four was not just a part of their lore, but a force that ordered placement, color, and other factors in their daily lives.

However, that is not to say that it is not a large part of their lore. It is said, for example, that “To maintain this cosmic order and to ensure its stability... four brothers... were placed at the four corners of the world to support the sky” (28). It is important to note here that the Maya, before the conquests, believed the earth to be flat and actually have four corners (41). This is

only one of many, many stories that mention the four corners of the world, which was obviously a very important part of the Mayan culture. In fact, in Mayan lore, man was the fourth and best creation of the gods, who wanted to create something that could properly worship them and live on the earth (Gubler 33). Four is also usually the number of messengers – usually owls or four different types of creatures (35).

The Mayan people also believed that there were four gods – one at each cardinal point – for each of the major agricultural aspects: bees, rain, wind, and sky supporters. Also, time was thought to pass by being carried on the backs of the gods of each of the four world religions that were linked to certain colors and symbols, which is how the Mayas ordered their calendar (Gubler 42). That is, colors and symbols, relating to or in groups of four, on the calendar each signify a certain god.

Social ordering also follows the pattern of fours. Positions of power were held in four year spans by four noblemen – each one held power for one year. Four is also a number that relates to social rank, through aspects such as numbers of gifts given to a person, with four being the highest rank (Gubler 45).

### **iii. “Four as a Sacred Number”**

This article by A.W. Buckland recounts how during his research of Native American tribes, Buckland noticed the continual inclusion of the number four. He says, “I found myself constantly confronted with the fact, that, amongst almost all the Red Indian tribes, the number four and its- multiples had a sacred significance, having special reference to the cardinal points and to the winds which blow from them; the sign and symbol of this quadruple nature-worship being the Greek, or equal-armed cross” (96).

As was true for the Maya, the four seasons and the four cardinal directions hold great significance in most other Native American tribes. This is likely due to the agricultural importance in their cultures. Each cardinal point in each tribe has its own god, but also its own color. The colors vary from tribe to tribe, as Buckland says that the colors are generally yellow, red, blue, and green, which is very different from the pattern of black, white, red, and yellow that the Maya had. He continues by explaining that “although the Navajos and Zunis both use white to denote the east, the colour employed by the Navajos for the west is yellow, but the Zunis use blue, whilst blue among the Navajos signifies south” (97). So while each tribe does generally use the same four colors, the use of the four colors is what varies. Not only that, but there is a god for each point and color as well:

The gods are all four in number and all range themselves one at each cardinal point, being painted in the colour appropriate to that point. There are four bear-gods, four porcupines, four squirrels, four long-bodied goddesses, four holy young men, four lightning birds, &c. The hero is allowed four days and four nights to tell his story, and four days are employed in his purification. The great corral made for the performance of the ceremonies is left open on the east side only, and all entering have to move round it to the south, following the course of the sun, and in all the ceremonies especial reverence appears to be shown to the east. (Buckland 98)

Throughout all of this, it is the number four remains the same.

Buckland does note, however, that seven is integrated in some areas as a number of significance as well. This is formed when the four cardinal points are grafted onto the three

realms (101). That is, when North, South, East, and West are regarded at the same time with the sky, earth, and water. And yet, it is still four that holds the most power in Native American life.

"Four spirits stand, four powers preside, four winds blow, four waters flow at the four corners of the mount in the general myth of the world" (101).

## **CONCLUSION**

The occurrences of the numbers three, four, and seven, displayed in the fairy tales, folklore, and mythologies within this paper showcase the fact that the use of these numbers is far more than mere coincidence. Three is used as a method of comparison – from one child to the other (usually older) two. It counts the days of special events, in ways similar to those in Christianity. And it showcases the tri-color pattern of red, black, and white that stems from the perpetuated ideal of womanhood. Four is the number closest to nature – the cardinal directions and the seasons. The gods of the directions and seasons always appear in sets of four. The Norwegian, Native North American, and Latin American tales give evidence of this time and time again. Seven is the number of perfection – perfect families, perfect locations, and perfect lengths of time, comparable to the qualities attributed to God in Christianity – regarded as a perfect being. It is also a way for some – the Kiowa, for instance – to feel closer to the world around them and the sky above them. The use of these numbers is not only tradition, though tradition does play its part; these numbers are indicators of culture, religion, origin, and storytelling methodology itself.

## **REFLECTION**

Writing this paper was, frankly, quite a journey. Though I had written papers labelled as ‘research papers’ before, never had I been the one to make connections, to draw upon the

evidence and make the conclusions that no one else had yet explored. This was a first, and I was not as prepared as I had thought that I was. Writing this paper was a challenge, to be sure, but also very rewarding. Despite the heavy loads of reading and the days of writing and editing, I never found myself wishing I had chosen a different topic, or wishing I had never taken on a twenty-some-odd page paper for the Honors program the same semester I decided to complete my English degree, and therefore take my English capstone (which was, of course, another twenty-five page paper).

Outlining my schedule was a wonderful idea, and I am very glad it was a requirement for the proposal. It was the knowledge of approaching deadlines that kept me (mostly) on track with my progress. I did end up setting back a few of my personal deadlines, but I stuck to those that I established for the more important aspects, such as establishing when to turn in my rough draft to my advisor for this paper.

There were also a few challenges in the citations of the paper. Many of the Indo-European tales come from one anthology, and I had never before had to cite from an anthology. In this case, the Writing Center on campus was a great help to me.

The most helpful thing about this project, though, even beyond my own interest in the topic, was the support I had from Dr. Dawn Evans, my chosen advisor for this project. She was there for me whenever I needed her; ready to offer up her honest opinion and always doing her best to support me however she could. In light of this, I would like to take the end of this paper to extend a thank you. Thank you, Dawn, for all your help and for supporting me – both in this project and my college career. You have been a large part of what has made it great to be a Laker.

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