The folktale that I chose to use began as “The Gingerbread Man”, one of my favorite tales from my childhood. However, this central idea of a man made of gingerbread, transformed as the research progressed to include a boy made of gingerbread, a cakeen, and johnny cakes. However, the central theme of a baked bread substance still holds in each of the tales I collected. I will start by giving a brief summary of each of the five variants I collected, followed by a breakdown of the motifs I found in each, common motifs, look at the tale type as assigned by Aarne and Thompson and problems with this type and other tales that are categorized as the same, and finally apply course readings to this tale.

The first two tales I used were from a collection of tales that were collected by James Taylor Adams. Adams was born in Kentucky and worked alongside Chase on a project in which he collected songs and tales of Wise County, Virginia and parts of neighboring Kentucky. He had no formal background or education in folklore, however he was a very skilled collector. His collection is housed at the University of Virginia’s college at Wise and the Blue Ridge Institute of Ferrum College. The copies I used were sourced from the Ferrum College website.

In the first tale recorded by Adams-an American folktale derived from the Appalachian region- “The Johnny Cake Boy”, an old woman makes a Johnny cake and leaves her little boy in charge of watching it while it bakes. Magically, the cake comes to life, jumps out of the window, and rolls down the road with the boy behind it. Eventually the old woman sees and takes off after it too. The johnny cake continues rolling and comes upon a group of men working at a mill who ask where he was going and try to make it stop. This does not work and so the men follow the cake behind the old woman and the boy. This story continues when the cake comes upon a hog, a dog, and a goose who all do the same as the men, woman, and boy and follow the cake running after it. The last thing the cake comes upon is a fox who offers to help the Johnny cake across the river by allowing the cake to get on his head, however the fox eats the Johnny cake.

The second tale collected by Adams, “The Gingerbread Boy”, follows a very similar pattern, an old woman makes the gingerbread boy and the children are asked to watch it as it bakes. The gingerbread boy comes to life, jumps out the window, runs down the road, and has the children, man, and woman chasing after it. The gingerbread boy passes a field of men working who try to make it stop and end up chasing it. The same happens with a dog and a cow. In the end, the gingerbread boy comes upon a fox he pretends to be hard of hearing and eats the gingerbread boy when he gets close enough. This is also an American folktale derived from the Appalachian region.

The third tale I used was a tale recounted and written down by George Kittredge and was included in the Journal of American Folklore in 1890. In this variant, “The Little Cakeen”, the cake is made by a woman. After it bakes, it jumps out of the window and runs away with the little woman and her husband chasing it. The cake comes upon a cat, dog, cow, hen, and an owl who all ask it what it is doing, try to stop it, and end up chasing it. The last thing that the cake encounters is a fox who tells the cake that he will help it hide. First the cake must jump on his tail, then his back, then his head, and finally into its mouth where it is eaten. This tale is an example of an English folktale in America.

The fourth tale I used was what is reputed to be the first version of the tale written down and circulated. It is from the children’s illustrated magazine *St. Nicholas* from 1874, written by Mary Dodge and is titled “The Gin-Ger-Bread Boy”. In this variant, a little old woman with no children makes a boy from gingerbread. He bakes, jumps out of the oven, and runs away leaving the woman and her husband to follow it. The gingerbread boy passes a barn full of threshers working, a field full of mowers, a cow, a pig and a fox. Each follow the boy, but it is the fox who is able to catch him while running, and eat him. I am going to assume that this tale is an American folktale, however this is never really made clear.

The final tale that I used was written in the Journal of American Folklore by Fanny Bergen in 1889 and is titled “Johnny-Cake”. In this variant, there is an old man, woman, and their son. The woman makes the cake and the boy is to watch it. Like all the other stories, it jumps from the oven and out of the window, but it rolls away like the first tale example (instead of running). The cake is followed by the man, woman, and the boy, and passes two well diggers who follow it but give up and stop to rest, as well as two ditch diggers, a bear, and a wolf who all do the same. The last character the cake passes is a fox who asks what the cake is doing, pretends to not be able to hear, and then eats the cake when it is close enough.

The motifs that run through all five of these variants are rather simple; there are not many motifs for each tale that exist. The most interesting thing that I found was that there was no motif for a cookie or a running cookie. I even used the English version of word cookie, a biscuit, and used it as a search term, however that came back negative as well. There is however, a motif for a fleeing pancake, which is what I was directed to when I looked for gingerbread man in the motif index. This is motif Z33.1.

There were other motifs that related to bread that could be used in discussion of these tales. The first that I found is motif H1226: pursuit of rolling cake leads to quest. This motif is still not fully correct because there is no ‘quest’, unless you could consider the running/rolling away of the cake to be an escape/freedom quest. Another motif that I found is D454.2: transformation: bread to another object. This motif fits all five variants I collected, if you consider a cake to be bread. In all five examples, the bread is transformed into another object, a boy or man while baking in the oven. When it finishes, it emerges as something other than what it first was. Along with this motif is D1031.1: magic bread. In all five cases, the bread is magical because it is able to run/roll and talk as it is trying to escape. The final, non-animal related motif that I found was D1031.2: magic cake, which goes perfectly along with the previous motif and may even be a better fit since it refers to a cake and not bread in general.

The other nine motifs that I found are all animals that the cake/cookie encounters along its escape. They are as follows:

B211.1.4: Speaking Hog (tales 1,4)

B211.1.5: Speaking Cow (tales 2,3,4)

B211.1.7: Speaking Dog (tales 1,2,3)

B211.2.3: Speaking Bear (tale 5)

B211.2.4: Speaking Wolf (tale 5)

B211.2.5: Speaking Fox (tales 1,2,3,4,5)

B211.3.3: Speaking Goose (tale 1)

B211.3.2.1: Speaking Chicken (tale 3)

B211.3: Speaking Bird (tale 3)

In all cases of the tales that I used, the fox is the final character that the fleeing cake meets and it is this character that eventually eats him. The fox, in all examples is the sly and cunning character who tricks the cake. No other animal occurs in every tale; some are only found in one tale like the owl and the wolf.

While I was not able to find a motif fitting this, the old woman making the cake or cookie is a key piece to every tale that I used. I would suggest an addition to the motif index that includes this motif, as it is key. I do believe that this also reflects social norms and ideas of the times perfectly; the woman was the household maker and was expected to make all the food. Taking this idea bit further, she gets lonely and makes an entity to keep her company in the kitchen little to know that it would come to life and flee from her.

Another motif separation that I wished existed was one between a running cake and a rolling cake. In the motif index, whether the cake rolls or runs is not made clear in the Z33.1 motif, it is however made clear in the H1226 motif where the cake is rolling. I feel that to have an entire motif that is just a fleeing pancake, there should be under that two other categories, one for a running gingerbread [cookie] or cake and a second for a rolling cake. This to me, is important because running gives the impression of an anthropomorphic entity whereas rolling does not. This to me, is two different stories, the first being more magical than a rolling cake.

What the runaway baked goods says also seems to have some importance to the tale. In the version that I remembered from my childhood, the verse that the runaway gingerbread man said was the most important part and was actually, what children would remember the best. However, in the written tales this part does not seem to be the most important, rather the line and order of those chasing the cake or cookie seems more important. For me, this clarifies the split between the oral and written traditions of this tale; in the oral tradition, the runaway’s refrain would have been the most important. However, in the written examples that I used, what the characters say to the runaway and what it says back does play an important role, but just to keep the tale moving along correctly and to help it stay a cumulative tale. Of course, if it was read aloud, this would change considerably.

Tale type 2025 does have its problems when it comes to classification. While researching this tale, I came across two other tales that were both categorized as tale type 2025, however they are completely different from the other tales that I had read. This posed a problem and a question for me, why were these tales ‘the same’?

The first of these two examples was collected by Leonard Roberts in 1969 in the Cumberland Gap area. In this tale, “Cheese and Crackers”, a family has a baby who wants cheese and crackers so each family member goes out to get some and eventually all, except the baby who is home alone, is eaten by a bear. Finally, their pet squirrel does not want to be left with the baby so it goes out to get the cheese and crackers, winds up meeting the bear, and tricks him to his death by climbing a tree and jumping branch to branch. At the end, all the family members come out of the bear’s belly saying how they were free and the squirrel replies that he has always been free because he was never trapped inside the bear.

The second example, “The Bear Ate Them Up” was collected by Vance Randolph in 1958 in the Ozarks. This tale follows the same idea, a family is seeking some bread however one by one they get eaten up by a bear. The bear also eats a rabbit and then tries to eat a squirrel, however he is tricked to his death again by falling from a tree and the family and rabbit all emerge from the bear’s belly exclaiming how happy they were to be out and the squirrel in the end the squirrel exclaims how happy he was because he never got in.

These two tales, while they are very similar in themselves are clearly not the same as the cake and cookie stories described previously. This is where my problem lies; how can these tales be the same tale type when there is no fleeing pancake motif that is central to the story. May I remind you that the tale type 2025, according to Aarne is about the fleeing pancake in which a woman makes a cake and it leaves whereupon it encounters multiple animals who try to stop it. I feel as if my dilemma is clear; this tale should have either a completely differently tale type or an amendment should be made to the 2025 tale type. The only motif that fits for this tale with the others that I used is that there is an old woman and family who in the end, seek some type of baked good. This however is also flawed because this motif does not exist in the motif index. However, all the tales that I used, including the two strange examples at the end are all cumulative tales. This of course, is not a motif on its own, but this is one thing that all the tales that I used have in common. This to me is troublesome because it not just makes a problem with categorization of tales, but also the systematic study of these tales. It would be very difficult to study all variants of this tale type if there is not much of a system of organization put into place to facilitate the study.

Both of these tales add a new character that is not seen in the others, the squirrel. This is identified as motif B437.3: the helpful squirrel. However, there is no motif for a talking squirrel, which is interesting when there are many other talking animal motifs found in the index. I would make this addition to the index since the squirrel plays such an important role in the tale and his final words before the end of the tale are really a key piece to the narrative. If the squirrel did not speak, the tale would seem to end differently.

On a side note, I found that the amount of recently-written tales about the gingerbread man was very great. For example, a collection of re-written fairy tales included a story called “The Stinky Cheese Man” was written in a very strong postmodern voice and has the same plot as the first five tales used, however, instead of a cake or cookie, the runaway entity is a wheel of smelly cheese that has a slice of bacon for his mouth and olives for eyes. He is fooled by a fox in the end, and falls into the water and crumbles to pieces. Along with this character is the gingerbread character found in the very popular animated film “Shrek”. In it, it is assumed that the gingerbread man has successfully run away from his maker and seems to have a mind and life of his own. These two examples proved to me, the power of the folk tale and the themes and morals that can and often do arise in these tales as well as the power they have to perpetuate themselves in our present popular culture.

Thinking back to the readings we have done on folktale, I found it hard to connect many directly because this tale is not a classic ‘fairy tale’. However, I was able to connect it to the article that was written by Zipes in which privatization is addressed. As I noted previously, this tale is best remembered by myself and I am sure others in the oral form. When it was being written down and read rather than heard, I do believe that it lost part of its meaning and its aesthetic value. The emphasis changes from the oral traditions to the more patterned and visual traditions of order.

I had trouble with the categorization this tale as a restoration or a rise tale, specifically because the tale, in all examples that I used ends rather ugly. The runaway cake or cookie never really rises to a higher status; however these tales would fit better under the restoration tale category because after the runaway is eaten, the normal way of life and order is restored.

This tale does however break a few of Olrik’s epic laws of folk narrative. First, it breaks the law of three and the law of two to a scene. In the examples that I used there were more than three characters in the story and in many of the scenes, there are far more than three characters present. In fact, there seem to be very few scenes where there are only two characters present at a time. On the flip side, this tale obeys many of the Olrik’s laws. For example, the law of opening and the law of closing, the law or repetition, tableau scenes, and the law of concentration in a leading character. Interestingly enough, this last law that I listed really stuck me. I seemed to think of the little old lady who made the cookie or cake as the leading character who is making something to keep her company in the kitchen, however the leading character emphasis gets switched to the runaway cake or cookie-which is always a boy or man-and you never get the story of the old lady who has lost her friend. Along with Olrik’s epic laws, this tale also roughly fits some of Propp’s functions. For example, 8a: one member of a family either lacks something or desires something (lonely old lady), 11: the hero leaves (gingerbread cookie or cake), and 21: the hero is pursued (cookie or cake being chased).

In conclusion, I enjoyed the critical thinking aspect that these tales provided. In the beginning, I was not even sure that “The Gingerbread Man” story that I had in my mind would even be considered a folk tale. Eventually my problems became finding motifs and understanding the system of classification. Upon thoroughly reading and annotating the tales, the motifs were few that existed in the index but still persisted in each tale. This tale type also allowed me to think more critically about the motif and tale type indices and try to create my own ideas of what should be added to make them more comprehensive to more folk tales, but also more useful for scholars. My goal was to demonstrate the similarities and differences between variants of the same folk tale; a goal I feel that I have accomplished and added too with the addition of other tales within the tale type 2025.

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