EXPECTATION AS NARRATIVE STRATEGY

IN RICHARD WAGNER'S *PARSIFAL*

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the

University of North Texas in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF MUSIC

By

Greg Straughn, BA

Denton, Texas

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The story of *Parsifal* is presented in two manners: through action and through narrative. Using the formalist theories of Vladimir Propp, the overall narrative is articulated in three narrative episodes. This thesis interprets the structure of narrative episodes in *Parsifal* on the basis of expectation. Propp's theory of *functions* provides labels for an interpretive analysis. Lévi-Strauss' reconstruction of Propp's functions into paired structures identifies key points in the drama as moments of "functional" saturation. This "functional" saturation coincides with Wagner's practice of Leitmotivic saturation. The semiotic theories of Charles Sanders Peirce, specifically his notion of *sign*, clarify the dense accumulation of meanings accrued by the Leitmotifs. Finally, *Parsifal*, as a "quest" for the unobtainable object, fits into the matrix of desire as formulated in the theories of Jacques Lacan.

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CHAPTER I

NARRATIVE IN WAGNER'S MUSIC DRAMAS

Narratives are integral to Richard Wagner's Romantic operas and music dramas. Functioning on two distinct levels, they serve both as small-scale, succinct, musical sections (replacing the aria, recitative, or duet) and as the overall story reenacted in the work.[1] This distinction has fostered two areas of scholarly interest. First, the narrative episode, with its intentional blurring of traditional operatic forms, has been viewed as a teleological development in a pattern evolving first from recitative/aria combinations, to the complex of *scena ed aria*, and finally to the continuity of the narrative episode.[2] Second, large-scale narratives seem as if superimposed onto purely instrumental works, thereby infusing the music with "event-centered" readings.[3] While analyses emphasizing

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[1] Throughout, the term "narrative episode" or "narration" will denote the small-scale, constituent parts that comprise the overall narrative, while "narrative" will refer to the story as a whole. One exception will remain when "narrative" is in the possessive (i.e. Brünhilde's narrative).

[2] Discussions treating nineteenth-century operatic narratives include Luca Zoppelli, "Narrative Elements in Donizetti's Operas," trans. William Ashbrook, *The Opera Quarterly* 10:3 (Fall 1993), 23-32; John Daverio, "Narration as Drama: Wagner's Early Revisions of *Tannhäuser* and Their Relation to the Rome Narrative," *College Music Symposium* 24:2 (Fall 1984), 55-68; and a stylistic overview of Verdi's narrative strategy in Elizabeth Hudson, *Narrative in Verdi: Perspectives on His Musical Dramaturgy*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Cornell University (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilm International, 1991).

[3] Among important articles on general application of narrative studies to music, see Fred Everett Maus, "Music as Narrative," *Indiana Theory Review* 12 (Spring/Fall 1991), 1-34; Lawerence Kramer, "Musical Narratology: A Theoretical Outline," *Indiana Theory Review* 12 (Spring/Fall 1991), 141-162; Jean-Jacques Nattiez, "Can One Speak of Narrativity in Music?" *Journal of the Royal Music Association* 115:2 (1990), 240-257; and Karol Berger, "Narrative and Lyric: Fundamental Poetic Forms of Composition," in *Musical Humanism and Its Legacy: Essays in Honor of Claude V. Palisca* (Stuyvesant, New York: Pendragon, 1992), 451-470. For articles examining specific instrumental works, see Patrick McCreless, "Roland Barthes' S/Z from a Musical Point of View," *In Theory Only* 10:7 (August 1988), 1-29; Marta Grabocz, "La sonate en si mineur de Liszt: Une strategie narrative complexe," *Analyse musicale* 8 (June 1987), 64-72; Robert Hatten, "On Narrativity in Music: Expressive Genres and Levels of Discourse in Beethoven," *Indiana Theory Review* 12 (Spring/Fall 1991), 75-98; and Gregory Karl, *Music as Plot: A Study in Cyclic Forms*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Cincinnati (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1993).

the latter interpretation have been more abundant, we cannot exclude the former

interpretation when considering Wagner's works since they fuse localized and large-scale

narratives into a single presentation.

In *Unsung Voices*, Carolyn Abbate provides a clear definition of "narrative:"

> "narrative" has generally been defined, since the nineteenth century, in terms of
> an analogy between certain linear elements of music (music proceeds through
> time, generates expectations based on one's instantaneous mental comparisons of
> music being heard with known types or paradigms, has tensions and resolutions,
> is a succession of sonic events that moves toward closure) and the events in a
> dramatic plot; that is, music has been perceived as enactment, as analogous to the
> event-sequences of theatrical or cinematic narrative.[4]

Abbate further notes that music cannot exist solely through the "unscrolling" of events; it

must also contain "moments of diegesis – musical voices that distance us from the

sensual matter of what we are hearing, that speak across it."[5] Finally, more than in the

works of other composers from the late nineteenth century, Wagner's operas and music

dramas epitomize the confluence of small- and large-scale narratives.

It is well known that *Der Ring des Nibelungen* was created to provide actual

reenactment of purely narrative episodes from the last music drama of the tetralogy,

Götterdämmerung. Creating the poem backwards, Wagner added the prehistory and

context for the events of Siegfried's life. This design sought to emphasize the action and

drama of the protagonist's death rather than the labyrinthine relationships between

characters and actions up to that point. His famous letter to Franz Liszt communicates

this:

> Thanks to the clarity of presentation which will thus have been made possible [the
> creation of three "context-giving" music dramas], I shall now -- by discarding, at
> the same time, all the narration-like passages which are now so extensive or else
> by compressing them into a number of much more concise moments -- acquire
> sufficient space to exploit the full wealth of emotive associations contained in the

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[4] Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), x.
[5] *Ibid.*, xii.

work, whereas previously, with my earlier, half-epic mode of presentation, I was obliged to prune everything laboriously and thus to weaken its impact.[6]

Wagner's efforts to eliminate "reminiscence narratives" from *Götterdämmerung* were not entirely successful. The Norns' prologue, Waltrude's narrative in Act I, scene iii; Alberich's narrative in Act II, scene i; and Siegfried's "song" in Act III, scene ii, all recount events prior to the opening of the music drama. The Norns' prologue and Siegfried's "song," however, are not simply reminiscence narratives. The Norns exist in a space outside the narrative trajectory. Their existence and actions are the narrative itself. Siegfried offers his story with the lines, "Dankst du es mir, / so sing ich dir Mären / aus meinen jungen Tagen."[7] Nevertheless, *both* narrative episodes are integral to the fabric of the overall narrative, as each provides impetus to further the drama (the Norns' as summation of all that has occurred and is yet to come; and Siegfried's as the catalyst for his own death).

Narrative episodes for any on-stage drama can only be presented in two fashions: with or without solicitation by another party and irrespective of solicitation, they are saturated with the personal experience of the teller. Indeed, all narrative episodes in the *Ring* and *Tristan* are clouded by the character portraying events. Even Brangäne's detached explanation of Isolde leaving Ireland is obscured by her naiveté; instead of providing information, she raises more questions throughout her narrative. Only in *Parsifal* does Wagner present a character whose fundamental purpose is to narrate: Gurnemanz.

The very act of narrating gives narrative episodes their importance. Through their disjunct and episodic nature, narrations cut through convention to reveal more of a character's intent than emotion. By doing so, episodes can be easily distorted by the

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[6] Richard Wagner, *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, ed. and trans. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), 238.

[7] If you would like, / I'll sing you the story / of all my young adventures.

intentional manipulations of the delivering character. Such intentionality in narrations do more than obscure veracity. Indeed, the first part of Loge's narrative in scene ii of *Das Rheingold* ends with the words: "Nicht müssig war ich, / wie mancher hier: / der lügt, wer lässig mich schilt!"[8] Thus, his character serves the dual purpose of revealing Alberich's plot while duping the giants to take the newly-forged ring instead of taking Freia (thereby nullifying Wotan's contract with them).

Also important in considering "truth" of narrative episodes is the matter of inclusion (or exclusion) of events constituting the narrative. Hayden White provides an example of this when he states that: "Every narrative, however seemingly 'full,' is constructed on the basis of a set of events which *might have been included but were left out*; and this is true of imaginary as it is of realistic narratives."[9] Selective inclusion is fundamental to David's short narration at the beginning of Act III of *Der Meistersinger*. Recounting the events of the night before (events leading to the brawl), David stresses that, in the end, everything turned out well, while glossing over his actual part in the action against Beckmesser. Wagner underscores the conscious deletion by bracketing the episode with a single measure of silence without the convention of cadential pause.

While truth in narration is an important facet of understanding the presentation of constituent events, it is neither relevant to Wagner's last music drama nor is it an aspect considered in this paper. However, one final look at narrative verisimilitude will clarify the context in which the narrative episodes appear in *Parsifal*. As White continues his discussion regarding truthful narration he tells us that

> narrativity, certainly in factual storytelling and probably in fictional storytelling as well, is intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality,

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[8] "So I was not lazy, / like others here; / he lies, who says that I was!"
[9] Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity," *On Narrative* ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 10.

reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine.[10]

By "moralize," White suggests an allegorical or moral significance not possessed by the mere sequence of items;[11] that is, the assignment of meaning in which context (both inside the narrative episode and with respect to the overall narrative) determines the story's value.

More than in any other music drama, narrative episodes serve to affect the overall narrative's trajectory in the very limited stage action of *Parsifal* and can been seen as shaping the structural edifice of the entire work. White recognizes this in a connection he makes with French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (a connection to which we shall return later):

> We can comprehend the appeal of historical discourse [an instance of narrative] by recognizing the extent to which it makes the real *desirable*, makes the real into an *object of desire*, and does so by its imposition, upon events that are represented as real, of the formal coherency that the stories possess (emphasis mine).[12]

The desire of which he speaks is more than just "truth." It is a desire manifest in expectation arrived at through the structured presentation of narrated events.

Discussions of operatic narratives lie within the general context of musical narratives. These, in turn, are but one facet of the artistic representation of narratives, a subject that the pioneering work of Vladimir Propp brought to the attention of scholars.[13] His work on Russian folktales led to segment-analysis (called "functions" by Propp) and was developed in the works of Roland Barthes[14] and Claude Lévi-Strauss.[15] Central to the theories of each author is the study of fundamental units in narratives ("function,"

[10] Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity," 14.

[11] *Ibid.*, 13.

[12] *Ibid.*, 20.

[13] Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, ed. Svatava Pirkova-Jakobson, trans. Laurence Scott (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Research Center, 1958).

[14] Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

[15] Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," *Myth: A Symposium*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington, Indiana: Indian University Press, 1972), 79-92. Lévi-Strauss' contributions to narratology ar but one facet of his scholarship and come from the tradition of Saussure and structural linguistics.

"code," and "bundle," respectively) and how the interaction of these units can be reconstituted to disclose commonalties between seemingly different narratives on a meta-level of structure.

Valuable for the understanding of non-linguistic narratives has been the work of Marilyn Aronberg Lavin[16] on Italian Renaissance frescos, and Kaja Silverman[17] and Christian Metz[18] on film. Art and film studies have fueled important theories of visual arrangement (how the ordering of events affects the unfolding narrative) and spectatorship (how the audience is or is not included in the presentation of the narrative). For the study of musical narratives we are indebted to Carolyn Abbate,[19] Eero Tarasti,[20] and Jean-Jacques Nattiez,[21] all of whom have focused primarily on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century topics.

The desire that narration elicits has progressively become a dominant issue in narrative analysis. Drawing from the psychoanalytic traditions of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, desire has been viewed both as the interruption of a phrenic (mental) circuit and as the quest for an unobtainable object, whose cyclic drive for attainment gives purpose to our existence. These formulations are basic to the paradigms created by Julia Kristeva,[22] Teresa de Lauretris,[23] and Salvo Zizek[24] for non-verbal artistic narratives.

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[16] Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, *The Place of Narrative* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990).

[17] Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: the Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1988.

[18] Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

[19] Abbate, *Unsung Voices.*

[20] Eero Tarasti, *Myth and Music: A Semiotic Approach to the Aesthetics of Myth in Music* (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton, 1979).

[21] Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

[22] Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

[23] Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984).

This thesis proposes an interpretation of the structure of narrative episodes in Wagner's *Parsifal* based on desire. Vladimir Propp's theory of "functions," as base components (forms) of a story, provides us with a lexicon for an interpretive analysis. Furthermore, Lévi-Strauss' reconstruction of Propp's functions into paired structures will identify key points in the drama as moments of "functional" saturation. This "functional" saturation coincides with Wagner's practice of Leitmotivic saturation. The semiotic theories of Charles Sanders Peirce,[25] specifically his notion of "sign" as part of a tripartite relationship, informs the dense accumulation of meanings accrued by the Leitmotifs. In turn, Jacques Lacan provides the matrix of desire within which we can place *Parsifal*.

Chapter II presents a summary of *Parsifal* and lays the theoretical foundations on which a structural analysis of the narrative can take place. Consideration of how the narrative episodes contribute to the overall narrative will be given in Chapter III. Chapters IV and V trace functions throughout the work to reveal Wagner's narrative strategy. By examining the functional presentation of the drama, we can penetrate how Wagner unfolds the overall narrative through juxtaposition of its narrative episodes to produce a work fundamentally based on expectation and ultimately desire.

[24] Salvoj Zizek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* (New York: Routledge, 1989) and *Looking Awry* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991).

[25] Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weisse, 8 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933-1958).

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF

NARRATIVITY AND SEMIOTICS

The story of *Parsifal* centers on the reparation of failure. Amfortas, the Grail king, lies near death after a battle against the errant knight Klingsor. As the king, his duty is to guard the Grail, chalice of the Last Supper, and also the sacred spear, used to pierce Christ on the cross. In a respite from the battle, Amfortas is seduced by the charms of Klingsor's liege Kundry, loses the sacred spear, and is impaled in his side. Now unable to perform the Grail rite, he awaits the fulfillment of a prophecy: an innocent fool, enlightened by compassion, will heal the wound and restore the Grail. This story is told to the young squires by Gurnemanz (an old Grail knight) and concludes at the moment of Parsifal's entrance, having just killed a swan with his bow and arrow. Gurnemanz chastises Parsifal and asks him who he is, wherefrom he came, and his name. Parsifal is unable to answer these questions. Hoping that Parsifal is the prophecy fulfilled, Gurnemanz takes him to the Grail castle to observe the ceremony. Amfortas, borne in on his litter and pleading for death, summons the strength to reveal the Grail, providing all with sacred nourishment. At the end of the ceremony, Gurnemanz asks Parsifal if he understood what he saw – Parsifal answers "No." Gurnemanz then expels Parsifal and is left in despair.

Act II opens in Klingsor's castle. Planning to steal the Grail, Klingsor awakens

Kundry. She is to seduce Parsifal, moving Klingsor closer to his prize. When Parsifal

enters the gardens outside the castle, Kundry calls him by name and attempts to seduce

him by providing information from his past. Kundry's kiss enlightens Parsifal with

an immediate understanding of the events of Act I. He leaves in search of the spear.

Klingsor, realizing his imminent defeat, thrusts the spear at Parsifal. Miraculously it

stops hovering above Parsifal's head. Grabbing the spear, the now enlightened fool

begins his search for the Grail castle.

Parsifal wanders for a considerable amount of time and, at the beginning of Act

III, returns unrecognized to the meadow of the Grail castle. After a brief dialogue with

Gurnemanz, Parsifal reveals himself and the spear. Kundry, now mute, is baptized as the

first action of the future king. They travel to the castle where Amfortas, in a state of

impending death, refuses to reveal the Grail. Parsifal touches the spear to the wound and

watches as Amfortas is healed. As the new Grail king, Parsifal ascends to the altar and

completes the ceremony.

The narrative summarized above is presented in two manners: through narrative

episodes entrusted to a single character, and through the interaction of multiple

characters. Both share equal importance in *Parsifal*. Only three characters contribute

narrative episodes to the story.[1] Before beginning an examination of the narrative

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[1] The purpose of other narratives in *Parsifal* rests primarily with character explication (i.e. Amfortas' lament).

episodes in relation to the overall narrative, we must discuss aspects of narrative theory

and semiotics as they apply to *Parsifal*.

Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* first appeared in 1928. In it, Propp

analyzed a section of A.N. Afanasév's collection of folktales. Published from 1855 to

1864, this work stood as the core of Russian folktale collections. The English translation

of *Morphology of the Folktale*, published in 1958, helped disseminate Propp's theories

outside the former Soviet Union and made it accessible to a worldwide audience,

influencing scholars in all areas of the humanities. One problem, however, arose from

this translation: its title. "Folktale" is a generic term describing any number of short

stories, often illustrating a moral virtue. Propp's book analyzed a subset of these,

specifically, the wondertale.[2] This clarification was made by Propp in an essay answering

to criticism by Claude Lévi-Strauss.

> Lévi-Strauss cited the statement in which I admit that my conclusions are not
> applicable to the tales of Novalis and Goethe and to the *Kunstmärchen* in general
> and turned it against me: allegedly, if my statement is true, my conclusions are
> wrong. But they are not wrong; they merely lack the universal character that my
> esteemed critic wished to attribute to them.[3]

Though this rebuttal is aimed at supporting his theory's specific application, Propp does

not exclude the possibility of the application of his theory to other genres, as he stated

earlier in the same article. According to Propp, "the analysis of narrative genres

according to the function of the characters can perhaps be applied to other tales and even

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[2] The term "wondertale" is most closely associated with "fairy" tales.
[3] Vladimir Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore*, ed. Anatoly Liberman, trans. Ariadna Y. Martin and Richard P. Martin, et. al. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 70.

to any narrative."[4]

Although Propp never defined the term "wondertale," he did clarify the corpus to which his theory could be applied.

> By "fairy tales" [wondertales] are meant those tales classified by Aarne under the numbers 300 to 749. This distribution is artificial, but the occasion will subsequently arise in which a more precise determination will make itself evident on the basis of resultant conclusions.[5]

Indeed, Propp's conclusions revealed a unifying plot structure for all the tales he studied -- an *Ursatz* plot structure. Propp described how he came to this "discovery" while examining three seemingly disparate tales, one dealing with Morozko [Frost], one with a *lešij* [wood goblin], and one with a bear. In each, a girl confronts the creature and, using her youth and charm, is rewarded and then released.

> Morozko, the *lešij*, and the bear test the stepdaughter and reward her each in his own way, but the plot does not change. Was it possible that no one should ever have noticed this before? Why did Afanasév and others think that they were dealing with different tales? It is obvious that Morozko, the *lešij*, and the bear performed the same action. To Afanasév these were different tales because of different characters in them. To me they were identical because the actions of the characters were the same. The idea seemed interesting, and I began to examine other wondertales from the point of view of the actions performed by the characters. As a result of studying the material (and not through abstract reasoning), I devised a very simple method of analyzing wondertales in accordance with the characters' actions--regardless of their concrete form. To designate these actions I adopted the term "functions. . . ." It turned out that the other plots were also based on the recurrence of functions and that all wondertale plots consisted of identical functions and had identical structure[6]

[4] Vladimir Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore*, 70.
[5] Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, ed. Svatava Pirkova-Jakobson, trans. Laurence Scott (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Research Center, 1958), 18.
[6] *Ibid.*, 69-70.

Propp further defined "function" as an act of dramatis personae, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of action of a tale as a whole.[7] This definition centers on the synchronic relationship of part to whole. Propp reiterated its importance in another definition of function.

> Function, according to my definition of the term (as used in *Morphology*) denotes the action of the character from the point of view of its significance for the progress of the narrative.[8]

Thirty-one categories of functions are listed by Propp. These functions are listed in Table 1 along with a brief characterization.

Table 1: Functions with Propp's representation and definitions

1.	absence	β	of a member of the older generation
2.	interdiction	γ	a warning, or sometimes a proposal
3.	violation	δ	of the interdiction
4.	reconnaissance	ϵ	villain's entrance (for the purpose of obtaining information)
5.	delivery	ι	villain receives information about his victim
6.	fraud	η	villain attempts to deceive in order to take possessions
7.	complicity	θ	villain submits to deception and unwittingly helps his enemy
8.	villainy	A	villain causes harm or injury to one member of the family
9.	lack	a	one member of the family lacks something; he desires to have something
10.	mediation	B	misfortune/shortage is made known; the hero is dispatched
11.	beginning counteraction	C	hero agrees or decides upon counteraction (asking permission to seek the lost daughter)
12.	departure	↑	hero leaves home
13.	first function	D	(of donor), hero is tested, interrogated, attacked - in preparation for receiving a magical agent

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[7] Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 20.
[8] Vladimir Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore*, 74.

14.	hero's reaction	E	hero reacts to actions of donor (sustains ordeal, answers greeting in either the positive or negative)
15.	provision	F	receipt of a magical agent
16.	spatial translocation	G	hero is transfigured, reaches, or is led to the object of his search
17.	struggle	H	hero and villain join in direct combat
18.	branding	J	hero is marked or branded
19.	victory	I	villain is defeated
20.	liquidation	K	initial misfortune or lack is liquidated (paired with villainy)
21.	return	↓	the hero returns, often the flight from someone/ something
22.	pursuit	Pr	the hero is pursued
23.	rescue	Rs	the hero is rescued from this pursuit
24.	unrecognized arrival	O	the hero, unrecognized, arrives home
25.	difficult task	M	a difficult task is proposed to the hero
26.	solution	N	task is accomplished
27.	recognition	Q	the hero is recognized
28.	exposure	Ex	the false hero is exposed
29.	transfiguration	T	the hero is given a new appearance
30.	punishment	U	the villain is punished
31.	wedding	W	the hero is married and ascends the throne

Concision and internal logic are determining criteria in Propp's definition of the thirty-one functions.

> If we read through all of the functions one after another, we quickly observe that one function develops out of another with logical and artistic necessity. . . . They all revolve on a single pivot, and not, as has been already mentioned, on a variety of pivotal stocks.[9]

Propp also notices that multiple functions are members of pairs (prohibition/violation, struggle/victory, etc.), and that several may form a group of actions at the beginning or middle of narrative episodes. It is important to note, however, that not all functions must necessarily be present to constitute a wondertale. This point is one that Propp himself

does not emphasize. Moreover, we are never told how many functions comprise a "minimum" for a wondertale.

The functions, whether as a group or individually, can be performed by only seven dramatis personae: the villain, the donor, the helper, the princess (sought-after-person) with her father, the dispatcher, the hero, and the false hero. These are not themselves characters; rather, they are models that serve to delineate the scaffolding a character lends to the narrative. In essence, Propp has reduced the number of actors to correspond to the relatively small number of functions assigned to the wondertale.

The shift from the realm of folktale to the infinite realm mythology has been defined by Lévi-Strauss as a change in temporality:

> If one day we were able to give the investigation [of wondertales] a historical dimension, the term "mythical tale" would be more suitable. . . . Tales are constructed on weaker oppositions than those found in myths. The former are not cosmological, metaphysical, or natural, but, more often, local, social and moral.[10]

However, this difference is not to be overstated. Later in the text, Lévi-Strauss notes that

> tales are miniature myths, in which the same oppositions are transposed to a smaller scale. . . . The point is not to choose between the tale and myth but to realize that they are the two poles of a field that also includes all sorts of intermediate forms and that their morphological analysis must be the same, or else one may miss elements belonging to the same system of transformations.[11]

Like Propp, Lévi-Strauss assigns to mythology meanings that rest not on the "isolated elements" which compose the myth, but on the *association* of those elements.

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[9] Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 58.

[10] Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Structure and Form: Reflections on a Work by Vladimir Propp," *Theory and History of Folklore*, ed. Anatoly Liberman, trans. Ariadna Y. Martin and Richard P. Martin, et. al. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 174-176.

[11] *Ibid.*, 178.

> Myth, like the rest of language, is made up of constituent units. . . [that] belong to a higher order, a more complex one. . . . For this reason, we will call them *gross constituent units* . . . . Each gross constituent unit will consist in a relation. . . . [and] the true constituent units of a myth are not the isolated relations but *bundles of such relations* and it is only as bundles that these relations can be put to use and combined so as to produce meaning.[12]

Propp's identification of individual elements and Lévi-Strauss' reconstitution of elements articulate the distinction between formalism and structuralism. The fact that Propp defined a distinction of form and content while Lévi-Strauss proclaimed their indissoluble union further illustrates their relationship as opposites. However, one cannot view these two critical positions as being mutually exclusive. Rather, they serve as diachronic and synchronic realizations of the same problem: how to examine the narrative (in any form) with respect to its constituent parts.

One of the central problems in Wagnerian research is discerning the method of dramatic construction, that is, understanding the drama's constituent parts. Inextricably linked with this process and method of construction is Wagner's use of Leitmotifs. The importance of both approaches is borne out by the enormous amount of literature each has fostered. Though the term Leitmotif was coined by F.W. Jähns in reference to Carl Maria von Weber's motivic recurrences, its use today is restricted almost exclusively to Wagner's music dramas. This association began in 1877, seven years after Jähns' first applied it, in an analysis of the *Ring* by Hans von Wolzogen. A friend and disciple of Wagner, Wolzogen catalogued the Leitmotifs as signs representing on-stage characters,

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[12] Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," 86-87.

actions, thoughts, or other dramatic events. As Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker have

noted, the impact of Wolzogen's "labeling" practice carries unshakable consequences:

> Every time we make an apology for continuing to use Wolzogen's labels we are acknowledging the unshaken force of his example. More than this: by using the verbal tags, even if only as a convenience, we underline for any reader all the referential connotations of the motives, whether self-evident or ridiculous and whether or not we ourselves believe in them.[13]

While not dismissing the logical and practical aspect of assigning labels to the Leitmotifs,

the rigidity implicit in such denotations is not easily overcome, especially since the

composer did not conceive them as static musical phrases. The multivariant forms of the

Leitmotifs serve as a critical warning to those ascribing meaning to any of them. In the

entry on "Leitmotif" for the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, John

Warrack posits three broad categories of motivic operation:

1. the ability to replace words to reveal the inner-workings of the mind;
2. the ability to reveal unseen characters;
3. the ability for conjoined motifs to reflect events on stage by contradiction, superimposition, or giving new shades of meaning.[14]

Wagner regularly employes Leitmotifs assignable to these three categories. *Parsifal's*

instrumental prelude, prefigured in those of *Rheingold, Meistersinger,* and *Tristan,* is

motivically (and therefore) dramatically pregnant. Like the three prior music dramas,

Parsifal draws from the motivic wellspring of its prelude.

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[13] Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker eds., *Analyzing Opera: Verdi and Wagner* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 7.

[14] John Warrack, "Leitmotif," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians,* 20 vols., ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1980), X, 646.

Wagner's own words lead to the pervasive motivic analysis that characterizes early Wagnerian research. In *The Artwork of the Future*, he wrote on the appropriation of instrumental techniques to the world of opera:

> In the larger work of absolute instrument music – the symphony – alternation, repetition, augmentation and diminution of themes made out the movement of each separate section, which strove to vindicate itself before the feeling by establishing the utmost possible unity of form, through the coordination and recurrence of its themes.[15]

From these remarks, it is not difficult to justify a strictly motivic reading of Wagner's music. This level of analysis yielded interpretations contingent on the reader's recognition of motivic shapes and names. Using lexicons as guidebooks, scholars sought to expose meaning by examining the overlay and transformation of the Leitmotifs. By doing so, there emerged a "Wagnerian musical language." One scholar took this idea a step further:

> The system of leit-motifs is no other than a musical language, entirely analogous to a spoken language and subject to the same laws; the only difference between them is that the former has a narrower field of application.[16]

While it is possible to assign syntactic or semantic meaning to Leitmotifs, it is not possible to extend the analogy with language to include a grammar. Clearly the Leitmotifs exhibit relationships to each other when compared or contrasted, but those relationships do not extend to a vocabulary capable of eliciting an audience's response. What, then, are we to do with Wagner's Leitmotivic technique? How can the motifs

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[15] Richard Wagner, *Wagner on Music and Drama*, ed. Albert Goldman and Evert Sprinchorn, trans. William Ashton Ellis (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1964), 229.

[16] L. Sabaneev, "Remarks on the Leit-Motif," trans. S.W. Pring, *Music and Letters* 13:2 (April 1932), 207.

influence the overall structure while simultaneously keeping an inherent structure of their own? How, for instance, would Kundry's motif differ when her role changes from "greeter and interrogator" to "donor of the narrative?" The answer, in part, lies in the system of functions as defined by Propp.

Both macro- and micro-structural issues are at work in the leitmotivic web. At the micro-structural level, we find the gradual accretions and transformations character-istically present in all of Wagner's late works. At the macro-structural level, we find the Leitmotifs working within a system of functions that create an overall structure we can call a wondertale. In *Parsifal*, then, two systems coalesce into a process distinct from its musico-dramatic precursors, producing a synthesis that transcends the conventional notions of opera and music drama. In *Parsifal*, and nowhere else, we have *Ein Bühnenweihfestspiel*. This term, as Mike Ashman stated, means "not so much 'sacred festival drama' (a standard English rendering) but rather 'festival work to consecrate a stage'."[17] This distinction is evident in Wagner's mind as we see from the 17 April 1879 entry in Cosima's diary:

> When we withdraw upstairs, he talks about his *Parsifal*, saying it has not been possible to avoid a certain restriction of feeling; this does not mean that it is churchlike in tone, he says, indeed there is even a divine wildness in it, but such affecting emotions as in *Tristan* or even the *Nibelungen* would be entirely out of place.[18]

The musical and dramatic distinctions carry over not so much in its conventions, in using

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[17] Mike Ashman, "A Very Human Epic," *Parsifal: Opera Guide 34*, ed. Nicholas John (London: John Calder, 1986), 7.
[18] Cosima Wagner, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries: Volume II, 1878-1893*, 293.

Leitmotifs as a formulating principle, but in its overall structure as a wondertale. The issues involving Leitmotifs in the music dramas also apply to Propp's functions: omnipresence versus single occurrence; transformational versus static; allegorical versus emotive. It is, however, the function (in Propp's sense) of the Leitmotifs within the unfolding narrative (in both senses) that distinguishes *Parsifal* from the other music dramas.

If one applies the structural theories of Propp and Lévi-Strauss to *Parsifal*, one can view the work as a variation of the wondertale. This is not a new claim; rather, it is the realization that Wagner presented the story in a fashion that would make the narrative comprehensible to the listener. Cosima Wagner's diary confirms this as she noted that, "he must always keep it very simple – he told me recently that he could never be too simple."[19] Carl Dahlhaus comments further the matter:

> If something was to be comprehensible, for Wagner, it had to be motivated and prepared for, to proceed as a natural consequence and fulfillment of something that had gone before, instead of erupting from nowhere.[20]

Although Dahlhaus was speaking of Leitmotivic use and development, the same can be said of Wagner's dramatic presentation, since each requires the other for meaningful comprehension. Central to understanding Wagner's narrative strategy is the parallelism that exists between the Leitmotifs and the drama as a whole. Whether narrated or acted, the requisite elements that serve as functions for the overall story are not always linear or

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[19] Cosima Wagner, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries: Volume II, 1878-1883*, 54.
[20] Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, trans. Mary Whittall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 152.

diachronic. A comparison with Propp's Appendix IV (List of Morphological Functions)

reveals the structure of *Parsifal* as a wondertale variant (Table 2).

Table 2: Comparison of *Parsifal*'s narrative structure and Propp's Functions

	Propp	Wagner	Locale
β^1	absence of elders	Titurel physically absent; Amfortas metaphorically absent	I/366
A^2	theft of magical agent	Klingsor steals spear	I/530
A^6	maiming/mutilation	Spear wounds Amfortas	I/536
a^2/a^3	lack of magical agent/miracle	Grail unable to heal Amfortas to return him to his duties	I/1292
B^7	lament or plaintive song	Amfortas' lament and plea for death	I/1298
C	counteraction of the hero	Parsifal is banished, thus no volition	I/1642
↑	dispatch of the hero	Gurnemanz forces Parsifal to leave	I/1646
D^2	greeting and interrogation	Kundry calls Parsifal by name and asks him questions of his childhood	II/739 II/882
E^8	reaction of hero/attempt at destruction averted	Kundry's kiss does not seduce Parsifal	II/991
F^1	control of magical agent/ agent is transferred	Kundry's kiss makes Parsifal "cosmically clear-sighted"	II/1341
H^1	struggle in an open field	Klingsor appears and thrusts spear	II/1485
I^3	victory without a fight	Spear stops, Parsifal takes it and destroys Klingsor's castle	II/1493
K^5	liquidation - done away with instantly through the application of the magical agent	[Parsifal heals Amfortas with the spear]	III/1031
↓	return	Parsifal wanders until Good Friday	III/169
o	unrecognized arrival	Gurnemanz does not recognize him	III/173
T^3	transfiguration – new garments	Parsifal wears armor over white raiments	III/483
W^*	(wedding) - accession to the throne	After healing Amfortas, Parsifal assumes head of Grail kingdom	III/1089

Wagner combines functions E and F, H and I, and delays function K to create tension in the drama.[21] The combination of "attempting destruction" and the "transference of the magical agent" emphasizes Kundry's position in the drama. This is all the more germane when we realize that Kundry's character represents the conflation of multiple characters from the medieval legend. Thus, the morphology of her character, both dramatically and functionally, is that of a synthesis. She desires both seduction and absolution, two mutually exclusive forces presented here by the combination of two functions. Furthermore, the conclusion of Act II, by far the most "active" part of the drama, contains the only instances of simultaneous functional presentation. Rather than an ensemble of people, Wagner gives us an ensemble of functions for the "finale." Also significant conclusion of Act II is the delaying of function K, the "liquidation of lack." By delaying this function, Parsifal wanders, returns, and becomes transfigured to prepare for his ascension to the Grail throne. The concept of "redemption for the redeemer" (which many attribute as an underlying motivation for *Parsifal*) would be lost with the instantaneous healing of Amfortas without physical contact to the spear. Thus, the dramatic exposition of functions adheres to the expected structure of the wondertale.

If *Parsifal* fits into Propp's definition for the wondertale, we can further describe *Parsifal*'s narrative procedures using Lévi-Strauss' "structuralization" of myth. In his book *Structuralism*, John Sturrock delineates the difference between the Formalism of Propp and the Structuralism of Lévi-Strauss that followed:

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[21] Propp noted that both the conflation of functions, especially H and I, and the delaying of functions is a common occurrence in wondertales. See *Morphology of the Folktale*, pp. 91-93.

The two crucial new ideas included here and which were largely missing in the earlier Formalism are those of integration and dynamism, both of which are fundamental to Structuralism.[22]

Further, Sturrock distinguishes the work of the two scholars by noting that Propp

saw no need to try and arrange his thirty-one 'functions' in any system, by establishing oppositions between them. . . . He [Lévi-Strauss] points out that Propp's 'functions' can be described as 'violation of an injunction' and another as 'prohibition', these two 'functions' are surely related, the first being the contradictory of the second; just as a 'function' described as 'prohibition' is the negative transformation of another described as an 'injunction'. This is the logic of transformations which Propp never grasped.[23]

Lévi-Strauss builds on Propp's work by including binary oppositions between the already existing functions to create sequences of relational pairs. In *A View From Afar*, Lévi-Strauss comments specifically on the *Parsifal* story. While discussing the transformation of material from the Chetrien/Wolfram sources to Wagner's music drama, Lévi-Strauss describes the story of the quest with specific reference to the act of communication. Setting up an immense binary opposition, he contrasts the Parsifal tale with that of the Oedipus myth, clarifying that

these two types, as I said, illustrate the two complementary solutions that human beings have devised for two problems of communication. One problem is excessive communication, too direct, too rapid, and therefore fatally virulent; the other problem is an overly slow, if not interrupted communication, which causes inertia and sterility. Wagner's genius anticipated by a good century the synthesis of universal myths that no one had ever before dreamed of connecting.[24]

Thus, to Lévi-Strauss, the world of Klingsor and the Flower Maidens represents the

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[22] John Sturrock, *Structuralism* (London: Paladin, 1986), 119.

[23] *Ibid.*, 119.

[24] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The View From Afar*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel and Phoebe Hoss (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 232-233.

Oedipal world with its direct communication (Kundry naming the as-yet-unnamed hero) and incestuous relations (Kundry identifying herself with Parsifal's mother). This is in contrast with the Grail realm, where an impotent leader is unable to perform the rite that sustains his subjects. Rather than having a society that gives Parsifal the information he needs to end their plight, here "plants, beasts, and men perish, and an answer is offered in vain to a question that no one thinks of asking."[25]

Lévi-Strauss offers two further insights into the study of myth and music. In describing the nature of the evolution of a "narrative myth," he notes that

> myths are only translatable into each other in the same way as a melody is only translatable into another which retains a relationship of homology with it: it can be transcribed into a different key, converted from major to minor or vice versa; its parameters can be modified so as to transform the rhythm, the quality of tone, the emotive charge, the relative intervals between consecutive notes, and so on. Perhaps, in extreme cases, it will no longer seem recognizable to the untutored ear; but it will still be the same melodic form.[26]

How, then, can this concept of homology relate to the internal study of one myth? We understand that the internal, structural elements, the bundles of meaning (*functions*), must necessarily share a common, transformational relationship. It is this relationship that proves homological and imbibes meaning into the work, as micro-structural elements build up the macro-structure. In other words, leitmotivic relationships, by their presence and combination, determine the meaning of a portion of the narrative episode. In the same essay, Lévi-Strauss presents an analogy that relates temporal and structural

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[25] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The View From Afar*, 232-233.
[26] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Naked Man*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 646.

elements when he compares myth to a musical score (that is, read horizontally and vertically at the same time). Thus, if we hear the Leitmotifs in *Parsifal* both horizontally (as they follow each other in the drama) and vertically (as they relate to each other in a system of functions) we find that the use of motivic combinations, like bundles of constituent units, renders meaning. Those points in the narrative most saturated with motivic presence will, by their very nature, carry the greatest sematic density. To illustrate this, we must turn to the score of *Parsifal*.

The first period (mm. 397-420) in the Act I narrative episode is Gurnemanz's account of Kundry's wild behavior. While this section provides some information about Kundry's actions, it does so by using actions already witnessed by the audience and the squires. Consequently, the music is not motivically infused. Only the rhythm of Kundry's motif occupies this portion of the episode. This is in sharp contrast with the section that immediately follows. Here, Gurnemanz tells the squires of Kundry's guilt and the fact that she could, through her actions, atone for that guilt. Here, too, the music draws heavily from the *Liebesmahlthema* of the prelude. Two factors contrast the difference between the sections. First, while the former deals with the present, the latter section deals with the past. This temporal distinction is a distinctive characteristic of Wagner's use of Leitmotifs in *Parsifal*. The more distant the narrative episode, the more it is motivically infused. Second, the subject of the latter section yields more information about Kundry's present state of being. Although we do not know the nature of her guilt, the audience (including the squires) now has cause to question Kundry's purpose and intent. Wagner underscores the irony of Kundry's guilt by quoting the *Liebesmahlthema*

from the prelude, heard here for the first time since the opening measures of the act. The recapitulation of motifs serves to delineate a narrative episode with one that precedes or follows it.

As narrative analysis illuminates the overall structure of the drama, semiotic analysis does so for the moment-by-moment structure. Since the moment-by-moment structure is determined by the Leitmotifs (or their absence), another separate theoretical system is needed to help explain their capacity to act not as functions, but as signs or symbols. Semiotics, as described by Nattiez, is "not the science of communication. . . . It is the study of the specificity of the function of symbolic forms, and the phenomenon of 'referring' to which they give rise."[27] This definition is drawn from the theories of American mathematician and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce's work on the classification of signs centers around the interaction of triadic relationships. This is in contrast to the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, whose dyadic relationship of signifier/signified became the standard for semiotic interpretation. To recognize the value of Peirce's theories as a paradigm for Leitmotivic interpretation, we must first understand the model itself.

The first of the triadic relationships is that of the "sign-interpretant-object." In this system, an object is referred to by means of a sign through an interpretant.

> A sign. . . is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an

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[27] Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 15.

equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*.[28]

The key to Peirce's system is the role of the interpretant, specifically, that any interpretant can be interpreted as another sign (Figure 1). In the broadest sense, then, the interpretant

Figure 1: Sign-Object-Interpretant relationships according to Peirce.[29]

$$S \rightarrow I_1 \rightarrow I_2 \rightarrow \cdots \rightarrow I_n \cdots$$
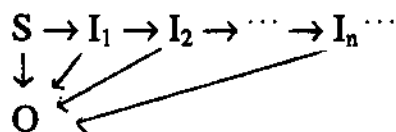
of one sign or object can lead to the inclusion of all possible signs or objects. While this is useful in trying to establish an organic connection between disparate objects, it can easily lead to exaggerated connectiveness, an issue not untouched in Wagnerian research. In describing the relationship between signs and interpretants, John Sturrock wrote:

> The *interpretant* of the Churchillian V-sign [the extension of the first and second fingers of the hand held at face height pointing away from the body] is, let us say, an assurance that 'We shall win the war in the end'. Such a string of words may not have been explicitly formulated by those witnessing the V-sign but it is one they might have produced if pressed actually to declare their interpretation of the sign.[30]

Thus, the ever-mutable interpretant is fixed only by the context of the sign. Leitmotivic interpretants are generated when the motifs are heard as different functions in the drama. For instance, the "Grail" motif is first heard during the prelude as a wordless cadential

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[28] Peirce quoted in Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 14.
[29] Figure addapted from Nattiez, *Music and Discourse*.
[30] John Sturrock, *Structuralism*, 86.

pattern. Later, when words and some other context are superimposed, we have an

entirely different interpretation of the motif. All Leitmotifs, in the post-*Lohengrin* works,

fall into the same category with respect to this continual reinterpretation. Even those that

do not change take on meaning gained from the drama that elapsed between motivic

repetitions.

Having provided a context for Peirce's large-scale division of sign-interpretant-

object, we can now turn to his division of three classes of signs. Peirce calls these three

divisions *trichotomies*. Each trichotomy is, in turn, divided into three parts: *qualisign*,

sinsign, and *legisign* – signs in relation to themselves; *icon*, *index*, and *symbol* – signs in

relation to their object; and *rheme*, *dicent signs*, and *arguments* – signs in relation to their

interpretants.[31] The Finnish semiotician Eero Tarasti has noted that the first and last

trichotomies do not have, as yet, a musical equivalent. He qualifies this by stating that:

> signs in relation to their interpretants concern those sign processes that take place
> in the mind of the listener, whereby he or she interprets the musical experience.[32]

From both a dramatic and musical point of view, the relationships between signs and their

objects/interpretants (*i.e.* not between signs and themselves) form the strongest

connection between the listener and the thing heard. Tarasti extends this syllogism to

find that *interoceptive* signs (those that "refer to relations within the musical work") carry

more meaning than *exteroceptive* signs (those "that direct our attention to the relation

[31] Charles Sanders Peirce, "Elements of Logic," vol. 2 of *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weisse, 8 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933-1958), 142-144.

[32] Eero Tarasti, *A Theory of Musical Semiotics* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994), 55.

between the music and the external world).[33] Without exteroceptive signs, however, the

reception history of a work would be lost.

The middle trichotomy (*icon*, *index*, and *symbol*) with its relationship of sign to

object, carries the most natural musico-dramatic analogy. Peirce defines an icon as "a

sign which refers to the Object that it denotes merely by virtue of characters of its own."[34]

This "picture-quality" of icons is Peirce's reason for choosing the term. The Churchillian

"V-sign," discussed earlier with respect to sign/interpretant, is an example of an icon.

Peirce continues by defining an index as "a sign which refers to that Object that it denotes

by virtue of being really affected by that Object."[35] With indexes, there is a natural,

implied sequence of causality. John Sturrock offers two examples of indexes: "when a

'ring around the sun' is said to be a 'sign' of rain, or smoke to be a sign of fire."[36] Kaja

Silverman further illuminates this category in her discussion of Peirce's own examples of

indexes (a weathervane, and a pointing hand).

> The signifying value of the weathervane resides not in its physical relationship to
> the wind, but in the concepts of "wind" and "direction" which it permits the
> observer to link up. Similarly, the pointing finger functions as a sign not because
> of its adjacency to a given site, like Boston, but because it generates in the mind
> of the walker or the driver the conceptual terms "Boston" and "turn right". . . .
> Because the indexical sign is understood to be connected to the real object, it is
> capable of making that object conceptually present.[37]

In music, especially in the Baroque and Classic eras, "cognitive harmonies" (N_6 - V),

serve as index which points the listener to tonic. Leitmotivic indexes exist when a motif

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[33] *Ibid.*, 57.
[34] Charles Sanders Peirce, "Elements of Logic," 143.
[35] *Ibid.*, 143.
[36] John Sturrock, *Structuralism*, 85.
[37] Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, 19-20.

refers to its "generative" motif. For instance, the "Spear" and the "Suffering" motifs are

part of the opening *Liebesmahlthema*. Each iteration of the "Spear" or "Suffering" motif

is an index of the *Liebesmahlthema* (Example 1).

Example 1: *Liebesmahlthema* (mm. 1-6).
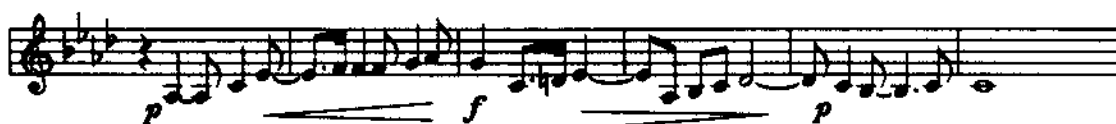
Peirce's final category, the symbol, is important for its arbitrary relationship

between sign and object.

> A *Symbol* is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of a law,
> usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the Symbol to be
> interpreted as referring to that Object. . . . Not only is it general itself, but the
> Object to which it refers is of a general nature.[38]

Language and notational systems, as Silverman points out, are "preeminently

symbolic."[39] Further, those who use language or notational systems must be taught

individual meanings. One cannot deduce "without help or instruction the content of the

expressions of a language utterly unknown to us."[40] Generally, Leitmotifs do not carry

this kind of contextual, symbolic meaning; however, one can find specific instances

where Wagner, through conscious borrowing of familiar material, creates a symbol (albeit

not completely arbitrary) linked to the outside world.

An understanding of the principles of semiotics, as well as the formalist and

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[38] Charles Sanders Peirce, "Elements of Logic," 143-44.
[39] Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, 20.
[40] John Sturrock, *Structuralism*, 84.

structuralist theories on which we base this study now permits the application of those

theories to *Parsifal*. First, however, we must identify commonalities between the

narrative episodes that constitute functions within the overall narrative.

CHAPTER III

THREE NARRATIVE EPISODES IN *PARSIFAL*

The three narratives episodes in *Parsifal* present varying degrees of similitude. Immediately noticeable is their placement within each act, that is, each precedes the principal action. In Act I, Gurnemanz recounts to the four squires events that tell of Amfortas' plight and Kundry's role therein, the building of the Grail castle, Klingsor's treachery, and the prophecy of a savior. All four of these events precede the appearance of Parsifal. In Act II, Kundry explains to Parsifal the significance of childhood events to his current state of naïve wandering. This narrative occurs before the *kiss*, which enlightens Parsifal to events in Act I. In Act III, however, contemporaneous rather than past events are explained. Here, Gurnemanz informs Parsifal of Titurel's death and Amfortas' pleas for the same, events that happened during Parsifal's wandering. This narrative serves as a catalyst for Parsifal's succession to the rule of the Grail kingdom. Thus, each narrative shares the function of plot advancement and each is communicated not to the audience alone but to specific characters on stage.

These episodes allow the narratives to take on an intimacy that colors the static quality often associated with this music drama. However, this manner of narrative presentation is not unique to *Parsifal*. In *Tristan*, Brangäne is present during Isolde's narrative (I, iii), as is Brünhilde for Wotan's monologue (*Walküre* II, ii). The narratives

in *Tristan* and *Walküre* serve not as detached accounts of the past but as personal,

psychological explanations of the present. The narratives in *Parsifal*, however, are

removed from this overt psychological device in two respects. First, they are short,

succinct stories (Gurnemanz's verbosity serves to link several stories); more importantly,

though, they distance themselves from the speaker (drawing themselves to the listener)

through narration in the second and third person. This is in sharp contrast to narratives in

Tristan and the *Ring*. In Isolde's narrative, one is immediately drawn to the fact that it is

Isolde herself who tells the tale:

> Mit dem hellen Schwert / ich vor ihm stund, / an ihm, dem Überfrechen.[1]

This is more evident in Wotan's monologue, beginning with his opening remarks:

> Was keinem in Worten ich künde, / unausgesprochen / bleib es denn ewig: / mit
> mir nur rat ich, / red ich zu dir.[2]

By contrast, the entire narrative episode of Gurnemanz in Act I contains only six

statements in the first person, while Act III contains only one. Kundry's story, in Act II,

moves immediately from first person ("Ich sah das Kind an seiner Mutter Brust") to

second person ("Gebettet sanft auf weichen Moosen"),[3] giving it the intimacy required for

her attempt at seduction. Unlike narrative episodes in the other music dramas, those in

Parsifal affect the listener not by the *teller* of the tale, but by the *tale* told.

Syntactical similarities extend beyond the boundaries of the narrative episodes as

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[1] "Facing him I stood / with that bright sword / to slay the overbold one" (*Tristan*, I, 3).

[2] "These thoughts that I have never uttered, / though I may think them, / still they're unspoken. / I think them aloud, then, / speaking to you" (*Walküre*, II, 2).

[3] "I saw the child upon his mother's breast," "On tender mosses you were cradled."

well. Immediately following the conclusion of each episode, Wagner propels the drama

forward by introducing musical and poetic exclamations. These syntactical similarities

are extended as each musical articulation is somehow contingent on Parsifal: Act I, with

the B♭ cadence signifying Parsifal's entrance (followed by the shouts of distant voices

"Weh! Weh! Hoho! Auf!"); Act II, with Parsifal's cries "Wehe! Wehe!;" and Act III, with

his cry "Und ich, ich bin's, / der all diess Elend schuf!"[4] Through these interjections,

Wagner shifts the dramatic emphasis from narrator to actor.

The very structure of each narrative creates internal similarities as they adhere to

the Aristotelian rubrics of *archê, meson,* and *telos* (beginning, middle, and end).

According to Aristotle, "Well-constructed plots, then, should neither begin from a

random point nor conclude at a random point, but should use the elements we have

mentioned [i.e. beginning, middle and conclusion.]"[5] The causal arrangement of the

stories, though not always chronological, leads the listener through the narrative. Figures

2, 3, and 4 outline the narratives from each act.

Figure 2: Outline of the Act I narrative episode (mm. 365-742).

Preface	Discussion of Kundry's help or hindrance; Kundry's defense; the explanation of her atonement of guilt (m. 365).
	Squires, "Does Kundry's guilt equal our distress?"
Beginning	**Story of Kundry** - with Titurel finding her; Interrogation: "Where were you and why didn't you help when the spear was lost?" (m. 468).
Middle	*Kundry,* "I never help."
	Squires, "Send her for the Spear."
	Story of Losing the Spear to Klingsor and Amfortas' never-closing wound
	Squires, "So you knew Klingsor?" (m. 511).
	[entrance of the Squires attending Amfortas]

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[4] "And I – I it is, / who brought this woe on all!"

[5] Aristotle, *Poetics I*, trans. Richard Janko (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 10.

How is Amfortas? *Squires,* "Refreshed"
Gurnemanz to himself, "Wound that will never close!"
Squires, "How did you know Klingsor?"

End
Story of the Grail Castle as built by Titurel (m. 563).
Story of Klingsor; his self mutilation and Black Magic; lure of the Magic
Garden; Amfortas' pain; "the rest you know;" now Klingsor wants the
Grail (m. 627).
Squires, "We must return the Spear!"
Story of the Grail's Vision: The Fool made wise through pity,
wait for him (m. 710).
Squires, "Made wise through pity. . ."

Figure 3: Outline of the Act II narrative episode (mm. 813-914).

Preface
Kundry's reaction to Parsifal's question, "Are you a flower grown in this
garden?" "No. Far from my homeland, I have waited for you to find me."
(815).

Beginning
Story of Parsifal's Childhood. Parsifal's laughter inspiring Herzeleide.
Herzeleide's guarding of her sleeping child (m .832).

Middle
Herzeleide's protection and shielding of Parsifal from worldly conflict.
Kundry's continuous questioning "Can you remember...?" (m. 882).

End
The Anguish of Herzeleide. Parsifal's thoughtlessness at leaving without
returning. Herzeleide's consuming grief, broken heart, and death. (m. 895).

Figure 4: Outline of the Act III narrative episode (mm. 332-419).

Preface
Gurnemanz's plea for any spell on Parsifal to be broken and his request for
healing (m .342).

Beginning
Story of the Amfortas' Continued Suffering - unanswered cries for death.
"No sorrow of the knights could move him to fulfill his sacred office" (m. 359).

Middle
The Shrouded Grail. Amfortas' inability to die due to the ever-sustaining
Grail. The denial of the "Food of Heaven" to the other, now weak, knights
(m. 377).

End
Story of the Death of Titurel. Gurnemanz's dwelling in the forest, waiting for
death; just as death has claimed Titurel, his "Holy King when once denied the
Grail's refreshment" (407).

It is evident from the outlines above that the three narratives share the same structural scheme, though the dramatic impulse of each differs greatly. Using narratives, Wagner presents historical, contemporaneous, and, on occasion, extraneous events. These narratives are closed, formal presentations whose integrity relies as much on structure as on music.

The motivic structure of each narrative episodes depends on the context of the story told. Wagner's use of motivic density throughout a specific section, however, remains consistent between the episodic narratives. By connecting a musical motif with a point in the narration, Wagner clarifies the broad "families of images" that saturate *Parsifal*.[6] In Act I, the stories of Kundry's guilt, Amfortas' wound, the building of the Grail Castle, and Klingsor's treachery are infused with specific Leitmotifs (respectively, the "salvation," "spear," "Grail" and "Klingsor" Leitmotifs). This infusion goes beyond the presence of the Leitmotifs to create musical boundaries defining a specific portion of the narrative. The narrative episodes in Acts II and III use the same strategy as the "Grail" story in Act I. Like the "Grail" motif, the "Herzeleide" (Act II) and "Wasteland" (Act III) motifs are highlighted by means of sequential repetition near the conclusion of the story. This procedure gives the narrative an immediately identifiable quality and unites temporally distant narratives with perceptible similarities.

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[6] Carolyn Abbate, "'Parsifal': Words and Music," *Parsifal - Opera Guide 34*, ed. Nicholas John (London: John Calder Publisher, Ltd., 1988), 44. Abbate contrasts the use of Leitmotifs in *Tristan* and *Parsifal* with those of the *Ring* noting that "multiple referential meanings tend to insinuate themselves into the listener's perception, rather than to hammer on his intellect" (44).

The three narrative episodes are linked not only by similitude of syntax, structure, and function, but also by their simultaneous conception. Wagner first conceived the idea of *Parsifal* during the summer of 1845 after reading Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*. Thus, with the *Ring*, *Tristan*, and *Die Meistersinger*, *Parsifal* occupied Wagner's consciousness (in varying degrees) during a thirty-five year period from genesis to completion. Although the first sketch, written in April 1857, has been lost, the prose draft, written from 27 August to 30 August 1865, is extant. This sketch was written in response to a request by King Ludwig II in a letter dated 21 August 1865. In it, the king wrote, "Impart to me something of your plans concerning 'The Victors' and 'Parcival.' I am <u>parched</u> with thirst for them. Slake my burning thirst."[7] On 26 August 1865, Wagner wrote across the page in his personal diary (the "Brown Book"), "How wonderful! – The King ardently desires to hear about Parzival."[8] The following four days of entries encompass the entire *Parsifal* drama and although the final structure of the narratives was to change the material that forms their essence is complete. Indeed, certain parts of the draft contain more detail than the final text or the stage directions. When Kundry exclaims Parsifal's name, the stage directions state:

He is about to escape, but on hearing Kundry's voice pauses in surprise.[9]

In the prose draft, Wagner writes:

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[7] Richard Wagner, *The Diary of Richard Wagner 1865-1882: The Brown Book*, presented and annotated by Joachim Bergfeld, trans. George Bird (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 46

[8] Richard Wagner, *The Diary of Richard Wagner*, 45.

[9] Act II, scene 2.

> Then he hears the loud, loving sound of a woman's voice calling him by name. He stops, shaken, believing it to be his mother, and stands, greatly affected, rooted to the spot.[10]

This position is amplified in Cosima Wagner's detailed diary. In her entry for 31 March 1878, she quotes her husband:

> "Do you know how Kundry calls to Parsifal?" He sings me the phrase... with which she names him: "It is the first time his name is spoken, and thus his mother has called him! Only music can do that."[11]

This kind of psychological intensity accounts for a significant portion of the listener's response to the narratives, particularly in the last two acts.

From Cosima's diaries it also is evident that the division of narrative sections was present from the earliest point of musical creation. On several occasions, excerpts from the nascent music drama were performed for Cosima, "In the afternoon, he called me into the *salon* in order to play me what he had just played: the beginning of Gurnemanz's narration, '*In heiliger Nacht neigten sich die Boten*',"[12] or "In the evening he plays me Gurenmanz's narration about the coming of the angels to Titurel."[13] The first entry contains a reference to "the beginning" of the narration; however, two points must be noted about her delineation. First, Wagner changed the text in the final draft to read "*Ihm neigten sich, in heilig ernster Nacht, dereinst des Heilands selig Boten.*" Second, this is not the beginning of a narrative, it is the continuation; musically, dramatically, and

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[10] Richard Wagner, *The Diary of Richard Wagner*, 56.

[11] Cosima Wagner, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries: Volume II, 1878-1883*, ed. Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, trans. Geoffrey Skelton (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1980), 54.

[12] From 13 November 1877 in Cosima Wagner, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries: Volume II, 1878-1883*, 995.

[13] From 20 November 1877 in Cosima Wagner, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries: Volume II, 1878-1883*, 997.

grammatically, this section of Gurnemanz's narrative began one and a half sentences earlier.

Whether or not Cosima was referring to this section as the *beginning* of Gurnemanz's narrative is not at issue. As Carolyn Abbate has noted, "Some commentators locate the beginning of Gurnemanz's narrative at the story of Titurel. This seems perverse, for it passes over the Spear narrative, and ignores the musical link between all five stories."[14] Because the previous entry detailing Wagner's work on Act I was dated more than a month earlier (10 October – dealing with music for the entrance of Amfortas' litter), it is reasonable to assume that Cosima's "beginning" referred to work Wagner had completed that day. Interestingly, Cosima recorded nothing more than "R. finishes Gurnemanz's narration" on 23 November 1877 to note the completion of *Parsifal*'s dramatic exposition.[15]

One final similarity links the creation of the narratives, that is, the conflation of characters out of Wolfram's *Parzival*. Wagner found his dramatic catalyst in Kundry. As he noted to Mathilde Wesendonck in early August, 1860, "Did I not tell you once before that the fabulously wild messenger of the grail is to be one and the same person as the enchantress of the second act. Since this dawned on me, almost everything else about the subject has become clear to me."[16] Kundry's character is a combination of Kondrie the Sorceress (who chastises Parsifal for his inability to question) and Orgeluse the temptress.

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[14] Carolyn Abbate, "*Parsifal*: Words and Music, *Parsifal - Opera Guide 34*, ed. Nicholas John (London: Calder, 1988), 48.

[15] From 23 November 1877 in Cosima Wagner, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries: Volume II, 1878-1883*, 997

[16] Richard Wagner, *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, trans. and ed. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), 500.

Likewise, Gurnemanz represents the synthesis of Gurnemanz (aged instructor in arms and chivalry) and Trevrezent (a hermit whose stories absolve Parsifal and spur him towards the Grail castle).[17] Thus, Wagner tightens the on-stage drama by limiting the number of characters who interact with Parsifal while expanding the psychological dimensions of those characters.

The similarities between the three narrative episodes permits an examination of these units in the context of the overall narrative. Furthermore, the examination of one specific section will elucidate Wagner's narrative strategy. This contextual significance requires the theoretical framework of narrativity and semiotics. By examining three narrative episodes, we can understand how Wagner orders functional material and how this presentation is affected by the use of Leitmotifs. Likewise, the Leitmotifs themselves will take on new meaning when they are viewed with respect to their "function" in the narrative.

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[17] W.J. Henderson, *Richard Wagner His Life and His Dramas*, 2nd edition, revised (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1901), 462-474.

CHAPTER IV

FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

To begin an examination of *Parsifal*'s overall narrative as it relates to Propp's theory of functions, we must first consider the prelude to Act I and its context within the entire work. The prelude, variously described as atmospheric, contemplative, or mysterious, is comprised of three Leitmotifs that form an important triptych in future motivic derivations. Wagner, in describing the opening section to King Ludwig, gave the following grammatical equivalency: "Love – Faith – Hope?"[1] Making no apologies to Saint Paul, Wagner tacitly strengthens the already implicit religious coorelation present in *Parsifal*. As Ernest Newman has noted, what Wagner gave next was a "doctrinal elucidation of the prelude rather than a musical analysis."[2] Further, Michael Tanner has pointed out that the prelude does:

> 'set the scene. . .' in the first part, by taking us into a disturbed and loft ambiance; in the second part, by giving us the sense of value which we shall keep and develop as we go through the work; and in the third, by involving us in untold anguish and getting us prepared for a long wait before the release from it.[3]

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[1] Wagner quoted in Ernest Newman, *The Wagner Operas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 667. Later, the reordering of these virtues forms part of an exegesis for the *Bayreuth Blätter* (December 1880) in which he equates them with Schopenhauer's recognition of a "moral meaning of the world." (See Richard Wagner, *Religion and Art*, trans. William Ashton Ellis (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), p. 259-60.

[2] *Ibid.*, 668.

[3] Michael Tanner, "The Total Work of Art" *The Wagner Companion*, ed. Peter Burbidge and Richard Sutton (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 207.

How, then, can we find meaning that combines a dramatical and music reading with respect to functionality? The answer lay some six hundred bars later when the music of the prelude is recast in Gurnemanz's narration. Beginning in m. 565, we have the portion of the narration dealing with Titurel and the establishment of the Grail kingdom. This most temporally distant section is related to the musically distant prelude in its recapitulation. And, though neither the prelude nor the narration reveals a structure recognized or expected by Propp, the information imparted by them gives a foundation on which the overall narrative is based.

Realizing that the prelude is based on so few motivic ideas, we must, as in the *Rheingold* prelude, listen with expectation of what is to come rather than explication of what is. Twice Wagner makes this clear. The most noticeable example is the conclusion of the prelude with an E♭ major seventh spreading across the violins and woodwinds moving to the F♭ heard in the offstage trombones (Example 2).

Example 2: Act I, mm. 110-116.

Each utilizes the *Liebesmahlthema* as its basis. Like the *Rheingold* prelude, the "pure" tonality (E♭ - G - B♭ - D) is interrupted by a motif one step away (a half-step in the

Parsifal prelude, a whole step in *Rheingold*, when the Rhinemaidens enter on F♮). Thus,

the listener is left to question what the prelude has set-up: invitation *to* something or

explication *of* something.

A subtle yet noteworthy carryover of this deceptive resolution is found at the

outset of the Act I narrative episode (mm. 563-565). Here, Wagner is preparing a

modulation with the low strings proceeding through a standard cadential pattern ending

on the dominant, while the low brasses enter the next bar on the tonic (Example 3).

Timbral distortion also links this period to the prelude.

Example 3: Act I, mm. 563-569.

The other example of Wagner's emphasis of expectation is the first presentation

of the "Grail" motif, the "Dresden Amen." In measures 39-40, we hear, in "tonic" A♭

major, the characteristic rhythm followed by the ascending tetrachord. The next two bars

continue this progress at the level of the dominant, forcing the motif (and all its

ecumenical connotation as a cadence) to become blurred. We no sooner hear the motif

than it is already being transformed. This transformation was misinterpreted by Newman

in his overview from *The Wagner Operas*. He noted:

The brass then give out a new motive, that of the Grail, in compact soft
harmonies: [he provides mm. 39-41a as the example]. It is repeated immediately
an octave higher, pianissimo, in the woodwinds.[4]

Example 4: Act I, mm. 39-43.

It is not "repeated" as such. At best, it is a "tonal" answer to the subject two bars

preceding it; but it is much more than this. The transformation, though minute (only the

D is raised)[5] is important for an understanding of how the prelude relates to the narrative

episode mentioned earlier. In measures 610-622, we find an extension of this simple

transformation that travels by third relations and the circle of fifths, to become the center

of the entire Act I narrative episode. It is also the first time that Wagner allows the

motif's cadential connotation to be utilized. Indeed, measure 622 is the only incidence of

the "Grail" motif, outside the prelude, in which it is used as an imperfect authentic

cadence, its extra-Wagnerian (and original) function.[6] As we shall see, the importance of

this narrative episode will gain further meaning when other cadential examples are

examined.

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[4] Ernest Newman, *The Wagner Operas*, 669.

[5] D is also the only note raised in the *Liebesmahl* theme, however it functions not as a leading tone but as supertonic in C minor.

[6] One must except mm. 139-146 in Act I, where a two-bar tag is added to the end of the motif.

Returning to the overall narrative, we see that immediately preceding the first section of

Gurnemanz's Act I narration is Kundry's refusal of thanks for her efforts to ease

Amfortas' pain. Her command "Fort, Fort – ins Bad!" (Be off! Off to your bath) forces

the scene to change as the wounded leader is carried away, accompanied by his own motif

(mm. 366-382). Dramatically, with Amfortas moving off stage, and musically, with the

purely instrumental accompaniment evolving from the somewhat chromatic "Amfortas"

motif to the strictly diatonic "Waldesmelodie," Wagner has created for his listeners an

audible division of periods. Further, as is typical with Wagner's practice of emphasizing

what is to come rather than what is, we hear, for the first time, the "Grail" motif in a

chromatically altered form (Example 5). The dialogue between the squires

Example 5: Act I, mm. 383-385.

regarding Kundry's nature provides a link between Gurnemanz's defense, the first section

in the Act I narration, and the preceding period, Amfortas' lament. Moreover, the

connecting music between the two periods reinforces the function, in the definition given

by Propp, of this moment in the overall narrative – namely, the "absence of elders." *This*

is the first time in Parsifal *that we see the presentation of a musical motif corresponding*

with its function in the narrative structure. By keeping the same key and orchestration as

its first presentation with Amfortas, Wagner has strengthened the point of commonality.

Likewise, the somewhat abbreviated "Waldesmelodie" has been modified (the opening

bar eliminated) allowing it to elide with the "Amfortas" motif.

Example 6: Act I, mm. 272-276 (first presentation of the "Waldesmelodie");
            Act I, mm. 373-377 (second and varied presentation of the "Waldesmelodie").

Thus, only a structural modification was made to the motif as a harmonic shift would de-

emphasize the commonality shared with the action on stage.

The second function in the overall narrative is the "theft of the magical agent."

Wagner delays its presentation considerably by placing it at the end of the third (and last)

section dealing with Kundry. Even here, it is only alluded to with reference to Kundry's

position when the spear was lost and, in keeping with Wagner's emphasis on expectation,

the "Spear" motif is only included after Gurnemanz's indictment. Indeed, Gurnemanz,

himself, is not speaking when we hear the motif; it is the third squire's juvenile disdain

which is accompanied by the section-ending motif (Example 7). The squires, then, take

on a new role as purveyor of narrative functions, since it is the third squire's statement

Example 7: Act I, mm. 496-500.

about winning back the lost spear that leads Gurnemanz to tell of the prophecy for a savior; previously, Amfortas alluded to this.

Most of this section is accompanied by the "Zauber" motif which makes its first appearance here, as well. Of course, the symbolic connection between Kundry and Black Magic is not lost on the attentive listener but, what is made exceptionally clear, is the function of the spear as an axis about which the drama revolves. The word "speer" (accompanied by the clarinets and pizzicato strings) and the relentless cadential progression leading to the "Spear" motif (mm. 496-99, Example 7, above) epitomize this emphasis. Furthermore, the cadential end of this section (m. 499) serves to contrast the section (mm. 610-622) discussed with respect to the prelude. Here, it is the voice that carries the cadential drive and the leading tone to tonic motion on the words "verlornen Speer!"[7] underscore both the importance of this section in the narrative episode and the position of the spear in the overall drama.

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[7] "Missing spear!"

This section of the narration is juxtaposed against the next function, "maiming or mutilation." Thus, we better understand the importance of the theft when we see it in the context of Klingsor's action: wounding Amfortas. After chastising the squire for wanting to return the spear for selfish reasons, Gurnemanz utters one of the most troubling yet poetic lines in the whole drama:

> O wunden wundervoller heiliger Speer!
> Ich sah dich schwingen von unheiligster Hand![8]

Immediately we know that the spear has been turned against its guardian; however, nothing is said of Klingsor's role. The music is drawn from the "Suffering" and "Spear" motifs of the *Liebesmahlthema*. Though harmonically the motifs are not changed (they appear in their original A♭ tonality), they are rhythmically augmented. This augmentation, coupled with Wagner's orchestral direction "Noch einmal so langsam" followed by "Immer noch breiter," gives the passage a sense of static expectation, further expanded by the ascending and descending 32nd notes in the lower strings. Wagner is clearly setting up the audience for an important piece of information: the function of "villainy."

The section that follows fills in missing information about the villain, specifically that it was Klingsor who stole the spear after seducing Amfortas with the help of "ein furchtbar schönes Weib."[9] Moving to the end of this section we find another cadential resolution whose orchestration bears significance within the narrative as a whole.

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[8] "O wounding, wonderful, all-holiest Spear! / I saw you wielded by unholiest hand!"
[9] "A fearful beauteous woman."

Measures 545-46 conclude this section as Gurnemanz tells of a wound that will never

close again. The motif comes from the concluding notes of the *Liebesmahlthema*, more

specifically, from the C minor version heard in bar 20 of the prelude. Though not the

"authentic" A♭ tonality, the use of C minor here, so long ago placed into the listeners

conscious, makes this cadential resolution aurally familiar (Example 8).

Example 8: Act I, mm. 543-546.

Furthermore, that the voice drops out before reaching the tonic prepares the following

section (the telling of Titurel and the Grail Castle) which ends with a similar non-

resolving vocal line. Once again, Wagner has punctuated the end of an episode's section

in such a distinctive way as to leave the listener anticipating the next section while

keeping the end of the previous on in mind.

A brief connective passage links the stories of losing the spear and building the

Grail castle. Measures 546-563 form this bridge as Amfortas' squires return to join

Gurnemanz and the other squires. As we noted before, the squires have given the

narrative its needed emphasis to continue. Here again, they perform a similar duty.

Periodically, the third and fourth squires (those that have been with Gurnemanz all along) ask questions regarding Klingsor's nature. Up to this time, Gurnemanz has carefully avoided these questions; however, once the other squires return and inform him of Amfortas' seeming improvement, he can no longer avoid their requests for information. That which follows is the center of the Act I narration, forming the "pre-history" upon which the overall narrative we witness unfolds.

The period that begins this portion of the narrative episode starts in measure 563 and does not end until measure 742, with Parsifal's entrance. Though it can be divided into sections, this massive structure does not cadence until the squires reiterate the prophecy stated in the "Perfect fool" motif (mm. 737-741), the last note of which becomes the subdominant to the tonic downbeat (m. 742) that announces "Parsifal's" motif (Example 9).

Example 9: Act I, mm. 737-742.

Two important points can be drawn from the narrative strategy present thus far. First, Wagner does not regularly link functional units. Rather, he prepares them by using familiar harmonizations or orchestrations of accompanying motifs. As we will see, it is some time before another functional unit appears to propel the story. Second, the bulk of

functional units has been weighted toward the first half of the narrative episode. Indeed,

the second half does not add to the overall progression of the story. Carolyn Abbate has

noted a similar distribution over entire acts:

> In each there is one solo or dialogue devised as a chief focus of musico-dramatic
> weight. . . . By saying that these solo/dialog passages are particularly important,
> we do not depreciate the Grail scenes, awesome in every respect, or even suggest
> that the oddly static music of the Flower Maidens is negligible. But the choral
> scenes are, on the whole, more shut in upon themselves, musically self-
> sufficient.[10]

This self-sufficiency does not translate into functional poverty. We will find that a

number of functions are exposed in the Grail scene. However, Wagner does not dwell, as

he did during Gurnemanz's narration, on their presentation. They are introduced to the

audience and then absorbed in the Grail ritual. Thus, to view the context of the last

section of Gurnemanz's narration, we must do so at the level of the motif, the subject of

the next chapter.

The next function expected of the narrative is that of "the lack of the magical

agent." Of course, this can be interpreted to represent the spear and doing so would not

interrupt the narrative fabric. However, we must view the presentation of this function in

the context the entire work. The amount of time that has passed between this function and

its immediate predecessor is considerably lengthy. The episodes of Parsifal's entrance,

his dialogue with Gurnemanz, with Kundry, and the walk to the Grail castle separate the

two functions. Temporally, then, Wagner has created expectation by delaying the "lack

of magical agent." Had he juxtaposed it with the "villainy" function, we could easily see

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[10] Carolyn Abbate, "'Parsifal': Words and Music," 43-44.

the "lack" as representing the spear. Clearly, this is not what Wagner intended. This becomes evident when the "lack" function is viewed in connection with the "lament" that immediately follows. Wagner has conflated these two functions and separated them from the predecessors to create dramatic expectation. By doing so, Wagner has also shifted the meaning of the "lack" function away from the spear and on to the Grail – specifically that the Grail lacks the ability to heal Amfortas and restore the kingdom to health. Once again, Wagner has emphasized the element of expectation as we are about to participate in the taking of the sacrament provided by the Grail.

Musically, the representation of the "lack" function at first *lacks* something as well: motivic inflection. Titurel's disembodied voice begins this narrative episode and his first declamation reveals no motivic quotation or transformation whatsoever.[11] This motivic deprivation is compensated by Amfortas' cry "Wehe! Wehe!," where the full orchestra is heard with the "Holy Repentance" motif (mm. 1260 ff.). Thus, it is only through the exchange of father and son that we understand the function presented at this point. Titurel commands Amfortas to reveal the Grail, but Amfortas refuses, knowing it will only prolong his suffering:

> Mein Vater, oh! noch einmal
> verrichte du das Amt!
> Lebe, leb und lass mich sterben.
>
> Dass keiner, keiner diese Qual ermisst,
> die mir der Anblick weckt, der euch entzückt!
> Was ist die Wunde, ihrer Schmerzen Wut

---

[11] We do see a rhythmic similarity in "Muß ich sterben" (Must I die) and the three notes that precede Titurel's next entrance, however, this is an isolated occurrence. See also Chapter VI for further discussion of this motif.

gegen die Not, die Höllenpein,
zu diesem Amt verdammt zu sein![12]

With this last line, Amfortas concludes his narration with the "lack" function. There is

one motivic presentation which occurs between Amfortas' two statements. In measure

1287, we hear the familiarly orchestrated Grail motif, this time in C♭ major. C♭ is

enharmonically reinterpreted as B, which serves as a dominant to the E minor section that

follows. Within this modulation lies a distortion of the Grail motif that, as such, we have

not seen before. Example 8 shows the opening rhythm without the ascending tetrachord

that regularly completes the motif. Abruptly, the low strings interrupt with a chromatic

flourish followed by a downward stepwise passage. Reaching from B to E, this perfect

fifth is complementary to the expected rising fourth, and both musically and motivically,

completes the "Grail" motif's presentation.

Example 10: Act I, mm. 1277-1281.

The function that follows the "lack" function is the "lament or plaintive song."

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[12] "My father, oh! just once more / resume the sacred task! / Live, live and let me parish." "May no one, no one know the burning pain / caused by the holy sight that gives you delight! / What is the Spear-wound, all its raging smart, / compared to the pain, the agony / of being condemned to serve this task!"

Though not a Leid by any definition, Amfortas' lament is a musically distinct form. Its beginning (m. 1298) is set apart by a distinct voice-only cadence in E minor while the end (m. 1404) is elided with a complete presentation of the "Perfect fool" motif heard "aus der Höhe." The lament centers around Amfortas' personal shame and anguish and is characterized by overt chromaticism, particularly noticeable in the transformation of motifs (Examples 9a and 9b). Both of these transformations of the "Grail" motif

Example 11a: Act I, mm. 1310-1315.

Example 11b: Act I, mm. 1325-1327.

occur here for the first time, though neither is complete. Example 11a lacks the familiar opening rhythm, while Example 11b is missing the concluding tetrachord. In the context of a lament, these structural modifications underscore the distress of the moment.

Also noteworthy in this relatively closed period is the first motif presented. Based on Titurel's unaccompanied plea ("Muß ich sterben, von Retter ungeleitet?"),[13] the motif retains much of the rhythmic shape while altering the melodic shape after the first four notes (Examples 12a and 12b). More importantly, it is first heard in the orchestra

Example 12a: Act I, mm. 1255-1258.

Muss ich ster - ben, vom Ret - ter un - ge - lei- ten?

Example 12b: Act I, mm. 1303-1309.

Weh - vol - les Er - be, dem ich ver - fal - len, ich

followed by an almost exact repetition in the voice. This orchestral exposition, a venerated operatic tradition, will occur in the other structurally separated "Lied," Kundry's Act II narrative. In both, musical, functional, and structural elements coincide for an emphatic demarcation underscored by dual motivic presentations.

The final two functions in Act I, the "counteraction" and "departure of the hero," occur in quick succession after the Grail ceremony. The ceremony, full of motivic expansion based on the *Liebesmahlthema*, is sheer pageantry. We the audience must, like Parsifal, participate as viewers to understand the significance of all that has come before.

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[13] "Must I die then, without its light to guide me?"

Though no narrative function is described here, this litany, much like Gurnemanz's telling of the Grail castle, serves a contextual purpose. Indeed, it is Gurnemanz's question "Weisst du, was du sah'st?"[14] and Parsifal's answer (he silently acknowledges "No") that forms the functional bundle. The two parts of the "counteraction" function (literally question and answer) are accompanied by distinct motifs and timbres. To Gurnemanz's question, the English horn and bassoon iterate the "Perfect fool" motif. With Parsifal's response, the strings play a rhythmically augmented version of the "Schwermut" ("Depression") motif (an already modified version of the last phrase of the *Liebesmahlthema* – Example 13). The elision between these two phrases is made transparent by the unison F shared between the English horn and the violins. Thus, the

Example 13: Act I, mm. 1639-1642.

two distinct parts of the "counteraction" function are seamless in their aural presentation. Furthermore, the connection between the "counteraction" and the "dispatch" functions is equally seamless as clarinets I and III share the same unison pitches as violins and violas. The repetition of the "Perfect fool" motif is divided between the clarinets (who carry the harmonic progression) and the violas (who have a rhythmically altered version of the

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[14] "Know you what you saw?"

melody). This alteration is made more pronounced by *sforzandi* that articulate key notes of the melody. Clearly the musical equivalent of Gurnemanz pushing Parsifal out of the castle, the "Parsifal" motif is played by the horns (*mit Dämpfer*) immediately after the "Perfect fool" motif. Gurnemanz concludes the on-stage action by chastising Parsifal with the lines: "lass' du hier künftig di Schwäne in Ruh' / und suche dir Gänser die Gans!"[15]

In both the "counteraction" and "dispatch" functions, the hero should take a proactive role – yet, in neither function does Parsifal participate. Wagner has represented this inactivity by eliding the motifs with unison pitches played by different timbres. Parsifal had no choice but to follow Gurnemanz's direction, and the musical succinctness underscored this. As in the second act, narrative functions are juxtaposed at the end of the act to push the drama forward through the ensuing interval.

In the second act, we encounter one of the primary enigmas in *Parsifal*: the name of its principal character. We remember, from the discourse with Gurnemanz, that Parsifal does not know his name or origin – two pieces of information that must (and will) be revealed in the next narrative function: the "greeting and interrogation" of the "donor of the narrative." This function follows the scene between Kundry and Klingsor and the "oddly static music"[16] of the Flower Maidens. Kundry, now the entranced servant of Klingsor, interrupts the flirtatious Flower Maidens with a single command: "Parsifal! Weile!" The motif to which these words are sung is, of course, the "Perfect fool" motif,

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[15] "Henceforth leave our swans in peace: / go seeking – you gander – for geese!"
[16] Carolyn Abbate, "'Parsifal': Words and Music," 44.

harmonically respelled G♭ - C♭ - D♮ rather than G♭ - C♭ - E♭♭. This reinterpretation allows

for the almost relentless 4 - 3 suspension over D♮ to dissolve into yet another suspension,

this time over a G in the cellos and bass (Example 14). The motion toward G is

important for two reasons. First, it provides the cadence that ends this narrative function.

Second, in keeping with Wagner's emphasis on expectation, we hear G major as distinct

from the A♭ harmony that preceded it and will keep this shift in our ears when Kundry's

narrative opens, also in G major. Further, the descending sixth (B to D) prefigures the

Example 14: Act II, mm. 739-749.

opening motif of Kundry's narrative (the second portion of this narrative function). Once

again key and motif coincide with narrative function – each strengthening the other's

position.

Propp defines the purpose of "the donor of the narrative" as an interrogation or

test in preparation for receiving the magical agent. Wagner gives us this in Kundry's

narrative. Moreover, we hear this music as Kundry's veiled attempt to seduce Parsifal.

As such, this narrative episode, the most categorically defined in the whole work, is

characterized by surface musical and dramatic gestures. This serves a dual purpose in

allowing the listener to immediately recognize Kundry's ulterior motive, while

simultaneously recognizing her questions as being a test (or "interrogation" in Propp's

sense) for Parsifal. Once again, motivic and functional presentations align; however,

never before has the elision been so purposefully transparent. We see this transparency in

the presentation of the questions themselves. Wagner uses sequential repetitions of a

rhythmically altered "Herzeleide" motif shared between the voice and violin I (often in

unison). Under this, the cellos and basses articulate each beat of the triple meter

providing a macabre waltz-like feeling to the whole passage. Further, Kundry's final

question (the one that will have "cosmic" ramifications) is separated from the preceeding

ones by means of rhythmic stagnation and a timbral shift (the winds and brass cease while

the strings play a series of first-inversion triads with an appoggiatura on beat one).

The entire climax of Kundry's narrative is related to the climax of the Act I

narrative episode (the story of the Grail castle) in its use of sequential repetition followed

by cadential evasion. In the Act I narration, the orchestra carries the cadential motion

while in Act II, it is Kundry's voice that moves to tonic, allowing the strings to remain

suspended over a pedal A in the cellos. Though this is not a direct recapitulation, the use

of similar musico-dramatic gestures to emphasize a particular point in the narrative

episodes provides commonality. Also, we will see that Kundry's final test (the kiss)

shares a similar commonality.

From this point to the end of the act, we are presented with the greatest number of

functions in the least amount of time. Kundry's kiss and Parsifal's epiphany constitute

the dramatic climax of the entire work. Furthermore, with respect to narrative functions,

the kiss/epiphany forms a centerpoint in the exposition of the story. We should expect,

then, a confluence of motifs to accompany these functions and, in true Wagnerian

fashion, we are not disappointed.

The kiss itself is the conclusion of the "first function" of the "donor of the

narrative." Thus, we find motivic similarity between Kundry's earlier questions and her

statement: "Die Liebe lerne kennen, / die Gamuret umschloss, / als Herzeleid's

Entbrennen / ihn sengend überfloss!"[17] In both passages, the altered "Herzeleide" motif

is used with identical orchestration, though in the latter, it collapses into "Kundry's"

motif to end the phrase. At the cadential end of this function (Kundry's words "der Liebe

ersten Kuss!"[18]) we find a simple, evaded cadence ($G\flat$ resolving to F^{o7} rather than $C\flat$). In

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[17] "Of love now learn the rapture / that Gamuret once learned, / when Herzeleide's passion / within him
fiercely burned!"

[18] "Love's first kiss!"

what we would expect to be a voice-only resolution, Wagner has turned our expectations

against us by including the four horns on the F half-diminished seventh.[19]

Immediately after this we hear the "Zauber" motif as Kundry leans over to kiss

Parsifal. However, we do not fully understand the nature of this action until we hear the

third iteration of e♮-f♯ (from the "Suffering" motif) that signifies Parsifal's enlightenment.

His first words after the kiss are punctuated by Kundry's motif – a musical gloss for

Parsifal's understanding of Amfortas and the wound. It is here, as many have noted, that

Parsifal becomes Amfortas and, as such, we hear much of the same music that was in

Amfortas' lament along with similar expressions in the text. Representing Parsifal's

eventual ascension to the Grail throne, this portion of the narrative serves to connect past,

present, and future.

An important distinction regarding the presentation of functions must be made

here. Beginning with the "hero's reaction," functions are not as succinct as in the first

half of the music drama. This difference is crucial to the interpretation of the narrative as

a whole since it allows for an expansion (musically and temporally) of dramatic

explication. Wagner will use this to its extreme in the third act, where the "return,"

"unrecognized arrival," and "transfiguration" functions occupy much of the first half of

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[19] I would be remiss by not mentioning Patrick McCreless' work on this passage, "Motif and Magic: A Referential Dyad in *Parsifal,*" *Music Analysis* 9:3 (1990), 227 ff. In it, he posits the E/F dyad (set as Parsifal's exclamation "Amfortas!" after the kiss) as a musical ramification of Wagner's "tightening up" of Wolfram's story. Occurring at points describing Amfortas and the spear, he sees the motif embodying a "central ethical argument of the opera that sensual pleasure and both physical and psychological pain are intertwined" (231). For the present discussion of this point in the narrative, it is sufficient to note that the dyad is present as a pedal in the fourth horn (F) that moves three bars later to an E (as the root of an E major triad) in the second clarinet. Beyond the scope of this paper, it would be of interest to explore McCreless' theory of dramatic "tightening up" with respect to the overall functional narrative strategy.

the act. Thus, when we view the two functions intertwined with the kiss (the "hero's reaction" and "control of the magical agent") we realize that they gain significance only through time.

In a specific example, Parsifal is made *welthellsichtig* (cosmically clear-sighted) at the moment of Kundry's kiss, but we cannot understand the ramifications until after his outburst. Kundry herself tells us this in the line "So war es mein Kuss, / der welthellsichtig dich machte?"[20] Curiously, the formal division of Parsifal's outburst is identical in the works of both Carl Dahlhaus and Alfred Lorenz. Dahlhaus divided it into three periods while Lorenz saw two *Stollen* and an *Abgesang*.[21] Nevertheless, that its formal division can be similarly described by such dissimilar approaches attests to the referential substance of this section.

The final two narrative functions in this act, the "struggle" and "victory," take place after Kundry's explanation of her personal anguish. Here again, Wagner combines functions and employs surface gestures (complete with a three-octave D major harp glissando) to push the action forward. Like the "counteraction" function, the "struggle" is a non-event as Parsifal simply grasps the spear that has miraculously stopped above his head. Also, like its predecessor, the "struggle" is presented in a brief temporal space. Only thirteen bars separate the harp glissando (signifying Klingsor thrusting the spear) with the transposed "Tristan" chord (signifying the destruction of Klingsor's castle).

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[20] "So it was my kiss / that made you see all these things clearly?"

[21] For interpretations of this passage, see Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, 152; and Alfred Lorenz *Der Musikalische Aufbau von Richard Wagners Parsifal* (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1966) 127-130.

The two functions are clearly identified by Leitmotifs. For the "struggle" function, a radically altered "spear" motif appears – harmonically changed to end in D major (the relative key in which this act began and will end and a tritone removed from the "global key" of the entire work, Example 15). The function of "victory" is accompanied by "Kundry's" motif, which dissipates into a chromatic descending stepwise sequence reminiscent of music at the opening of the act.

Example 15: Act II, mm. 1489-1493.

Between the "struggle" and "victory" functions, Parsifal explains the significance of the spear as the agent of healing and destruction. By doing this, he anticipates the fulfillment of two functions: the "liquidation" (where Amfortas is healed) and the "victory" (where Klingsor is banished). His speech articulates them functionally and temporally backward, since we have the immediate representation of "victory," while the "liquidation" function must wait until Amfortas is physically present. The delay of the latter is clearly meant to create expectation in the minds of the audience. By having Parsifal announce "Wie die Wunde er schliesse, / die mit ihm du schlugest,"[22] as the winds articulate the opening of the "Grail" motif, we are once again reminded of the

connection between spear and Grail. As in Act I, where we saw the Grail as the embodiment of the "lack" function, we now see the spear as the agent of the "liquidation" of that "lack." This dramatic epiphany unites these disparate actions and propels the drama through Parsifal's "litanous" wanderings.

The third act contains the final four narrative functions plus the as yet unresolved "liquidation of lack" function. Dramatically, only the first and last of these four (the "return" and "wedding"), along with the "liquidation" function, are necessary to complete the action of the story. We must infer from the prelude to Act III a representation of Parsifal's wandering – an inference confirmed when the "Irrens" motif (Example 16), first heard in the prelude, is heard again as Parsifal recounts his travels to Gurnemanz.

Example 16: "Irrens" motif.
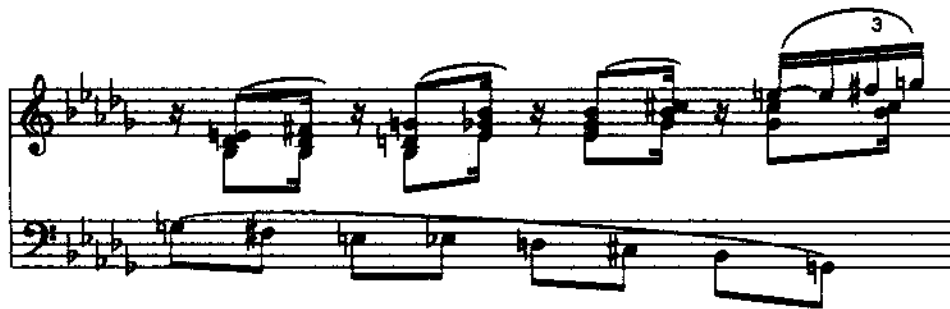
This direct, localized connection between off-stage action and on-stage narration retrospectively posits meaning to the Act III prelude and, at the same time, continues the emphasis of expectation common throughout the music drama. It is within this context that Parsifal returns and, at first, is unrecognized.

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[22] "The wound shall be healed now / by the Spear that wounded."

Both functions are incumbent on the "Parsifal" motif for audience recognition. Indeed, Wagner employs dramatic irony by having the orchestra play an altered form of the motif, announcing the visitor quite clearly to the audience while Gurnemanz and Kundry are left to inquire as to his purpose there. Like the prelude and the function of "return," the "unrecognized arrival" is foiled in the orchestra with the appearance of the "Parsifal" motif. Unlike the prelude, however, we have heard the "Parsifal" motif before and its denotation is unmistakably clear. To gain a complete understanding of the "unrecognized arrival," we must wait to hear an explanation (verbally or musically), just as we did for the "return" function moments earlier. This explanation comes in the form of Parsifal's other motif, the "Perfect fool" motif, first heard in Act III as a part of the "transfiguration" function.

Returning to the narrative functions, Parsifal's "transfiguration" comes as Gurnemanz prepares him for purification. Having his armor and breastplate removed, Parsifal is visually transfigured before his metaphorical consecration. It is at this point that we hear the "Perfect fool" motif, the only time before the scene changes to the Grail castle. It is also at this point that we hear a sequential development of a motif that ends with the "Grail" motif *without* Gurnemanz's voice as a part of the tonic chord. The motif developed is that of the "Perfect fool" and, though not ending on the dominant as in Act I, Gurnemanz's last note (the subdominant) is cadentially linked to the goal key (B major). Here, the direct correlation with the Act I narrative episode is apparent in the motif (the "Grail") and key (F♯ major in Act I, B major in Act III) but not in function. This is a pragmatic distinction in that the first act established a context (the foundation of the Grail

community) while the third act depicts its rejuvenation. We hear the conclusion of the "transfiguration" function as the beginning of the fulfillment of the Act I prophecy. Parsifal's baptism of Kundry is a baptism of faith (Die Taufe nimm, / und glaub' an den Erlöser!)[23] – a faith that is now manifest in the "transfigured" Parsifal.

The remaining functions, the still unresolved "liquidation" and "wedding" happen in the last moments of the music drama. As the knights bring in Titurel's coffin and Amfortas' litter, they tell of the father's death due to the son's selfish desire. Amfortas then restates his plea for death, this time suggesting to the knights, "heraus die Waffe! Taucht eure Schwerter / tief, – tief, bis ans Heft!"[24] Parsifal, at the moment of "liquidation," extends the spear and touches Amfortas' side. With the fulfillment of this function, Wagner has resolved the central (albeit surface) tension of the music drama – heal the wounded king to restore order in the kingdom.

Likewise, four systems of dramatic presentation, textual, visual, motivic, and functional have coincided here to underscore the importance of this moment in the drama. Parsifal touches Amfortas with the spear moments before he states "die Wunde schliesst / der Speer nur, die sie schlug,"[25] while the axial relationship between the Grail and spear, established in Act I with the presentation of the "lack" function, comes together here as the "Grail" motif accompanies the action on stage. For further emphasis, Wagner elides the "wedding" function with the "liquidation" by not expanding Parsifal's comments on Amfortas' absolution: "Sei heil, entsündigt und gesühnt! / Denn ich verwalte nun dein

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[23] "Baptized be, / have faith in the Redeemer!"
[24] "Unsheathe your weapons! Plunge every sword blade / deep, – deep, in my heart!"

Amt."[26] This succinctness allows Wagner to obfuscate the final function of the drama. The "liquidation of lack" becomes an event incumbent on Parsifal's ascension to the throne and revelation of the Grail. Thus, the Grail, musically present in the "liquidation" function and physically in the "wedding" function, has united the two in a similar dramatic duality as its did with the spear. Parsifal's lines "Enthüllet den Gral, öffnet den Schrein!"[27] return us to the key of A♭ major (for a full 54 measures), thereby capturing the entire *Bühnenweifestspiel*.

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[25] "The Spear that smote you / must heal you of your wound."

[26] "Be healed, forgiven and atoned! Now I shall undertake your task."

[27] "Reveal now the Grail, open the shrine!"

CHAPTER V

MUSICO-SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

Having seen that the structure of the narrative in *Parsifal* follows that of Propp's "wondertale," we may now turn to a discussion of how Leitmotifs operate within this structure. This is particularly relevant to the understanding of the "Grail" motif, Wagner's most prosaic Leitmotif. By applying aspects of the semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Peirce, we can adduce meanings for this motif drawn from its context within the music drama and also beyond the world of *Parsifal*.

The "Grail" motif carries the distinction of being directly borrowed from a pre-existing source. This is not an isolated occurrence. Indeed, *Parsifal* includes another instance of motivic borrowing (this one a self-borrowing) in the "Swan" motif that appears as Parsifal enters, having killed a swan with his bow and arrow. Drawn from *Lohengrin*, the "Swan" motif establishes a direct, though limited, connection with its predecessor. *Lohengrin* is a temporal sequel to *Parsifal*, as the protagonist in the former is the son of the protagonist in the latter.

Returning to the "Grail" motif, the "Dresden Amen" – upon which the motif is based – has been used previously in secular music as a symbol of ecumenicity. The most famous example of this use is in Mendelssohn's *Reformation Symphony* of 1832. In her examination of this symphony, Judith Sibler found two contemporaneous uses of the

"Dresden Amen" in the works of Louis Spohr (the "Reisesonata" of 1836) and Carl

Loewe (the ballad "Der Gang nach dem Eisenhammer," also from 1832). She notes, "like

Spohr, Loewe used the Dresden Amen to achieve a naturalistic portrayal of a religious

ritual."[1] In the ballad, the "Amen" appears as the narrator enters a church hearing the

words "Et cum spiritu tuo" set to the familiar rising tetrachord. Part of a responsory for

the Royal Chapel in Dresden, the ballad sets a traditional melody by Kapellmeister

Johann Gottlieb Naumann (1741-1801). Since Naumann's service as Kapellmeister

began in 1776, the setting used by Mendelssohn, Spohr, and Loewe would have been

available for some fifty years at the time of their writing. Five decades would suffice for

grafting the cadential pattern onto the public consciousness. As Sibler noted,

> whether Mendelssohn learned it from Loewe or from some other musician, it
> seems likely that Mendelssohn's initial contact with the Dresden Amen came
> indirectly, that is, from a musician who had remembered it as an effective bit of
> music and recommended it for its programmatic potential, rather than directly
> from the Catholic liturgy.[2]

Furthermore, Mendelssohn's audience did not recognize the "Amen" as a quotation. In

his review of the work, critic Ludwig Rellstab called it "the *cantus firmus* that appeared

from time to time."[3] It was not until 1903, more than a decade after *Parsifal*, that

Wilhelm Tappert correctly identified the motif as the "Dresden Amen," becoming the

first to do so.[4]

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[1] Judith Karen Sibler, *Mendelssohn and the Reformation Symphony: A Critical and Historical Study* (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1987; Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms), 103.

[2] *Ibid.*, 105-106.

[3] *Ibid.*, 100.

[4] Wilhelm Tappert, "Das Gralthema in Richard Wagners *Parsifal*," *Musikalisches Wochenblatt* vol. 34 no. 31/32 (30 July 1903), 425.
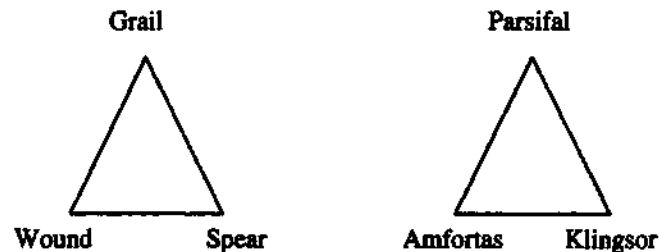
This background on the pre-Wagnerian use of the "Dresden Amen" illustrates the

fact that, rather than being a direct reference to the liturgy, it was an "archetypal" sound

used to evoke the sacrosanct, an association it maintains in *Parsifal*. Wagner knew that

his audience (whether aware of its origins or not) would hear the motif as a carryover

from the ecclesiastical establishment: exactly the image he wanted to elicit. Like the

distinct musical image embodied in the "Dresden Amen," Wagner wanted a distinct

physical image of the Grail as well. In Wolfram, it was a magic stone that fell from the

sky; Wagner, however, altered its form into the chalice, another common medieval form

taken by the Grail. This shift engendered yet another ecclesiastical reference – the vessel

of the Eucharist. Lucy Beckett extends this representational shift recognizing that the

Grail

> must be given the weight of the stories which make it the chalice of the Last
> Supper and the vessel in which Joseph of Arimathea caught the blood of Christ on
> the cross. This will raise the suffering of Amfortas to quite a different level and
> give his guardianship, his wound and his inability to die a moral and religious
> value of which Wolfram had no conception.[5]

By elevating the Grail to create a dramatic axis, Wagner formed the apex of a

triumvirate that would motivate the entire drama. Figure 5 shows this triumvirate along

with its equivalent characters. In the course of his Act I narration, Gurnemanz is

repeatedly asked to tell of his knowledge of Klingsor. The first two times, he resists and

changes the conversation by telling about the spear and the wound. This effectively

establishes the first two angles of the triumvirate and allows the culmination (both of the

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[5] Lucy Beckett, *Richard Wagner* Parsifal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 8.

Figure 5: Motivating Triumvirates in *Parsifal*

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       Grail                    Parsifal

        /\                        /\
       /  \                      /  \
      /    \                    /    \
     /      \                  /      \
    /_____\                /_____\
  Wound     Spear         Amfortas   Klingsor
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triptych and the narration) to rest with the Grail. Through Gurnemanz's reiteration of

both the characters and their accompanying objects, Wagner unifies the underling desire

of the music drama: return the spear to heal the wound that will reestablish the Grail rite.

Gurnemanz can answer the squire's question of Klingsor's origin only after he has

established the subjects and objects of the action.

We may now turn to the lexicon of Charles Sanders Peirce to ascertain more

clearly the Grail's position as the primary cogent and dramatic element in *Parsifal*. In

Peirce's thinking, the "Grail" motif would be a Dicent Indexical Legisign. Peirce

describes this as analogous to a street cry, "Hey, you there!" Its three constituent parts are

respectively existence, reference, and law.

First, the Dicent quality refers to "a Sign, which, for its Interpretant, is a Sign of

actual existence."[6] That is to say, it exists in phenomenal actuality and could continue

doing so forever. The Dresden Amen existed in ecclesiastical practice long before

Wagner invoked it in his music drama, though it was there that it was canonized. Second,

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[6] Charles Sanders Peirce, "Elements of Logic," 144.

an Index is "a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object."[7] Thus it is the referential association between the church usage and the dramatic usage that makes the motif a metonymic index; the Amen stands for the church *and* the Grail. Third, a Legisign "is a law that is a Sign. . . . Every conventional sign is a legisign [but not conversely]. . . . Every legisign signifies through an instance of its application, which may be termed a *Replica* of it."[8] This most abstract concept can best be understood by its completely arbitrary nature. The Legisign is merely a principle of organization (a motif) which accumulates meaning through iteration.

Peirce wrote that a Dicent Indexical Legisign is "any general type of law, however established, which requires each instance of it to be really affected by its Object in such a manner as to furnish definite information concerning that Object."[9] Seven times the "Grail" motif is heard before the opening of the narration; only once did words associate it with the *Sang Real* (the "Royal Blood," i.e. the blood of Christ). By maintaining this ambiguity, Wagner presents multiple views of this singularity. The effect is to illuminate, as much as possible, the object cause of desire for Gurnemanz, the squires, and the community as a whole – the Holy Grail.

It is in the capacity of "object cause of desire" that the Grail represents another domain of semiotic interpretation. Since the entire matrix of relationships in *Parsifal* is tied to the place of the Grail in the drama, Wagner has created a prototypical community

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[7] Charles Sanders Peirce, "Elements of Logic," 143.
[8] *Ibid.*, 142-143.
[9] *Ibid.*, 148.

whose existence is inextricably bound to a single object. By turning this object into an objective (that is, a thing sought after), we have entered the realm of psychoanalysis – an area not unexplored by Wagner or Wagnerian research.

The "objective," according to French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, is an extension of the Freudian notion of the pleasure principle. Lacan postulated the existence of an "intruder which disturbs the harmonious circuit of the psychic apparatus run by the 'pleasure principle' . . . not something external to it but strictly *inherent* to it."[10] The "pleasure principle" does not care for the "limitations imposed by reality," but is ultimately superseded (via a series of cuts, "complexes," and interpolations) by the reality principle.[11] Thus, "our most 'natural' openness to reality implies that the prohibitions which exert pressure upon the inherent logic of the psychic apparatus have successfully broken it down and become our 'second nature'."[12] This reality-intruder, this denier of complete pleasure, is the *objet petit a* (the little *autre* or *other*). Lacan's own graphic representation of the *objet petit a* yields an interesting perspective:
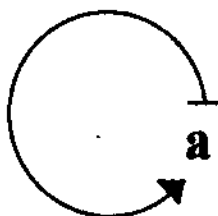
[10] Slavoj Zizek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 48.
[11] *Ibid.*, 47-48.
[12] *Ibid.*, 47-48.

In *Looking Awry*, Salvoj Zizek states that "The paradox of desire is that it posits retroactively its own cause, i.e., the object *a* is an object that can be perceived only by a gaze 'distorted' by desire, an object that *does not exist* [except] for an 'objective' gaze. . . . The object *a* is 'objectively' nothing, though, viewed from a certain perspective, it assumes the shape of 'something'."[13] This rather slippery definition, like the *a* itself, is continuously thwarted.

Turning again to the "Grail" motif, we see that its presence in the climax of the Act I narration helps clarify (for the audience) the object sought after, while simultaneously being the unobtainable *objet a*. Example 17 shows the final bars of the Act I climax revealing the "Grail" motif in its capacity as a standard cadential pattern.

Example 17: Act I, mm. 618-622.

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[13] Slavoj Zizek, *Looking Awry*, 12.

The music, however, does not cease at this point. As many have noted, the F♯ timpani roll provides a seamless transition to the next musical period, the story of Klingsor. Often we speak of evaded cadences or defeated expectation in terms of Wagner's musico-structural endings. However, at this point, we are given an imperfect authentic cadence as desired and expected. How can we then explain the full realization of the preceding bars (the sequence *cum* development of the "Grail" motif) with respect to the ensuing dramatic narrative? To do so, we return to the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan.

In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan provides a clearer definition of the *objet a*:

> The *objet a* is something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as an organ. This serves as a symbol of lack. . . . It must, therefore, be an object that is, firstly, separable and, secondly, that has some relation to the lack.[14]

The F♯ represents the *objet a* as it is separable (isolated from the preceding chord and presented by a percussion rather than a "melodic" instrument) and related to the lack (F♯ serves as tonic of the key area articulated by the "Dresden Amen" *qua* "Grail" motif). Furthermore, the F♯ key area had already been established across the narration, so that its resurgence here would trigger recognition, or at least reminiscence, in the listeners' minds.

Example 18 is the first tonicization of G♭ in the narration. Kundry's question

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[14] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 103.

"Sind die Tiere hier nicht heilig?"[15] ascends the familiar tetrachord accompanied by oboes and clarinets. Thus, the first hearing of the "Grail" motif in the narration corresponds to the first articulation of G♭. Moreover, this is the first time in the entire work that words are directly associated with the motif.

Example 18: Act I, mm. 383-385.

In Examples 19 and 20, Wagner uses pedal points and chromatic key exchanges as a means of emphasizing F♯. In Example 20, Wagner relates Gurnemanz, the Third

Example 19: Act I, mm. 401-404.

Squire, and the orchestra by the common pitch F♯. Besides the identical vocal register (F♯ in tenor and bass) a fully-diminished seventh on F♯ is followed by a German sixth chord, both of which share the F♯. This underscores the "great distress" of the text by using two

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[15] "Are the creatures here not holy?"

Example 20: Act I, mm. 454-458.

chords with unstable tendencies as the catalysts for dramatic action. Likewise, pivot tone

progressions are used in similarly unstable relationships often forming extended sections

of the narration. The first of these is used in the story of meeting Kundry. In Example

21, the F♯ is a pitch common to a fully-diminished seventh chord (built on F♯) and D

major. Later, the accompaniment is refigured as a half- diminished seventh chord and an

Example 21: Act I, mm. 567-571.

F♯ minor triad. This arching, Hydra-like line in the upper voice is the "Zauber" motif

heard here for the first time. By frequently using enharmonic modulations, Wagner

references his modulations in the listener's ear to create a degree of familiarity (one note

shared between two chords). This direct chordal connection, albeit tenuous, helps instill

the sense of expectation by articulating the point of commonality. For instance, the F♯ is

emphasized by timbral unity (timpani) in Example 19, and is isolated as the last note sung

by the Squire and the first note sung by Gurnemanz (both unaccompanied), Example 20.

Following the climax of the narration, however, *abrupt* modulations help defeat the

expectation previously created. This defeat of expectation is also discussed in Patrick

McCreless' article "Motive and Magic." In it, he shows the pivotal E/F dyad at the

climax of Act II is "prefigured" throughout Act I, thus making it "expected" as a

reference point. On a smaller scale, the inclusion of F♯s as a sonority in chord

progressions creates a familiarity that is fully reached in the climax of Gurnemanz's

narration.

The final F♯/G♭ passage situates the climax of Gurnemanz's narration. Beginning

in measure 570, Wagner changes the key signature to G♭ major, a goal not reached until

measure 581 in the elision of the "Grail" motif with the *Liebesmahl* theme (Example 22).

As Gurnemanz enlightens the squires to the nature of the Grail, the tonality shifts to the

subdominant (C♭) which is reinterpreted as B, the dominant of E that we reach in measure

591. The harmonic plan of this portion of the narration is outlined in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Harmonic plan of the climax of the Act I narration with corresponding measure numbers.

a♮/a	e♭	C♭	G♭	C♭	E (a)	D♮/A	B♭	D♭	A	F♯
565	570	575	579	591	592	599	602	605	608	615

Example 22: Act I, mm. 569-581.

Enharmonic modulations are used throughout; however, in the first half, they affect

modulations by fourths or fifths. In the second half, modulations move by thirds and thus

obscure the harmonic direction of the passage. This is most evident in the seemingly

disjunct juxtaposition of D♭ and A in measures 607-608. Here, without any intervening

chords, the two sonorities are heard one after another. If we view the augmented fifth (D♭

to A) as a minor sixth (C♯ to A), the progression becomes motion from mediant to tonic.

Further, the movement from C♯ (D♭) to A is carried to its fulfillment when another

submediant/tonic progression occurs (A to F♯). Wagner solidifies the symmetrical

relationship shared by these two progressions in his resolution (or lack thereof) in the

vocal line. Example 23 contrasts these two cadential endings. Though they share the

Example 23: Act I, mm. 606-607 and 619-620.

same harmonic rhythm (I^6_4 for two beats followed by V^7 for two beats) and the same

declamatory rhythm, the former resolves to tonic while the latter is left unresolved. It is

this non-resolution that manifests the very embodiment of lack -- lack of closure, lack of

sustenance and, ultimately, lack of redemption.

CHAPTER VI

WAGNER'S NARRATIVE STRATEGY

The narrative strategy employed in *Parsifal* is one of expectation running at times

parallel, and at times counter, to the drama on stage. This is self evident. However, a full

understanding of this process is not revealed until a system of narrative structure is

applied to Wagner's creative process. Using the Formalist theories of Propp, we have

seen how *Parsifal* conforms to the structure of a "wondertale." Further, Lévi-Strauss'

structuralistic reconstitution of Propp's theory into "bundles" of meaningful units can be

seen at the level of elided dramatic moments (i.e. the conclusion of Acts II and III). In

tandem with a "distributional" reading of the work, we have seen that an "integrational"

reading of a specific motif offers a semiotic realization not apparent in the structure alone.

A crystalline example of the confluence of functional, musical, dramatic, and

visual processes is seen at the beginning of Amfortas' lament in Act I (mm. 1298 ff.).

Here, we are presented the functional bundle of "lack of the magical agent" and "lament."

Amfortas relates the former in the lines: "Was ist die Wunde, ihrer Schmerzen Wut /

gegen die Not, die Höllenpein / zu diesem Amt verdammt zu sein!"[1] Though motivic

inflection is sparse, they are articulated to emphasize their presence. Indeed,

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[1] "What is the Spear-wound, all its raging smart, / compared to the pain, the agony / of being condemned to
serve this task!"

the first and last words are sung without orchestral accompaniment (mm. 1293-1293 and

1297). Such extreme timbral conservatism, rarely seen in Wagner, underscores the

"lack" function. Furthermore, the resolution by voice alone ($F\sharp^{o7}$ to E minor) finally

establishes the goal key, first articulated in measure 1280 (Example 24). The elision of

functions is facilitated by this clear cadential resolution, as the lament begins in E

Example 24: Act I, mm. 1280-1282 and 1296-1297.

minor. The first line of Amfortas' lament (Wehvolles Erbe, dem ich verfallen)[2]

illustrates a motivic transformation consistent with Wagner's emphasis of expectation.

Based on the descending minor third heard at Titurel's words "Muss ich sterben" (m.

1255),[3] this motif is a rhythmic inversion of the *Liebesmahlthema* (Example 25). The

exact repetition by the voice (mm. 1303-1306) reinforces this for the audience. Thus, by

creating a referential association to the opening of the music drama, the parallel opening

of Amfortas' lament unites the two and leads the listener to expect his interpretation on

the present situation. Finally, the entire lament (including Titurel's provocation) is

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[2] "Accursed birthright, through you I am cursed."
[3] "Must I die, then."

Example 25: Act I, mm. 1299-1032 and mm. 1-3.

temporally set apart from the Grail ritual it interrupts. Immediately before Titurel's first line, "Mein Sohn Amfortas,"[4] the youth, from the cupola, sing the texted "Glaubens" motif ending in E♭ major (here serving as dominant to A♭). Following Amfortas' lament, they enter with the "Perfect fool" motif (mm. 1404 ff.) now in D. The transition that follows, however, modulates back to E♭ major and concludes with Titurel's final words "Enthüllt den Gral!"[5] Thus Amfortas' entire lament, while more than 150 measure in length, is only a brief interruption of the continuing rite, a dream-like state where time

Example 26a: Act I, mm. 1241-1245.

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[4] "My son, Amfortas."
[5] "Reveal the Grail!"

Example 26b: Act I, mm. 1412-1418.

and space are null. What, then, can these two approaches illuminate with respect to a

narrative strategy at odds (on occasion) with the musical, visual, and dramatic

presentation? For the answer, we must turn to the very definition of narrative and

narrativity.

On the nature of this difference between narrative and narrativity, Teresa de

Lauretis establishes the following definitional intents:

> The object of narrative theory. . . is not therefore narrative but narrativity; not so
> much the structure of narrative (its component units and their relations) as its
> work and effects. Today narrative theory is no longer or not primarily intent on
> establishing a logic, a grammar, or a formal rhetoric of narrative; what it seeks to
> understand is the nature of the structuring and destructing, even destructive,
> processes at work in textual and semiotic production.[6]

This definition is situated in the context of "desire" in narrative. Specifically, that all

narratives seek, in their dependence on economic, social, and esthetic foundations, to

arouse and elicit the wants of the listener. If narrative is, as Roland Barthes described it,

"international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself,"[7] then we

experience them constantly, habitually, and (on occasions) liminally.[8] Thus, the

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[6] Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, 105.

[7] Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 106.

[8] The "liminal" is a perceptual borderline, neither conscious nor unconscious.

recognition of an underlying *desire* in narrative instantly allows for, and often demands, the response of expectation. Ultimately, it is within this context of expectation that we interpret meaning in *Parsifal*. Let us examine further the concept of narrative desire.

In *Parsifal*, that which is desired is made apparent from the very beginning. As with *Tristan* and *Meistersinger*, the music that follows the prelude (the "Sailor's Song" and the "Chorale," respectively) sets up the opposition of characters central to the drama vis-à-vis those "outside" the inner action. *Parsifal* is no exception. Though Gurnemanz's role is verbose, it in no way constitutes a part of the motivating triumvirate. Indeed, his very exclusion is necessary to articulate the lack experienced by the Grail community. Furthermore, there is an acoustical/spatial separation of music (as with *Tristan*) heard at the beginning, since the first motif played by the orchestra (the "Grail" motif) is the same as the off-stage reveille played by the trombones and trumpets. This off-stage/orchestra coupling is repeated sixteen bars later as the conclusion of this brief, dramatic preamble. Several differences contrast the two statements. In the latter presentation, Gurnemanz is not singing and, therefore, no words interrupt the elision between off-stage brass and orchestral woodwinds. However, in the first presentation, the words articulated during the one-bar "interruption" ("Hört ihr den Ruf?")[9] take on added significance as an interrogative not just for the squires but for the audience as well. The use of the "Grail" motif serves, in both instances, as an investment of meaning in this axial motif. Also, the timbral distinction between off-stage and orchestral sounds sets up a psychical move from the 'sonorous envelope' to the 'acoustic mirror,' a move

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[9] "Hear you the call?"

incumbent on recognition (for infants, of the mother's voice; for us, of the timbrally different "Grail" motifs) as its principal means of articulation.[10] Lastly, the opening words themselves "He! Ho!" formulate what Peirce has described as a Dicent Indexical Legisign and what we have classed as the "Dresden Amen" *qua* "Grail" motif. Here the emphasis is on indexicality, but its presence simultaneously reinforces the subjectification of the audience and the objectification of the music drama. In the presentation of thirty-two measures of music, Wagner has posited the audience as an "outsider" to the action on stage – an outsider whose desire will be fulfilled by the explication of the narrative itself.

The representation of desire manifest in the opening measures of Act I is portrayed through a timbral juxtaposition of motifs. On a larger (and more visual) scale, the very presentation of the Grail constitutes an instance of narrative desire. As we have noted earlier, the symbolic shift of 'sign' from stone to chalice was a conscious choice made by the composer. This shift would have repercussions when viewed in terms of the quest (in the archetypal sense) underlying the entire music drama. As with all quests, an opposition is immediately established between the seeker and the thing sought. This fundamental dichotomy is central to the narratological theories of Soviet semiotician Yuri Lotman. In his reassessment of Propp's thirty-one functions, Lotman reduces them to

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[10] Thus, the Grail is imbibed with the first of several feminine characteristics, the maternal voice. As Kaja Silverman points out in her book, *The Acoustic Mirror* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), "since the voice is capable of being internalized (the mother's voice is heard long before her face is seen) and at the same time is externalized (by age ten weeks, the child can recognize the mother's voice), it can spill over from subject to object and object to subject, violating the bodily limits upon which classical subjectivity depends," p. 80. In *Parsifal*, we are at first "blind" to the Grail's visage; thus it is the move from the purely musical (prelude) to the liminal (off-stage) to the aural (orchestral) and finally to the textual (Kundry's words) that completes the journey from the sonorous envelope to the acoustic mirror.

form a pair of functions "open at both ends and thus endlessly repeatable: 'entry into a closed space, and emergence from it'."[11] In her analysis of Lotman, de Lauretis gives the following explanation of the bipartite opposition:

> If the work of the mythical structuralization is to establish distinctions, the primary distinction on which all others depend is not, say, life and death, but rather sexual difference. In other words, the picture of the world produced in mythical thought since the very beginning of culture would rest, first and foremost, on what we call biology. Opposite pairs such as inside/outside, the raw/cooked, or life/death appear to be merely derivatives of the fundamental opposition between boundary and passage: and passage may be in either direction, from inside to outside or vice versa, from life to death or vice versa, nonetheless all these terms are predicated on the *single* figure of the hero who crosses the boundary and penetrates the outer space. In so doing the hero, the mythical subject, is constructed as human being and is male; he is the active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of differences. Female is what is not susceptible to transformation, to life or death; she (it) is an element of plot-space, a topos, a resistance, matrix and matter.[12]

In *Parsifal*, Wagner has represented the feminine obstacle (the Grail) in one of its most feminine embodiments (the chalice). To extend this analogy further, we can interpret the chalice as the morphological archetype (as defined by Lotman): the womb, an analogy confirmed (interestingly enough) by a citation from Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*.

As the heading to chapter sixty-six, Eco quotes a passage from the controversial book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*:[13]

> At the same time, the Holy Grail must have been, literally, the vessel that had received and contained the blood of Jesus. In other words, it must have been the womb of the Magdalene.[14]

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[11] Quoted in de Lauretis *Alice Doesn't*, 118.

[12] *Ibid.*, 119.

[13] Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (New York: Dell, 1983).

[14] Quoted in Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 377.

The observation proffered in *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* is one of a non-metaphorical "bride

of Christ," (Mary Magdalene) who could have founded a Messianic bloodline.

Extrapolating backwards, then, a vessel containing the savior's blood could also be

interpreted as the womb wherefrom he came (the Blessed Virgin Mary). Wagner's own

thoughts on the Virgin can be found in *Religion and Art*, where he establishes the

following paradigm:

> The mystery of motherhood without natural [explanation] can be traced to the
> greater miracle, the birth of God himself: for in this Denial-of-the-world is
> revealed by a life prefiguratively offered up for its redemption.[15]

W. Ashton Ellis clarifies this by citing Schopenhauer in a footnote from the same

passage:

> "The woman's share in procreation is more guiltless than the man's; for he
> bestows upon the child his *will*, which is the first sin, and therefore the root of all
> evil; the woman, on the contrary, bestows [her] intellect, which is the pathway to
> redemption. . . so that in the conception the Will is given afresh the possibility of
> redemption." On this hypothesis the *absence* (my emphasis) of a father, who
> bestows "Affirmation of the will," would be the "necessary miracle" conducting
> the birth of the redeemer.[16]

Wagner, in the course of *Parsifal*, has given us the "fatherless" redeemer. Like so many

of his fatherless-protagonists, Parsifal simultaneously reinforces the feminine essence of

the Grail as the "pathway to redemption" (Parsifal must return the spear to heal the

wound to restore the Grail – all for the redemption of Amfortas). It is this rigorously

determined sequence of events that characterizes *Parsifal* not only as a "wondertale" but

also, and foremost, as "myth" and "ritual."

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[15] Richard Wagner, *Religion and Art*, trans. William Ashton Ellis (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of
Nebraska Press, 1994), 218.
[16] *Ibid.*

We have seen how Formalist and Structuralist approaches to folktales and mythology have derived from similar treatment of their respective sources, namely the segmentation of a narrative into constituent units. This, in turn, advances understanding of how music fits into this archetypal paradigm. In the "Overture" to *The Raw and the Cooked*, Lévi-Strauss establishes the following relationship between myth and music:

> Myth and music share of both being languages which, in their different ways, transcend articulate expression, while at the same time – like articulate speech, but unlike painting – requiring a temporal dimension in which to unfold. But this relation to time is of a rather special nature: it is as if music and mythology needed time only in order to deny it. Both, indeed are instruments for the obliteration of time.[17]

Time and space are seamlessly related in *Parsifal*'s narrative episodes – a metaphysical singularity. Lévi-Strauss also discusses the fact that "music and mythology appeal to mental structures that the different listeners have in common."[18] Here, care must be taken not to confuse culture-specific structures (the "Dresden Amen") with overt musical gestures (deceptive cadences or diminished-seventh arpeggios). Umberto Eco, in proposing his "logic of culture," reminds us that context is, essentially, everything. It is within the particular context of late nineteenth-century Germany that we understand the "Dresden Amen" as the "Grail" motif.

Lévi-Strauss also postulates the relationship between music and ritual in a sequence of gradations, given to illustrate the movement outside of language. Associations exists

> between explicit mythology, which is literature in the full sense of the term, and implicit mythology in which fragments of discourse are bound up with non-

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[17] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 15-16.
[18] *Ibid.*, 26.

> linguistic actions, and lastly pure ritual which, in its extreme forms, can be said to lose all contact with language, since it consists either of sacred formulae – incomprehensible for the uninitiated, or utterances devoid of any intrinsic meaning, such as are often used in magic – or of physical movements or of the selection and handling of various objects. At this point, ritual, like music at the other extreme of the systems, moves right outside language.[19]

While not a definition of ritual, this is the recognition that there is a dependence on language and that, in advanced states, both music and ritual transcend language. How, then, can *Parsifal*, whose presentation is clearly bound up with language, be said to be a ritual? The answer lies in the sum total of the "Bayreuth experience."

In the beginning of the music drama, we have no foreknowledge of events. Indeed, it is Gurnemanz's narrative episode in Act I that supplies us with the requisite background information thus moving the audience from a state of "uninitiation" to one of full understanding (one of Lévi-Strauss' criteria for ritual). Following a teleological path, his episode reiterates the prophecy of a redeemer who will return the Grail kingdom to order. Through this process of initiation, we are lead to expectation. By creating the "always-already" redeemer Wagner further circumscribes the importance that expectation should carry for his audience. Finally, we must necessarily extend the metaphor of the chalice as womb to be the archetypal/architectural shape that will envelope his audience: Bayreuth as the space for which *Parsifal* is the *Bühnenweihfestspiel*. Acoustically, the audience is surrounded in a hall created for the sole purpose of experiencing this particular music drama. Here, time, space, drama, and narrative are one. As "audience," we have entered a ritual.

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[19]Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Naked Man*, 671.

The Grail ceremonies lie within the great symmetry of Acts I and III. In Act I, we watch *with* Parsifal as the rite unfolds and are unaware of its symbolic meaning. In Act III, we watch *as* Parsifal assumes the Grail throne, powerless to change the course of predetermined actions. Each ceremony emphasizes its nature as spectacle by virtue of its placement in the act (after a purposefully undertaken journey) and its necessary inclusion of spectators (the squires and the audience).

The entire "Bayreuth experience," the "pilgrimage" as many have called it, forms the exterior ritual which, like the building itself, circumscribes the on-stage ritual. This unique ritual-within-ritual further objectifies the audience as spectator: they come to watch *and* to be watched. This has long been a convention of all opera; however, in *Parsifal*, occasion, venue, and drama combine to create the total experience. Salvoj Zizek touches on this when he notes that the true nature of *Parsifal* is that of "a work whose ultimate accomplishment is to confer upon a Christian context the form of a pagan ritual."[20] He qualifies this with a footnote that for spectation in the music drama

> one must conceive of the notion of ritual in *Parsifal* in an appropriately broad way which exceeds by far the ritualistic enactment of sacred enjoyment (the Grail's disclosure): the very failure to perform the ritual properly is part of the ritual. Amfortas' lamentation, for example, is by no means a spontaneous outburst of unbearable suffering, but a thoroughly ritualized, "formalized" performance. The proof of its "nonpsychological" character is the finale of Act I: after Titurel's super-ego voice repeats the command "Disclose the Grail!" the unbearable pain miraculously passes and Amfortas is able to perform the required motions with no trouble at all. Far from being an exception, this reflective shift from the failed ritual to the ritualistic performance of a failure offers the key to the very notion of the ritual: "ritual" is originally, constitutively the formalized repetition of a failure.[21]

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[20] Salvoj Zizek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham : Duke University Press, 1993), 192.

[21] *Ibid.*, 278-279.

Understanding that the essence of ritual is this repetition of failure, we have in

Parsifal the ritual exposed. Zizek clarifies this notion in the concluding words of the

chapter "The Wound Is Healed Only by the Spear That Smote You," where he relates the

cyclic pattern of a boomerang to the very "drive" of a ritual.

> The boomerang thus designates the very moment of the moment of "culture," the
> moment when instinct is transformed into drive: the moment of splitting between
> goal and aim, the moment when the true aim is no longer to hit the target but to
> maintain the very circular movement of missing it.[22]

The circular movement in *Parsifal* is identified by the return of A♭ major, the key

in which it began. This anomaly (reserved for only one other work, *Der Meistersinger*)

returns the listener metaphorically and sonically to the beginning. This completion of the

circle unifies time and space. The *objet a*, in the form of the Grail, is now in the hands of

its new master. With expectation fulfilled, the narrative cannot continue; it must, as do

all rituals, begin again.

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[22] Salvoj Zizek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 199.

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