

ATU-Index For Story Inspiration



The ATU Index and Friends

The **Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index** (ATU Index) is a tool used by people studying folklore which categorises folk tales into a large number of different types by stripping them down to their basic motifs or plots. As the categories have descriptions of the various stories within them, it is a great resource for writers looking for inspiration from folktales.

Initially published in 1910 by Antti Aarne, a Finnish folklorist, the index was translated into English, expanded, and updated, by American folklorist Stith Thompson in 1928 and 1961. German folklorist, Hans-Jörg Uther further expanded it in 2004.

The ATU Index coverage is mostly folktales originating from Europe, North Africa, and North America. There is further work being undertaken to integrate tales from other cultures. But then, folktales with European origins are those we're familiar with. If you're looking to rework a classic folktale, you're likely to find it in here together with references to some of its lesser known variations. As far as the ATU Index is concerned a folktale is a tale or story that is part of the oral tradition of a people or a place. So "*Goldilocks and the Three Bears*" isn't anywhere in the ATU Index because it was written and published by 19th century English poet and writer, Robert Southey.

The ATU Index isn't the only such tool. Others include Stith Thompson's **Motif-Index of Folk-Literature**. If you're really looking to expand your coverage to folktales from other cultures, there are some good websites out there with collections of folktales, although not necessarily categorised.

Why You Might Use the ATU Index in Writing

There are many examples of re-tellings of some of the classic fairy tales in literature, movies, and games. Some have been sanitised for the family audience, others have been transposed into other genre and

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settings that challenge the reader to recognise the underlying motifs and themes that belong to a familiar folktale. The ATU Index and Motif-Index of Folk-Literature, can be used to see the key motifs that shape a particular tale, or can serve as a source for more obscure folktales to work from. In many cases, the Indexes will show that some stories can have multiple endings, or connect to yet other story types.

By using some of the motifs and descriptors an author can create their own tales that have a similar flavour to a folk tale.

Accessing the ATU Index and Other Similar Resources

If you want to go *old school*, the ATU Index and the Motif-Index of Folk-Literature are all available as pdfs from various websites. But there are also online databases if you prefer to access them that way. Here are some links;

The ATU Index

The ATU Index can be found as a three volume pdf from this website. <https://edition.fi/kalevalaseura>

The three volumes are;

- The Types of International Folktales – A Classification and Bibliography:
 - PART I: Animal Tales, Tales of Magic, Religious Tales, and Realistic Tales
 - PART II: Tales of the Stupid Ogre, Anecdotes and Jokes, and Formula Tales
 - PART III: Appendices

Motif-Index of Folk-Literature

Archive.org has all six volumes of the **Motif-Index of Folk-Literature** gathered into one large volume here;

<https://archive.org/details/Thompson2016MotifIndex/>

or more directly here;

https://ia600301.us.archive.org/18/items/Thompson2016MotifIndex/Thompson_2016_Motif-Index.pdf

You can also find scanned versions of several of the volumes on **Archive.org**, but they're a bit more clumsy to use than the compiled volume linked above.

Online

If you're after an online database of the same material and more, then go to the **Multilingual Folk Tale Database** <http://www.mftd.org/index.php?action=home> which also includes links to the text of some of the tales.

Another excellent resource is the **Ashliman's Online Folk Tales by ATU**

<https://libraryguides.missouri.edu/c.php?g=1052498>.

Navigating the ATU Index

The ATU Index lists the basic plots or central motifs of a vast number of folktales from various cultures categorised by overall plot type, each given an AT Number.

The seven main categories are;

Animal Tales	1-299
Tales of Magic	300-749
Religious Tales	750-849
Realistic Tales	850-999
Tales of the Stupid Ogre (Giant, Devil)	1000-1199
Anecdotes and Jokes	1200-1999
Formula Tales	2000-2399

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Within each main category are a number of sub-categories. For instance within the Tales of Magic, you will find.

Tales of Magic	300-749
Supernatural Adversaries	300-399
Supernatural or Enchanted Wife (Husband) or Other Relative	400-459
Wife	400-424
Husband	425-449
Brother or Sister	450-459
Supernatural Tasks	460-499
Supernatural Helpers	500-559
Magic Objects	560-649
Supernatural Power or Knowledge	650-699
Other Tales of the Supernatural	700-749

When Hans-Jörg Uther rejigged the system, he produced the ATU Index in three volumes, the third of which was an appendix with a Subject Index. In a way this works like a thesaurus for tales. For instance, if you wanted to find any folktales featuring harps, you would look up “*Harp*” and find two tales where harps are significant.

Harp. Bringing a living h. as impossible task 465, self-playing h. 328A.

Number 465 is under *Tales of Magic, Supernatural Tasks* and the particular tale is;

465 *The Man Persecuted Because of His Beautiful Wife.* (Including the previous Types 465A–465D.)

A man marries a beautiful young woman of supernatural origin: She is an animal bride (e.g. swan maiden [B642]) or she comes from God. She secretly keeps house for him. He discovers her and steals or burns her animal skin to prevent her from turning back into an animal.

An envious king coverts this beautiful wife and, on advice of an evil adviser (vizier, old woman) [H911], he gives the hero (three) impossible tasks to get rid of him [H931.1, H1211]: e.g. to build a castle or bridge in one night, to bring an exceptional baby (who understands 14 languages), to find a living harp [H1335], to harvest a field of grain in one night [H1090], to bring grapes in winter [H1023.3], to feed an army, to bring a huge tent that fits into one hand, to bring a very small (thumb-sized) man.

The man accomplishes two of the tasks with the help of his wife [H1233.2.1]. The last task often leads him to the otherworld, and it is accomplished by one of the wife's relatives who defeats the king.

In some variants the king finds out about the beautiful young woman from a picture [T11.2] that the hero carries with him. Cf. Types 313, 402, 471, and 531.

Combinations: 400, 569, and 882.

Remarks: Documented in the 7th century in China, and in the 8th century in Japan.

Literature/Variants: A very long list of variants of this tale which has been omitted here for the fact that it is very long and is more for the interests of folklorists.

and Number 328A is also under the *Tales of Magic* classification, but this time about a supernatural adversary. The particular tale is Jack and the Beanstalk.

328A *Jack and the Beanstalk.*

A poor boy named Jack trades his cow for some beans (his mother finds a bean while sweeping the house). One of the beans grows into a giant beanstalk [F54.2], which Jack climbs to an upper world where he finds the house of a giant.

The giant's wife gives him food and hides him when her husband comes home. The giant smells human flesh [G84] but his wife tells him he is mistaken [G532]. The giant eats dinner, counts his money, and then falls asleep. Jack steals the money and runs home down the beanstalk. He makes two more trips, stealing the giant's hen that lays golden eggs [B103.2.1] and his self-playing harp [D1601.18].

The third time, the harp cries out and awakens the giant, who runs after Jack. Jack reaches the bottom of the beanstalk and chops it down. The giant falls to his death, and Jack and his mother have plenty of money.

Remarks: The beanstalk as a ladder to the sky appears in an English tale from the early 18th century. The first version of the type is from 1807.

Literature/Variants: BP II, 511–513; Desmonde 1965; Humphreys 1965; Wolfenstein 1965; EM 2 (1979) 587; Opie/Opie 1980, 211–226; MacDonald 1982, No. F54.2.1.1*; Scherf 1995 I, 620–627; Goldberg 2001.

Norwegian: Hodne 1984, No. 328; English: Baughman 1966, No. 328B; German: Benzel 1962, No. 165; Hungarian: Kovács 1943 II, No. 74; Japanese: Ikeda 1971, No. 328; Australian: Jacobs 1898, 59ff., Baughman 1966, No. 328B, Briggs 1970f. A I, 316ff.; French-Canadian: Barbeau/Lancot 1926, 427ff.; US-American: Baughman 1966, No. 328B; West Indies: Beckwith 1924, No. 114; South African: cf. Grobbelaar 1981, No. 328.

Each tale type includes a description of the main plot points or motifs within the story and also shows the variations in details that exist. The numbers in square brackets refer to the Motif-Index. For instance the [B642] in the *The Man Persecuted Because of His Beautiful Wife* tale type has the Motif-Index entry;

B642. B642. Marriage to person in bird form. (Cf. B602, D150.).—Type 432; India: *Thompson-Balys.

The motif of stealing or destroying the wife's animal skin crops up in many stories from many cultures. It is one of the most widely distributed motifs in the world and thought to be quite ancient.

Other numbers refer to other story types within the ATU-Index. So, you can start pulling on one strand and soon find yourself being led all over the index, discovering weird and wonderful (or frightening) new tales you've never encountered before.

In the case of tale type 465, the title "*The Man Persecuted Because of His Beautiful Wife*." is descriptive rather than the title of a story. This is because there are a number of tales from different cultures which fit this pattern of motifs.

Using the ATU Index in Story Creation

Because the ATU Index descriptions distill folktales down to their basic motifs, this gives an author a great series of building blocks to work with should they wish to rebuild a folktale to match their own vision. The author can use the building blocks in such a way that there is no doubt in the mind of the reader that the story is a retelling of a folktale. They can also be much more covert, so that it is only after a reader thinks about the stories underlying plot that they can recognise the shape of the original folktale.

An author could select a known story they want to re-invent and use the ATU index to identify the critical motifs they will need to include as well as the more obscure variations that they may opt to use. Some of the ways they could change the treatment of the folktale, is by;

- changing the genre,
- or changing the point of view.
- Or changing the character's decisions and critical points.
- Or using different character behaviours and back stories to change the readers views on the characters.

For instance the type 465 "*The Man Persecuted Because of His Beautiful Wife*" tale could be told as an office based satire replacing the jealous king with a sleazy manager, the momentous tasks with ridiculous corporate requests. How the author handles a changeling main character in such a genre may be a challenge. But you get the idea. Alternatively the tale could be told from the point of view of the wife – how does she feel about being trapped in human form?

An author working from a familiar folktale may decide to re-pitch the ending of a classic folktale. There are numerous folktales with dubious take-away messages. Maybe an author feels like making them a bit more

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fair or holding the perpetrators to account through a court case. Would Jack be feeling so smug if he was tried for murder of the giant, and theft of his prize possessions?

The ATU Index and Motif Index are both grab-bags of story elements. An author could cobble together a new folk tale by gathering a selection of motifs and parts of story types and using them in a new pattern.

Writing Challenge

Take a wander through the ATU Index or Motif Index and see if there is a folktale you'd like to re-invent in some way or tell from a different point of view. Or you could choose a tale type or selection of motifs to build your own tale around in whatever genre or point of view you wish. The tales can be as obscure as you like.

References

- Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index – Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aarne-Thompson-Uther_Index
- Motif-Index of Folk-Literature – Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motif-Index_of_Folk-Literature
- A Casual Girl's Guide to Using the ATU Index: <https://retellingthetales.com/a-casual-girls-guide-to-using-the-atu-index/>
- The Types of International Folktales – A Classification and Bibliography:
- PART I: Animal Tales, Tales of Magic, Religious Tales, and Realistic Tales
- PART II: Tales of the Stupid Ogre, Anecdotes and Jokes, and Formula Tales
- PART III: Appendices
- Stith Thompson's Motif-Index of Folk-Literature



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