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A Tempest in a Teacup: Reading the Future in Tea Leaves

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Abstract

Much of the anthropological research on divination attempts to gauge its role in society, but the question remains: why is divination persuasive? An analysis of two tea leaf readings by a single reader shows that the fortunes bear a structural resemblance to folktales, with the client as hero. Like the plot in a folktale, the readings' predictions focus on the struggle to complete the tasks of the life course, often with the help of donors. Culturally, the readings persuade by reassuring us that life imitates art, while at the psychological level, they encourage us to sift through our thoughts for people and events that fit the storyline. This is the first known study to apply a Proppian structural analysis to divination narratives. It is also a human interest story—40 years in the making—about how a grandmother who lived through hard times in the Hudson Valley of New York State taught her college-educated grandson to read tea leaves. I conclude that folktale telling and tea leaf divination may spring from the same creative source. The findings support current theories about how and why divination persists in the modern world.

Key Words: *tea leaf reading, divination, morphology of the folktale, literary theory, structuralism, Vladimir Propp, syntagmatic, paradigmatic, cultural expectations, confirmation bias, pseudoscience*

Introduction

Tea leaf reading, or tasseography, has been a means of telling fortunes in the West since the importation of tea into Europe in the 1600s (Bramah 1972). In the United States today, tea leaf readings are conducted in earnest and for fun in a range of settings, from family kitchens, storefront parlors, and suburban offices to traveling circuses and county fairs. Readings are believed to divine the future, and although much of the anthropological research on divination has attempted to gauge its role in society, including its social functions (Espirito Santo 2019 [2023]), there is little to explain why divination is persuasive (Boyer 2020, 100). Why should anybody believe in predictions hidden in the leaves of a teacup? I show here that what intrigues us in a drama is, in fact, present in our tea leaves, too—if, with the tea leaf reader, we but have the eyes to see.

The desire to look into the future is distinctively human. We rely on our use of

symbols to envision things “beyond the horizon” of space and time. In life, we generally seek to avoid trouble and choose wisely among the available alternatives. Which road to take in an uncertain world? In ancient times, generals like Alexander the Great consulted diviners about when and where to fight battles (Arrian 1976, 289). Today, people consult tea leaf readers to get a glimpse of what might be coming down the pike, whether it's a marriage prospect or a rival at work or one of life's opportunities or pitfalls: we seek an edge. A tea leaf reading has an air of mystery. The forces at work in a cup are believed to be occult, and we look at readers askance for dabbling in an art fraught with danger. Churches condemn the practice as trafficking with the devil. Yet, a tea leaf reading has the allure of the forbidden, and the desire to know the future, and by knowing it, to control it can consume some people. The assurance of the reader and the atmosphere in the room can have a powerful

impact. The element of prophesy is heightened by the drama of the moment. We want to confirm what the reader sees—why else are we there? And, yet, hearing predictions is one thing; acting on them is something else. In his reckless pursuit of prophesy, Shakespeare's Macbeth brought destruction on himself and those around him. Consider his pronouncement on divination and on life: “Life is... a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing” (Mowat and Werstine 2013, 179). In an ironic inversion of Macbeth's verdict, Alfred Hitchcock had Doris Day sing a song that negated divination (“*Que Será, Será [Whatever Will be, Will Be]*”) in order to divine where her young son was being held captive in Hitchcock's film, *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (Hitchcock 1956). The boy hears her, whistles along, and is saved. The lyrics read in part: “When I was just a little girl I asked my mother, what will I be. Will I be pretty? Will I be rich? Here's what she said to me. *Qué será, sera*. Whatever will



From Dalrymple, Laurel. 2015. "For Centuries, People Have Searched for Answers in the Bottom of a Teacup." *The Salt*, NPR [National Public Radio]. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2015/09/01/434621010/for-centuries-people-have-searched-for-answers-in-the-bottom-of-a-tea-cup>. The caption beneath the graphic in this National Public Radio (NPR) feature on tea leaf divination reads, "The practice of reading tea leaves for insights had its heyday during the Victorian era, when fascination with the occult and self-analysis thrived." Photo permission to reprint: Science History Images / Alamy Stock Photo.

be, will be. The future's not ours to see. *Qué será, sera*. What will be, will be" (Day 1956).

The art of tea leaf reading

A tea leaf reading is not a free-form art. A reading has a structure and tells a story, and like a story, it operates according to a set of rules. The hero of the story is the client, and the story moves from where the client is now to where he or she will be in the future. The journey is mapped out in the symbols the reader discerns in the clumps and specks of wet leaves left in a teacup after the tea is drunk.

This study revolves around a single tea leaf reader, my grandmother, so it's both personal and professional, and the data on

which it's based was gathered many years ago. I conducted the research as an anthropology graduate student in 1976, when I was 26 years old and my grandmother was 74. I discussed the project back then in a seminar at Indiana University. As of this writing (2023), I am 73. My grandmother lived to be nearly 90, and passed away in 1992. At the height of my grandmother's career, she was telling fortunes for about 30 people, including many relatives and friends. I knew a lot of her clients. I was intrigued by her talent, and when I asked her what the trick was, she offered to teach me her methods. I quickly accepted.

My grandmother first learned about tea leaf reading from her paternal grandmother,

an immigrant from Norway. When she was a teenager, a woman called "Tea Leaf Mary" read her leaves at a county fair in upstate New York, and it changed her life. Mary's predictions led her to the man she married, my grandfather. I'll call my grandmother Amy Smith, a pseudonym, and I'll use fictitious names for most of the other people mentioned in this paper.

Who was Amy Smith?

Amy was born in 1902, and grew up in Orange County, New York, in a small town outside of a railroad hub north of New York City. Her mother was American, of English descent, and her immigrant father left Norway as a child with his mother.

Amy was one of eight children. Her father changed his last name to his Irish-sounding middle name before the children were born, the better to get a job through local politics as the railroad constable, and he went about the train yard armed with pistols. He cut quite a figure in an old photograph from the local archives. In the caption, he was called, “Two Gun Larry.” When Amy was in her early teens, the family moved north to an onion farm that her father had been hired to manage. It was located not far from Albany. In January 1919, her mother died of pneumonia during the Spanish flu epidemic, and shortly afterward, her father left for California, looking for work in the motion picture industry. Decades passed with no word from him. He only returned to visit in 1949. Amy had a younger sister who was about 6 at the time he left. She was raised by the eldest sibling in the family, another daughter, then in her early 20s.

Amy thought that her father wanted to work in Hollywood. I wondered if it was in Westerns, because he played the part of constable in real life and actually did wear guns. Larry passed away shortly after he returned to California from his New York visit. His death certificate listed a Los Angeles hotel as his residence and “realtor” as his line of work. After not hearing from him for so many years, Amy had received him cordially, but she told me she wished he’d never come back.

Amy met my grandfather, Henry Smith, when she was around 16, and he was about two years older. It was near the end of the First World War. Henry was from Massachusetts. He left college to help bring in the harvest on my grandmother’s farm, part of the war effort. Many of the farm hands were away in the military. At the end of the season, however, Henry returned home, where his family owned a hotel. Shortly afterward, with her mother deceased and the family fragmenting, Amy traveled to Massachusetts to be with him, and marriage soon followed. She was 17 at the time. They moved back to New York State later with three young children in tow. Henry got a job as a truck driver and drove

a regular route over the mountains between eastern New York and western Massachusetts. They raised their family on his wages and were married for nearly five decades. Henry died at the age of 64 in 1964. All three children, including my mother Elsa, lived to be over 90.

For many years, Amy’s world revolved around her husband, the children, and several of her siblings and their families. Tea leaf reading was put aside. Once the children were raised and married, and after Henry passed away and widowhood stretched before her, the old fascination returned. She never forgot Tea Leaf Mary, her reader at the county fair.

Amy Smith (AS): Tea Leaf Mary told me... I had two fellas... going with two guys and their names both started with ‘H.’ One lived in New York State, and one lived out of state... really, she told me this. She said the one that’s here you’re going to have a hard time getting away from... he had an awful temper... and I didn’t like him, anyway. I had to go with him, he lived next door to us, and my mother thought he was the one, you know... So she [Mary] just said that I was going to marry the one out of state. And that when I went there, I wouldn’t know anyone, and I was going to a white house, and there would be a lot of people in it. And that’s mostly it [that is, that’s how it happened]. Then she said... of course, at that time my father I didn’t know where he was... he had left... and she said well, someday I would know where he was living, and we did. It was 28 years before we heard from him....

Amy was in her early 60s when she began to study the leaves in earnest. She read a booklet about tea leaf reading put out by one of the tea companies—she thought Tetley or Salada. She said it must have been written by someone who knew the leaves, because the symbols matched the ones her grandmother taught her. She also read an article about the leaves in the Sunday newspaper, and she made a point of saying the story was written by an American Indian. In American spiritualism, there is a belief that Native Americans are attuned

to the spiritual world and make good “spirit guides” (Berry 1995). Amy shared this view. The fact that a Native American woman described the symbols lent greater authority to the newspaper article.

AS: “She had this write-up about the symbols and, you know, how you read it. And I know I kept it, because I referred back to it lots of times, just like I did with the little book.”

Putting together what she learned in her younger days with her research into the leaves, Amy began to try her hand at deciphering cups. She found she had a knack for it, and in time, the word spread about how good she was. Suddenly, she and her sessions were in demand. The leaves drew people to her in a special way. Amy had found a calling. She’d become a star.

AS: “[Now, for me. I’d done it] maybe 10 years. I’d only tell [for] the family. Then, everybody tells me how good I am, so everybody comes to me. I had 28 to Jean’s in the Catskills, 28!”

Amy read leaves for friends and family without charge, though food was usually served at the sessions. It was suggested that she read for patrons at a restaurant in Florida, possibly in exchange for meals. She considered doing it but held off. She thought it might require a license. We did not discuss typical fees paid for tea leaf readings done in parlors.

How to prepare a cup

A tea leaf reading has the appearance of a social visit—two people meeting over tea and getting acquainted, but this is no mere exchange of pleasantries. The reader is getting a sense of who the client is and where he or she *wants* to go and is *likely* to go. Gender, age, general appearance, married or single—all of that is taken in. The *manner* of the client is important, too: trusting or skeptical, confident or anxious, quick or measured? A staid society matron’s fortune will likely differ from that of an unattached working girl. And, there is the business aspect. The reader is in charge and provides a service. The client has taken a real step just by coming in. Readings arise from a



Amy and Henry Smith circa 1938. The sketch from an old photograph is by Erin Cahill, the author's daughter. Courtesy of the author.

mountains, and, you know, things you have to jump around to. [I don't do it that way.] But this, if you keep it all on one side, it will spread out if it wants to, you know, as you drink it. You do just like you drink. Just drink it, so that it comes up out of the bottom. What's on the bottom is usually bad news or... things... hills you got to go over. You don't have to have those. That will go there if it's got to go, it will go. Now, when you put the cup, you know what you do? You put it upside down... you put the handle near you.... And I want it to drip. I don't like to tell with drips in it. If I don't let that drip, [it's] going to have tears come down. But if you let it stand... for a few minutes and let it dry out, then if water comes out of it, then you'll find that there's going to be tears or that there's going to be something.... And it's surprising how that tear will come, if it's going to come.

How to interpret symbols

There are online guides to tea leaf reading that feature long lists of symbols to look for in the tea leaves (Goodwin 2021), as well as a storied 19th-century guide to the art (A Highland Seer 1881). Many of the symbols are motivated. They resemble the object they represent. For example, a reader might see the shape of a bird—a bringer of news—in the outline of the leaves. Other symbols are more conventional in appearance. A good example would be a “home”—the place where you live or will live—represented simply by a large mass of leaves. One by one, the symbols in a cup are identified and interpreted.

I asked Amy if flowers were good symbols.

AS: It depends on how many. Some flowers, like a four-leaf clover or a bouquet of flowers, are good signs. But too many flowers could be a funeral. If the flowers are wilted over, too, it's not a good sign. It's like something is built up and falls over. If you see a tree with the roots and branches and all, it's like the person is going to branch out. Or, like a maple leaf is a good omen. Also, if you see a spade in a cup, it's a symbol of death. It may be that the person will die. Or if the spade is not connected with

medium—the tea leaves—and there is a proper way to prepare the medium so as to get a correct fortune. Loose tea of the right consistency—not too coarse, not too fine—is steeped in a teapot. The tea is then poured into the client's cup; the wet leaves from the pot flow along with the tea. In the course of conversation, the tea is drunk and the cup is drained, and a trail of leaves is left from the bottom of the cup to the rim. The client then turns the cup over and around three times while making a wish. The number three is widely considered to be magical (Lease 1919).

Amy explained:

AS: Loose tea makes better tea and you don't have a lot of little pieces in it... and then, some is mixed with herbs and they're too big.... When you drink tea, you take it and you go like this... and then, you put it down. [She motions with the cup, as if bringing it to her lips, sipping, and then returning it to the saucer in one motion.] And the last bit you take and you do it so, so it's all on that side. You're not supposed to swish it around or, you know, let it sit on the bottom. Some say to roll it around, and then, that makes

anything, not near the house, it may be that a death will occur further away from the immediate family. If it's connected with the house, it's a death in the immediate family. Henry's sister used to read cards, and she saw a spade in Theresa's cards [Amy's sister]. That was in July, and Theresa died in December. [Note: Theresa was shot and killed by a man who claimed she owed him money and with whom she may have been romantically involved.]

"*Look for the wish*": Amy said it was important to spot the wish, the largest opening to be found in the leaves. She said to note the size: a big hole means a big wish, and a fully enclosed hole means the wish will come true. If the opening has a break, it means the wish will either not come true or come only partly true.

"*Look for the home*": Amy said that the home is the biggest mass of leaves in the cup. It's a key symbol because it represents the client and it helps anchor the reading. Other symbols appear in and near it. You look around the home "to see what you want to know."

"*What it means*": It is one thing to identify a symbol—a leaf stem, for example, can represent a person. It's another to know what a symbol means in a fortune. Sometimes, the reader will provide the details based on its appearance or location in the cup. Sometimes, the details are left for clients to fill in as they *sift through* their lives to see what might fit with the symbol. A fit is experienced as a *discovery*. For example, a reader might say, "I see two stems here, two people in your life," to which the client might reply, "Well, I've got two really good friends; they're my neighbors"—to which the reader might add, "Yes, they're close to you, I can see that, because the stems are right here, next to your home."

"*You can make more out of it*": A symbol is a symbol is a symbol—until it becomes another symbol. Shapes in the leaves may evoke one symbol at a given point in the reading, but the same shapes, when viewed from another angle, can evoke a different symbol at another point. Thus, tea leaf configurations can be multivalent in terms of what they represent.

Amy appreciated strong eye contact in a client, which she said helped her interpret the meaning of the symbols, and which I took as an indication that the sitter was "into" the reading—suspension of disbelief can help create this momentum. Amy had to be careful, however, because a stare could work both ways. She was reluctant to read one client's leaves—he wanted it done weekly—because his eye contact was so strong that she felt he might be reading her thoughts, something she sought to avoid in case the fortune had bad portents that she wanted to soften. As she put it—he "seemed to be looking through me."

Fortunes and tales

Two of Amy's fortunes are set forth below. Her words convey what she was like as a person. The sound of her voice would come through clearly to anyone who knew her in real life. The initial reading is presented in detail using a sketch of the leaves and a transcript of what Amy said about them. The second reading is also presented in transcript, but without a sketch. Amy's techniques for reading symbols are **bolded** in the transcripts to highlight them. To show how the fortunes resemble tales, both are then summarized using a method that the Russian folklorist V. Propp applied to a body of European folktales to reveal their underlying structure (Propp 1958). Propp's folktale morphology was initially published in Russian (*Морфология Сказки*) in 1928. The literary critic Dmitry Olshansky observed about Propp:

[His] research on fairy-tales achieved world recognition as the first application of structuralism to the humanities, and created the foundation for new disciplines, such as narratology, semiology, and structural anthropology. Umberto Eco considers that 'Saussure + Levi-Strauss + Hjelmslev + Propp drew up the method... that is known as structuralism.' (Olshansky 2008)

The method has been used to critique a range of popular culture media productions, including the *Star Wars* movie (Portlock-Thorogood 2015), as well as *Harry*

Potter, and the TV show, *Sons of Anarchy* (Sampson 2015).

Cup #1: The first cup that Amy read was difficult in that she was not just *telling* a fortune but *teaching* me how to read leaves—that was hard enough. She was also doing it with my then 26-year-old wife's cup, which made it even trickier. My thought was to have my wife be the assistant, but this had a hidden drawback. Although I viewed her cup as a *sample* and the reading as a *performance*, it was something different to Amy. It was a glimpse into my wife's future, and that future would affect me as the husband, perhaps in ways I might not like. That was a risk, and I believe Amy tried to minimize it by tilting the reading in my direction. Now, the symbols in my wife's cup might apply not just to her but to me. In this way, the possibility of competing destinies was in some measure taken off the table. This is a good example of how the presence of an observer can alter what's observed. I didn't appreciate the effect that my being there was having until after the reading got underway. Here is the fortune as Amy related it:

AS: Now, starting right off, your wish (A) is coming true [**"Look for the wish"**]. Now, don't tell it, don't say anything. But it's on the bottom of your cup, and it might mean that it might be a little hard to come by. You're going to have a little hard time getting it, but it's coming, and it won't be, say, right away. It won't be real quick, but it's coming, and it was kind of a big wish. And it's something that... it almost opened up that you weren't going to get it. But somehow there's someone working for you or somebody has done something for you, that this is going to come to what you want. It's something that you wished for, that you want, and somebody is helping you get this wish.

And now your home is.... See, you have two homes (B, C). When there's two homes, there's two places... two big symbols. So, the one symbol on the bottom is down where your home is [when you do have a home]. But up here on the top [nearer the rim], you still have another little place where

you are [now]. Here, here... you see, Michael? When there's two big things, that means there's two homes, see that?

Now, this is her wish, right there. That's a big... always enclosed hole. But it almost cracked open. And that means it would only partly come true. It didn't crack all the way, so it is coming true.

Now, you have right around here, where she is now, where she's living, there's something coming in moneywise (D) ["all this little stuff, specks"] and it's coming a lot easier than it has. It's coming down and around, and it's coming into... and some way, it's coming very easy, I don't know—[could be] that you might find somewhere along the way... [or] where you're going to get more in the way of maybe a raise or working more hours, or something like that.

It looks like that someone is speaking or talking right here now, see? See that,

see here? That thing there...somebody's hand is out. On the top symbol, see it. That's somebody that's speaking and getting up and letting out something that they want to talk about (E). It looks like something connected with you. So it could be that he [me] might get up and give a talk, something like that, or it would be that somebody would ask you if you want to say something...

Now, can you see these things that I'm showing you? There's the man with the hand up, or it could be a man or a woman, because the head is big, but I'm thinking it could be concerning you because it's got hair, you know, a lot of hair...and it's speaking with authority. [Note: I had a head of hair in those days; not so today.] In other words, you get up, and you have your speech, see here?

Now, also, here I got a bird, see the bird (F)? There's the bird, and see the

wing? ...That means good news. That always brings good news to you, and especially if the wing is out. If the wing is down, it might be that you hear sickness, or the tail is down.

Now, here's a symbol over here. This is connected with the house yet. This looks like a cat or a dog. Now, you see the dog (G)—the dog's tail? Now, this is a big dog, but this dog is protecting this house. It stays there and protects everything, all there. It's on the outside looking in... because it's connected with this house. So, he's seeing this. So that means that he's protecting all and everything around, so that would be either this house or that house. It's wherever you live, because, you know, this is her fortune.

So, now that's one, two, three, symbols you got. There's the man speaking, there's the dog, and this is the bird,

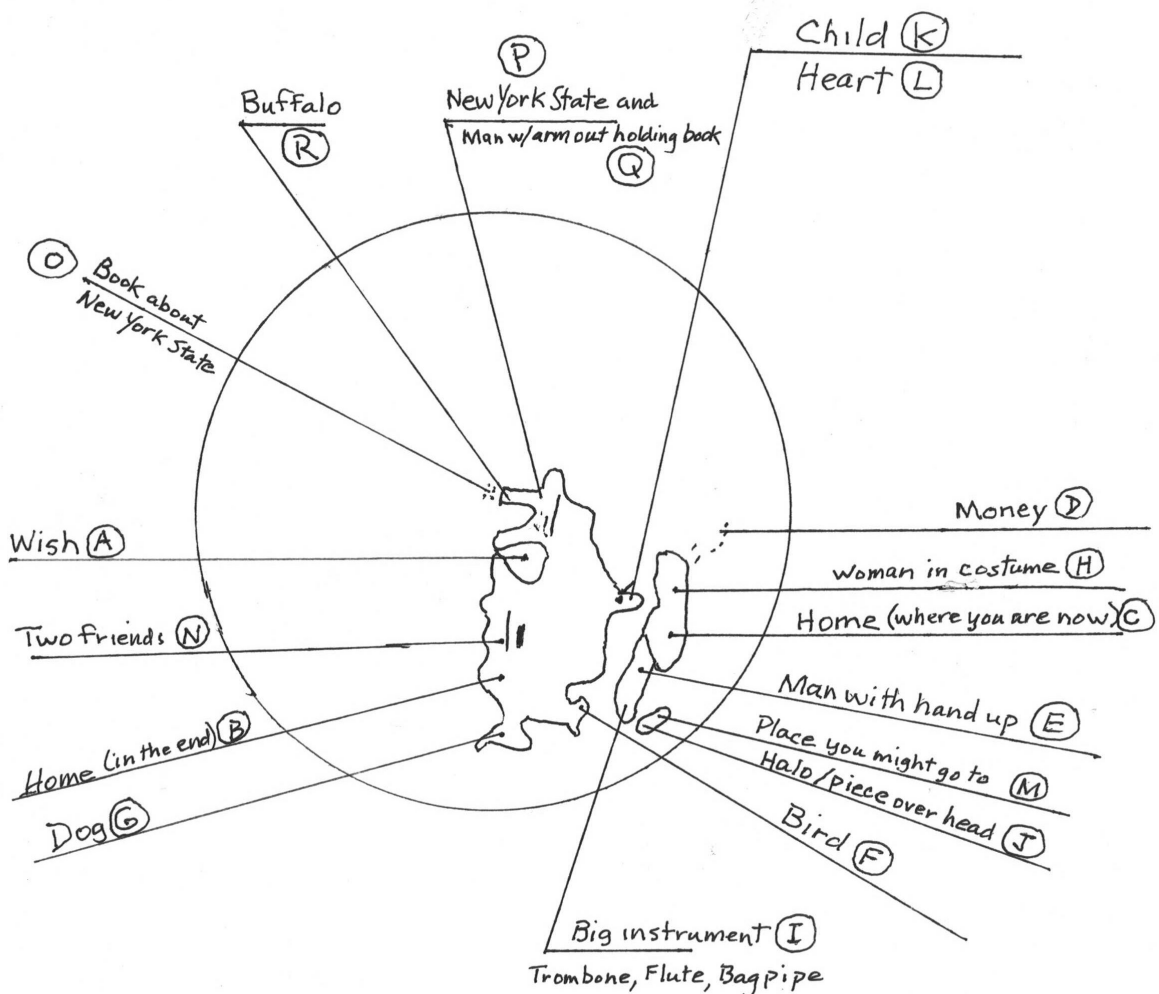


Figure 1: Identification of symbols is approximate. The tea leaves were sketched by eye at the time of the session. Where Amy saw a few of the symbols, like the "man with hand up," is a best guess. The "two friends" were tea leaf stems, one long and thin, the other short and thick, inside the "home in the end." Illustration by the author.

[and you got the money]. So that's good news. And this is a dog or a cat. A cat isn't as good news. But any kind of animal that you can make out of it is always good in your cup, and letters also, or numbers, and I don't see any numbers yet.

Now, what I'm trying to make out of there.... This is still where you live, but you still make something out of it, just the same. Because you're going around this place. You're going around this to find out what you want to know [*“Look for the home”*]. Now, there, where this is, there's somebody that has music. And it's sort of a big thing—now see, see a person here—say this is the head. There's a piece of music, you see it. So, it's somebody that plays music (H), and around you, and you might be interested in whoever it is and interested in that part. Or she, too, because it's her fortune.... And, also this means that you could be taking up any kind of music yourself. You might be taking up something that you like to do. So, it looks like a trombone or it could be a flute.... It could be anything. It's a big instrument (I), though.... They dress in a kind of costume from another country—that they wear around the school.... It could be any person, they dress funny. That's the way they look to me. [*Question: Is that symbol you're pointing to now both a house and a person?*] Yes, it could be both. This is not a house; it's where you are now.... Now, what I was going to tell you about this person, is that they have... they're very... seems to me that they're—because they're in your cup—they're more fond of you, to teach you or tell you about something.... Also, she has this piece over her head (J), that she is very talented. She knows a real lot, that she could help an awful lot.... See... because she's got it up, and she's all dressed up, and she's like... she's playing and really meaning it. It still could be a man, you know, dressed up like that, if they dress like that. [*Wife: I can only think of one person that we know who dresses in Native dress and plays the flute and Irish bagpipes, Wendy*]. Well, see, that could be it, because, see, there's the long thing and the bag [*“What it means”*]... but that's the way they hold it. They hold a bagpipe like this, don't they? They squeeze it, or something? [*Wife: Yeah*] Yeah, that could be it.

Now, there is forming now, see this... a child (K)—on the top of this house. But that means that that is not going to be until you are settled in the home. The child... and that this is the only one. Now, there's a little thing, a speck, that's a heart (L) and, see, it's almost shaped like a heart. And you see that? And that means that there's love in the home, and there's contentment, and like that. When you have it, it's between the two. And everything is in harmony and like that. And also, that she... it shows that she knows how to make this come about. She doesn't have this outward [quick] speech. She thinks things over, and she does it slowly and nothing irritates her. If it does, she doesn't come out with it. That's what keeps the harmony.

Now here, see it here, is two places. Now this is a place because it's a little bigger than some of the things. This is a place that you might go to (M). When you want to do something or when you're through school or maybe before you're through school. And she will be with you, but she is going to find something there before you. Because it's her cup, and being that it's her cup, she is going to find something that might help you. But she's going to find it before you do.

Now, let's see what we can find over here.... Now, there's two people (N) and that's connected with the home... when you actually come to your own home. And one looks very tall and thin, and the other one is more short and stocky. They'll come to your home, and they'll always be friends to you.

... Something to do about a book. [*Note: The transcript has a disjunction here. The topic seems to shift abruptly to the book about New York State. Whether this was due to a jump by the reader or a gap in the transcript, and I missed something, I cannot determine.*] See, that you are working on some kind of a book, and that you're helping... with a book. Here's the book. See the book? There's the hand. That's the hand: see the hand with the book? And you might be helping that person with the book. Or, you could be writing it. In other words, you got something to do with it. It's in your cup. Do you notice how this is a symbol of a map? This is a New York State map, really. So, this is, well, it's something to do with

whatever, if it's him (Michael) writing it, it's something to do with everything around.... It has something to do with the state (O). The book's just the same as the state [*“You can make more out of it”*]. See the map of New York State there (P), too? Now, there's the state of New York, see? See how it comes up? Now, there's the arm with the book on it (Q). You see where the top part of the state is? It comes down, and then it goes out. And then, it goes up around here where Buffalo (R) is, over here. See, that's the state of New York. That could mean that the book, when you write it, that she or you (Michael) or both of you, might have your name in it, because you're from New York State. So, I'm only going by this because I can see that New York State... it could be another state. I don't know what Indiana state looks like. Now, Indiana might be this way, and it would look like Indiana. Is it Indiana-shaped? It could be like Indiana....

I don't see really no sicknesses... no sickness... because that would be on the bottom. You have no problems, I mean worries. You might have problems, anybody has... but I mean, there's no sicknesses. That's why I say you try to get them off the bottom of your cup, because any little speck down there means some “upsetness,” some little discouragement, or something that makes you feel upset. So, that's all I really can tell you.

Morphology of tea leaf readings

The characters and topics in this reading recall several of the dramatis personae and a number of the 31 plot components, or functions, outlined in Propp's folktale morphology (1958, 58). Reducing and simplifying a painstaking and detailed analysis, the protagonists in Propp's tales:

- sense a lack and set off on a quest to fill or liquidate the lack;
- may receive help, sometimes from a donor (for example, a magical agent or magical object); and
- sometimes after proving their worth (a test), which they may use to defeat a villain or complete a difficult task, gain a reward.

Propp noted that tales can get quite complex (1958, 83). In a single story, a protagonist can encounter a number of different donors, be tested in different ways, and receive different kinds of help. A hero can defeat several villains and complete a host of difficult tasks before gaining the reward, typically, a wedding, a kingdom, or a fortune. Propp used the term, “move” (in Russian, ход), to describe the progression from a lack or villainy through intermediary functions to a wedding or reward (Propp 1968, 39). This is the same word used for a chess move in Russian, and it aptly describes the clever moves and counter-moves often found in folktales. Propp stressed that the function of an action is based on the effect it has on moving the plot forward. Thus, the solving of a riddle can function as a test of worth if it results in the receipt of help for further seeking, or as the completion of a difficult task or the defeat of a villain if it results in the acquisition of the sought for reward.

Propp showed that while not every function appears in every tale, the ones that do appear have been observed to follow a sequence. That the functions occur in sequence indicates that they have a *syntagmatic* relationship to one another, like the subject–verb–object sequence in a sentence. Marriage does not precede the defeat of the villain or the completion of a difficult task; it follows them. Otherwise, the story would make little sense. That disparate actions can perform the same function shows a *paradigmatic* relationship. Heroes can defeat villains by outwitting them or overcoming them in battle. The effect is the same; the villain is vanquished. The paradigmatic nature of the functions in tales is a reason why stories with widely different actions can still *feel* very similar.

Let’s apply this functional approach to the tea leaves. If the ultimate goal in tales is to win a spouse or a kingdom, do readings feature something similar? Arguably, they do. The chain of symbols in a cup may take clients through the challenges of their salad days to a rosier future, and along the way, important people may show up to

provide help. This sequence, which is illustrated in the first reading, closely resembles the move that Propp outlined for folktales. And, the same issue is at the root of both a tale and a reading: a lack. Amy placed special emphasis on two symbols: the wish and the home. You wish for something you want, but lack: financial success, marriage, or the birth of a child, for example. Your dream home is also something you may lack now but look forward to having some day.

As in folktales, so, too, in the readings, the function of an action depends on its effect on the fortune. To classify a predicted benefit, for example, the question becomes: Is it an end in itself (a sought-for reward) or a means to an end (help in gaining a reward)? In a similar way, does meeting a challenge yield assistance for further seeking (passing a test) or result in the sought-after reward (completion of a difficult task)?

A functional summary of Cup #1:

1. My wife has “someone working for her” (**donor1**) who will provide assistance (**help1**) in getting her big, hard-to-get (**difficult task1**) wish (**reward1**).

2. My wife will find, earn, or merit (**test1**) more money (**help2**).

3. My wife or I will deliver a speech (**test2**) that gets us noticed (**help3**).

4. A “little bird” (**donor2**) will bring good news (**help4**).

5. A “big dog” (**donor3**) will provide protection (**help5**) for the home (**reward2**) that my wife will eventually acquire (**difficult task2**).

6. A costumed performer (**donor4**) will impart wisdom (**help6**).

7. My wife’s restraint will keep the harmony (**difficult task3**), which preserves her marriage (**reward3**) and is followed by birth of a child (**reward4**).

8. My wife will travel (**test3**) and find something helpful (**help7**).

9. Two people (**donors5**) will come to the house and provide friendship (**help8**).

10. My wife will write or help with (**difficult task4**) a book (**reward5**).

11. My wife will handle problems (**difficult task5**) and remain free of sickness (**reward6**).

Let’s count the functions by category to fully appreciate their importance. The reading says my wife will do the following in the course of getting her wish:

- **encounter five donors:** “someone working for her,” a “little bird,” a “big dog,” a “talented performer,” “two friends;”

- **use eight helps:** inside assistance, money, notoriety, good news, protection, wisdom, something found in her travels, friendship;

- **pass three tests:** earns money, delivers a speech, travels and finds help;

- **complete five difficult tasks:** gets her wish, acquires a home, maintains harmony at home, writes or helps with a book, handles personal problems; and

- **gain six rewards:** her wish, a home, a stable marriage, a child, a book, good health.

Cup #2: The second cup was mine. It was read following my wife’s cup in the same session.

AS: Well now, there’s your wish. But see her wish was like a round one. Yours has got two things coming up on it... It’s like a bridge or a mountain. I think the wish has something concerning what you are trying to do, that you’ll make that goal. You know, that you’re climbing up to that goal [**“Look for the wish”**].... Now, you see what else you can see. You have to pick it up in your hand and turn it around, like this. Now, what does that look like? Now, I’ll see if you see what I see. I see like the head of an animal. It could be like a bear.... Any animal that you can get in the cup is always good. So, you look for an animal... you can make one. Now, off that animal’s head, you can see the little pieces? Well, that means that whatever he does, he’ll make money. It’ll come. It will be little dots, see them? Three of them. Three different ways he’ll make it, when he goes. [*Wife: So the money has to do with around the animals?*] Not just around an animal, but wherever you can make it. But if it’s around an animal, it’s better. But that’s an omen.... And over here, there looks like a scythe. Or you

could also make a letter out of it Well, it could be an “f.” [*“You can make more out of it”*] So you have to figure that out. So, there’s something that concerns and also has a cycle [harvest cycle]. See, a scythe. I saw a scythe there first, so it’s in a cycle of something. You know how that little scythe cuts stuff? Well, that’s the scythe, but then if you look at it, it could be the letter “f.” [*Me: Could be “Folklore”?*] It could be, that’s right. You might not do it now, but you’ll do it later. And the cycle you do it in, it’ll still be good. You know, if you don’t take it now, in another cycle of time, and you’ll make it better maybe. . . .

Now, on the top, right on the top of the house, there is something coming out of it [*“Look for the home”*]. It looks like a chimney. . . . or it looks like a little animal, with a little tail, see how the tail comes out of it? Now, this is a crawling animal. Now, that is not as good, a crawling animal. So this means that you have someone around you that you have to watch out for. In other words, he’s kind of a person that’s underhanded. On the surface, he might be great to you. But underneath, he’s doing something not so right, not so good. For his own good, he’s doing it. Not that he doesn’t like you, but to make his own self look better. So, in other words, watch him because he might do something wrong and blame it on you. But actually, it’s not that he wants to do it, but he wants to make himself look good, but he’s not as good. This is like a little mouse or something, he’s kind of a mousey little thing. He’s really smart. He’s smart, but he’s going to get caught if you watch him. That’s what you have to do, watch him.

Now, you know what I told you about the tall man before? There he is. He’s right there. . . . [Oh!] See the tear coming out of there? There it is. You’re going to feel bad about something. That means you’re going to feel a little bad about something. That could not mean much. It doesn’t mean that much [*Me: Pretty good sized tear, though.*] Well, it hasn’t all come out yet, but it isn’t that bad. Of course, I probably wasn’t holding it right. But now, what was I saying. . . . [*Wife: About the tall man.*] Yeah, the tall man, here he is. He’s very tall, but he has something over you. . . . I mean, he has power over you. . . . to do in any way. That he can help you. He can help you in any

way you want to be helped. He’s. . . well, he’s taking it really to you. . . . And he’s going to be a real asset to you along the way. And you might be connected to him for quite a while, because he’s in the home part, see? [*“Look for the home”*] . . . See, a long thing, a long and narrow thing, is a person. And you see a long, thin person. . . . thing like this, is a man. A woman is usually, you know, wide here, and the head, you know, like big hair or a hat. Also, it can be just a real thick, heavy-set thing. And that could be a woman.

. . . Now, these things here. . . this is almost like a four-leaf clover. . . . but this is a very good sign. When you see something crossed and you can make a leaf of it. . . . so, that is a good omen that’s coming very soon. And anything that’s on the top of the cup, comes around the handle, on the very top is coming soon. . . . sooner than what’s down here.

These are two people coming, to tell something. Now they might be. . . did you do something about a house before you came? Did you ask or look at a house? [*Wife: Yes.*] Well, that might be concerning that. They’re coming [and] you might get what you want. I say this could be something you really want. Because of this [the four-leaf clover]. That it’s what you want. . . . it’s coming soon. And so you want it soon. . . . if you’re going to move. I would say this is what you’re going to hear, when you get home.

. . . See, you got a lot of people [coming in], now see, where she didn’t have that many people in her cup. . . . See that short man there, see that little, short piece? That’s a short man. . . . Here’s another person. See this one sticking out here? Well, this man is somebody that is really putting his neck out too much. He’s getting into your business, and he’s asking you questions and he’s looking for information. And don’t give him too much because he’s going to get something quicker than you get. In other words, somebody might ask you something. . . . [About] something you were doing or that you might want to do. And then he might say to you, “Well, how are you going to do this, Michael? How would you start there?” . . . So, you have to be careful that you don’t give him some of your information. . . . that he might take ahead of you, see what I mean?

Now, if you look at this again. . . there’s a symbol of music again. You see that cross? See that cross right in there. Well, I just think this is another symbol of music. It looks like. . . . see what I can see. . . . what kind of music it is. It could be like. . . . it could be a piano. It’s somebody that’s very fluent with it, you know, goes like everything. And, it could be that or, ahh, one person, or it could be two people that are doing small instruments, but they’re close together when they’re doing it. [*Me: We know some people who play. . . one plays the fiddle and one plays the banjo. They always play together; they’re good friends and our good friends.*] Well it could be that, see because of the cross. . . . because it makes it, you know, it connects it, in other words. [*“What it means”*] And there it looks like a piano with its feet. This looks like it could be a violin coming out of there. . . . But that was a cross, you saw that. And that. . . that is a. . . they might be having a hard. . . if they’re trying to make a living out of this. Although as I say they’re very good at it, but he’ll never make it. [*Me: The fiddle player lost out on a job he was told he had.*] Uh huh, he didn’t get as far as he thought.

And you have something up in the air. And I think that’s something you’re building up in your mind and something even outside of what you’re doing. You have something. . . and you’re thinking and you’re scheming and you’re planning to make this something, something different from what you’re doing. And it’s attached to you. Then it’s going to be alright. . . . That’s the bubble, or not a bubble, but something you’ve got in your mind that’s big, and you’re going to make this something. And it’s something different to what you are doing. And it may not come to you yet, but it’s going to come. You’re going to make good on whatever it is.

Seems to be a lot of people. . . like when you’re working. . . that bother you. That keep coming and you’re doing something, and they’re talking to you, but you don’t look up. And then, all of a sudden, somebody comes in, in sort of a high crown or it could be a professor’s hat. . . . Well, there’s somebody that comes in and really talks to you, and then you look up and. . . when they talk to you. . . you’re really very interested. And you drop everything right there, and you’re all set to talk to

him. And, you get a lot out of what he has to say.

Well, I can't see too much more.... So, everything is clear, no sicknesses, there are no obstacles to get in your way. Actually, I see more travel in her cup than in yours. Not travel but more places that she's going. But you will be with her, so that means that that's the same, anyway.

A functional summary of Cup #2:

1. I'll strive for (climb up a bridge or mountain) and get (**difficult task1**) my wish (**reward1**).

2. A benefactor ("bear") (**donor1**) will provide money in three ways (**help1**).

3. I'll "harvest" later (**difficult task2**) something I'm working on now (the letter "f") (**reward2**).

4. If I watch, I'll expose an imposter ("mouse") (**defeat villain1**) and remain whole (**reward3**).

5. I'll feel bad, but a benefactor ("tall man") (**donor2**) will assist me in the any way I want (**help2**).

6. Two people (**donors3**) will soon tell my wife and I (**help3**) that our search for new housing (**difficult task3**) ("four-leaf clover") was successful (**reward4**).

7. If I keep my own counsel, I'll deny an exploiter ("a man sticking his neck out") the means to beat me to a benefit (**defeat villain2**), and I'll remain whole (**reward5**).

8. My musician friend, though talented, will not be able to make a living out of performing (**failed difficult task**). [This is an example of a prediction involving people close to the client. They sometimes act as proxies, for example, when a reading follows the children of older clients.]

9. I'm building up in my mind ("bubble") something different from what I'm doing now (**difficult task4**), and it will succeed (**reward6**).

10. I'll avoid distractions (**test1**), listen to an authority (in a "crown" or "professor's hat") (**donor4**) and receive guidance (**help4**).

11. I'll avoid obstacles (**difficult task5**) and enjoy good health (**reward7**).

Again, let's count the functions by category. The reading says I'll do the following in the course of getting my wish:

- **encounter four donors:** a "bear," a "tall man," "two people," a man wearing a "crown or professor's hat;"

- **use four helps:** three sources of money, assistance, housing assistance, guidance;

- **pass one test:** avoid distractions;

- **defeat two villains:** expose an imposter, deny an exploiter;

- **complete five difficult tasks:** get the wish, "harvest" a current project later, do a housing search, make a goal change, avoid obstacles; and

- **gain seven rewards:** my wish, a long delayed benefit, immunity from an imposter, new housing, immunity from an exploiter, a changed goal, good health.

Morphological comparison of readings and folktales

It is striking that the functions abstracted from Propp's folktale study appear repeatedly in both of the tea leaf readings. While the sample is small, this suggests that tale telling and tea leaf reading are connected in their deep structures and from a performance standpoint. Additional research would be needed to determine if the pattern holds across different readers and for a range of clients of different ages and backgrounds.

The functions in the readings and the predictions they contain are not randomly distributed. Rather, they follow a sequence that is similar to Propp's move (LTR sequence):

Lack (L) → difficult task completed or defeat of a villain (T) → reward (R)

May occur with help, usually from a donor (though people can help themselves)

The two readings contain embedded moves. For example, the fortunes in both cups start with a **lack** (the wish), proceed to the completion of a **difficult task** (the wish is "hard to get" in Cup #1 and "climb" in Cup #2), and end with the wish coming true (**reward**) before continuing

through other moves to their conclusions. The **LTR** sequence occurs five more times in Cup #1. My wife will: 1) acquire a home; 2) preserve her marriage; 3) have a child; 4) write or help with a book; 5) handle personal problems and enjoy good health. It occurs six more times in Cup #2. I will: 1) take the benefit later from a project underway now; 2) gain immunity from an imposter; 3) get new housing; 4) gain immunity from an exploiter; 5) succeed with a changed goal; 6) avoid obstacles and enjoy good health.

However, there are some important differences between the two readings, on the one hand, and between the readings and Propp's folktales, on the other. Let's compare the readings, first. The defeat of villains does not appear in my wife's cup but appears twice in mine. Also, moves having to do with work or career appear more frequently in my cup, while those having to do with family are more prominent in my wife's. These differences may stem from cultural expectations about the role of women (family-oriented and cooperative) versus that of men (career-oriented and competitive), and they appear to support a point made by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his tribute to Propp that plot variations in tales—whether a "situation of lack" is due to one thing or another, for example—are not arbitrary, as Propp seemed to suggest, but rather are influenced by cultural beliefs (Lévi-Strauss 1960, 185–6). Going further, like the fundamental cultural opposition in Amerindian mythology between the raw (nature) and the cooked (culture) (Lévi-Strauss 1969), I would argue that the Western preoccupation with what is temporary or episodic (E) versus lasting or permanent (P) underlies the following functional analogies in both tales and the fortunes analyzed—help for further seeking (E) : sought for reward (P) :: test (E) : difficult task (P) :: donor (E) : marriage partner (P) :: "where you are now" (E) : "home in the end" (P).

The difference between the readings and Propp's folktales is structural. For Propp, while a folktale may contain a number of

different moves, there is always a primary lack or villainy that starts things off and a corresponding reward that liquidates that lack and concludes the tale. That's what makes a multi-move story a single tale, as opposed to an assemblage of separate tales. However, the correspondence between the opening and the closing is less clear in the readings. There is no necessary connection between the wish and health as topics, if, in fact, a prediction about health is the traditional closing of a reading. As noted above, it may not be. Rather, it may be that while coverage of it is required, it's added at the end only if it doesn't appear elsewhere in the reading. For this reason, while folktales are "tied up with a bow," readings seem freer to wander, "to go around and see what you want to know," subject as they are to the demands of the leaves—that is, to what the leaves are "telling" the reader.

Why divination?

Theories about why forms of divination like tea leaf reading persist in the modern world abound. There are two mechanisms in these readings that contribute to their persuasiveness. One is cultural; the other is psychological.

At the cultural level: Tea leaf fortunes and folktales operate against a backdrop of Western, culturally-derived expectations about the stages of life. The young will develop the skills to survive and thrive. They'll connect with wiser heads (protectors and helpers), form bonds of friendship and marriage, confront life's challenges, hive off and establish their own households, and raise children of their own. And they'll do so more or less in that order. As individuals, many of us hope our lives will go this route, and when we hear it confirmed in a reading, it encourages us to believe in the reading's predictions. In its progression and its drama, life does imitate art. Arguably, this helps explain why folktales are satisfying while fortunes are *persuasive*. If readings were just "one damned thing after another," their plausibility would suffer. They would lose cultural meaning.

Regarding the stages of the life course referenced above: it can be said that the readings honored their sequence. We do not see predictions that the "home in the end" will be acquired before undertaking work or career-related tasks necessary to obtain it, or that children will be born before marriage. Making such predictions in my grandmother's era, let's say, would have put the readings at odds with cultural expectations, increased the anxiety level, and potentially weakened their persuasiveness. However, with the rise and acceptance of social trends that formerly seemed out of the norm and unrealistic—for example, emancipated, unmarried, and unemployed minors with children living in their own permanent, government-funded housing—the bounds of what might seem persuasive in a prediction have likely expanded. The same might be said for other social trends more prevalent in generations X through Z—for example, identity politics and a waning of traditional views on gender roles and social institutions, including marriage. It would be interesting to see how readers stay credible these days, not to mention how they find their way to a happy ending for modern clients.

At the psychological level: A kind of confirmation bias, or tendency to only seek out information that supports one position or idea, operates when clients are encouraged to sift through their thoughts and recollections to see what fits with a prediction that may be only broadly outlined (Smith 2009, 149–51). An example can be found in the first reading when my wife racks her brain ("I can only think of one person..."), and then plugs in a specific individual, the bagpipe player, into Amy's broad description of a person in costume who plays a big instrument. At that point, the prediction can be said to "make sense." It becomes an "aha moment," one of sudden insight or discovery. Another example occurs in the second reading when I insert my fiddle-playing friend into Amy's somewhat hedged description of a musician who, though talented, won't be able to make a

career playing music. (Is it one musician or two; is the instrument a piano or a violin?) And, because fortunes typically cover long periods of time (for example, "your home, when you do come to it"), the predictions they contain can linger awaiting confirmation throughout life. For example, does my writing of this paper, now, confirm Amy's prediction back then that I would harvest something in the future when it was ripe for the taking, something that began with the letter "f"—"folklore"? ("You know, if you don't take it now, in another cycle of time, and you'll make it better maybe...") Does the fact that I pursued a career in social services rather than anthropology confirm Amy's prediction that I would succeed at something different from what I was engaged in at the time? ("That's the bubble, or not a bubble, but something you've got in your mind that's big, and you're going to make this something. And it's something different to what you are doing.") Did the tear in my fortune foretell the sadness I would come to feel about my eventual divorce from my wife? ("See the tear coming out of there? There it is. You're going to feel bad about something.... [And] it hasn't all come out yet.")

Or are these all examples of confirmation bias? Arguably, we all return later to things we enjoyed but left behind earlier in life. People do make big changes in their lives, and life is full of tears of regret. Should it be considered an accurate prediction to foretell these things in any life? Put another way, given enough time, would each one of us be able to confirm just about any prediction that a reader might make? Our lives may be that eventful. And yet, it all seems so—persuasive.

Randomness, order, agency, and "belief"

A kinetic link surely exists from the client's hand and lips to the cup to the tea to the leaves. Thus, the physics of drinking from a cup would likely influence the shapes in the leaves and would be different for different people and for the same person on different occasions. Exactly

how the force at work in a cup operated Amy did not say. However, astrologer Aliza Kelly (2018) wrote, “Like all divination practices, tea leaf reading is based on the concept of directing energy. When we focus our magickal intention on the tea, the leaves become energetic conduits that are capable of mirroring our experiences—including those which have yet to occur.”

Although Amy did not develop either of these notions, the idea of a metaphysical Star Wars-like force being at work through the link may have been closer to her thinking. Amy pointed out that it was important to drink the tea in a normal manner and to avoid swirling it around. You could take some precautions, like letting the cup drip, but she seemed to say, “Don’t try to force the leaves; they’re out of your control.” Thus, randomness was needed for the power involved. (“...If you let it stand... for a few minutes and let it dry out, then if water comes out of it, then you’ll find that there’s going to be tears or that there’s going to be something... And, it’s surprising how that tear will come, if it’s going to come.”) What was left from this process was a residue of images that required an imposed order to be understood and communicated. The rules operated at two levels. First, Amy had a method for reading leaves, which included finding the wish, locating the home and looking around it for symbols, interpreting the symbols, and getting the client involved in the reading. We might almost call this method a language, “speaking cups,” and it was something that Amy could articulate and teach. But there was another rule operating at a deeper level, one less available to conscious awareness. It was the sequence: lack (L) → difficult task completed or defeat of a villain (I) → reward (R). Although not articulated, this rule provided a structure into which the symbols could be inserted to cue their narration. The sequence resembles what is called, in literary theory, a story structure, an element that underlies the order in which the events in a narrative are presented to a reader (Lunsford and Horowitz 2005).

Regardless whether one believes the world is, at bottom, a physical or a metaphysical phenomenon, lived life remains uncertain and contingent. Being a scientist or a shaman won’t save you there. The former, as easily as the latter, can mistake an opportunity for a pitfall, a friend for a con- niver, or a prince charming for a cad. And, when it comes to acting in the moment, people perforce turn to things that other people say work, or might work. That could involve material cause and effect thinking as it comes down from one’s culture or it could mean—particularly, where the information is limited and the stakes are high—old saws or divined predictions. Even these, as opposed to wild guesses, aren’t based on nothing. Rather, they gain strength in the same way that the sciences do—when they emerge from steps in a process, especially a scheme that can be articulated. The related point that “belief” about *why* something works is less clear or of less interest than *that* it works, or may work—and that it’s the folklorist’s job initially to trace the latter (how) and bracket the former (why)—was made by Sabina Magliocco in an article aptly titled, “Beyond Belief: Context, Rationality and Participatory Consciousness,” on Italian folk healing (2012). Magliocco followed Linda Dégh’s lead on the study of belief legends and their tellers (1996). Magliocco quoted her informants: “*Non é vero ma ci credo*” (“It’s not true, but I believe in it”), where “it” includes a set of practices that must be learned and performed for the healing to work. The same point could be made about tea leaf divination. Amy said virtually nothing about why it works, my speculations aside, and everything about that it works, if you know and follow the rules. In other words, it’s all about *participation*. Regarding the rational and the “participatory,” Magliocco (2012, 11) wrote, “The co-existence, in all human societies, of these contrasting ways of knowing explains the tenuous, ambivalent nature of belief, and its ubiquitous co-existence with rationality.”

From an unvarnished viewpoint, a lot of divination is about one person (an adept)

telling another person (a supplicant) some important, sometimes pivotal things. Adepts *want* to tell; they *want to exercise power*, the power to define the situation. Supplicants are *willing to give up power* to receive the definition. Supplicants are vulnerable. They wonder if what they’re getting is real. However, there’s vulnerability on the other side, as well. The adept’s agency, or ability, and reputation for accuracy are on the line in the telling. It is performance anxiety (the adept) versus suspicion (the supplicant). The point is to reduce, on both sides, the reasons to lack faith in the predictions and to increase the reasons to have confidence in them. The means of doing so is a kind of distancing in which the medium becomes the focus while the human factor is downplayed. Pascal Boyer (2020) called this “ostensive detachment” and made the case that confidence increases as ostensive detachment increases and that the need for ostensive detachment increases as the stakes go up. Although Gillian Bennett (1999, 125–6) did not use the term ostensive detachment to describe the disclaimers that veterans of ghostly encounters often make while struggling to understand and relate what they experienced—saying about the event, that it occurred in broad daylight or that alcohol wasn’t involved, for example—they may have that effect, if only to leave the final judgment on whether it really occurred or not in the balance (“Isn’t that odd, that?”). Ostensive detachment was clearly evident in Amy’s tea leaf readings. She was making perceptive observations about the persons and futures of two very important people in her life, so the stakes were high. She was saying to my wife: you’re talented and you’re patient, and she was saying to me—you’re headstrong, be careful. In a sense, though, it wasn’t Amy who was speaking, it was the leaves. Amy had a degree of protection. The leaves could be praised for their accuracy; however, in a pinch where they slid, they could also be blamed. For example, when I questioned her claim that the sadness I’d feel would be slight—it was a big drip —Amy was able to put it down to the angle of the cup.

Conclusion

Arguably, tea leaf readings have much in common with folktales. Though tales are viewed as fiction and readings as real in their predictions, both take the form of dramatic narratives. Readings and tales alike can raise some serious issues, but neither genre casts its lead character as a victim, rather as a player in a world worth winning. In this sense, readings and folktales endorse the societal status quo, and while listeners to folktales are only indirectly cast as the hero of the story through identification with the protagonist, they are directly depicted as such in readings. A folktale is about someone like you; a reading is about you. And like a folktale, a good tea leaf reading mixes anxiety with feelings of relief. It's a tempest in a teacup. ▼

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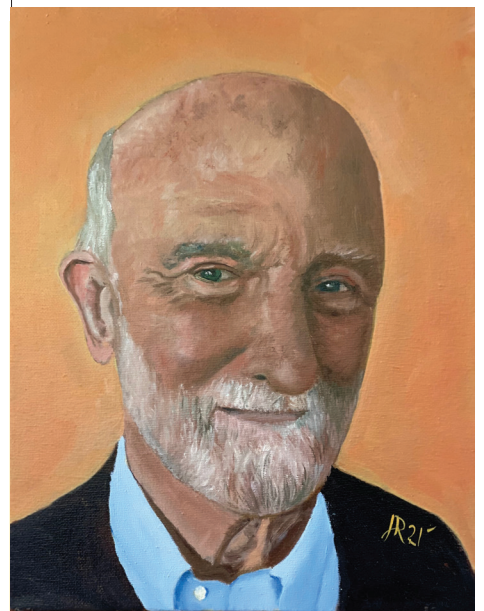
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