

## Detailed Analysis of the Structure of *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights*

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For this paper, I focused on “The Fisherman and The Jinnee” from *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights*, translated by N. J. Dawood. When thinking about how to map out the structure, I thought a numerical and alphabetical system would be best to visualize it while also giving you the reader the space to understand each value. Ironically, when I went to sketch out this visualization, it did start to resemble a sheet of music. I have the frame, noted as “F,” on the first line, and the three substructures all denoted with their roman numerals.

I broke down the narrative to as few sentences as possible<sup>1</sup> after spending time studying the structure. I then assigned those small sentences a number or letter, chronologically. Then, I was able to visually arrange them, as seen in my figure. For the rest of the paper, I made notes under each small sentence to show how they matter in the story. Essentially, when talking about the tale, those small sentences came to be my guide and organization. I also go through seeds of development and motifs along the way.

I purposely had no overlapping of any structure—i.e., 6 did not go to 7 until A-S was completed—because I don’t see the story overlapping as such. There are different structures going on at once, yes, but I see the string of narrative as unilateral. That is, there is one string that dips and rises from one structure to another, and I wanted the reader to be able to see that. Ideally, there wouldn’t have been two separate tables, but one completely horizontal table. Due to page size, this wasn’t possible, and so the break from 11-12 does not mean anything. After the end of the tale, I go into some conclusions and general discussion about the tale, even though the bulk of my analysis is embedded in the structure. Before we go into detail, I have presented the structure in an Aristotle-like fashion:

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<sup>1</sup> Inspired by Lévi-Strauss’ method explored in “The Structural Study of Myth”

→ The simplest structure of the story: A poor Fisherman has a family he can barely provide for. The Fisherman gets rich.

→ The next simplest structure of the story: A poor Fisherman has a family he can barely provide for. He meets a Jinnee, the King undoes the spell, and the Fisherman gets rich.

→ The last “simple” structure of the story we will look at: A poor Fisherman has a family he can barely provide for. He meets a Jinnee, who shows him rare fish he can sell to the King. The fish turn out to be enchanted, and the King undoes the spell. The King rewards the Fisherman with money and the marriage of his daughters. The Fisherman gets rich.

Now, we will dive deep into the story. We have an intricate structure to look at.

*The Fisherman and The Jinnee*  
Lillian's visual representation

F	1 2 3 4 5 6	7 8 // 9 10 11
I	A B C D E // F G H	N // O P Q R S
II	I J K L M	
II		

F	12 13 // 14* 15 16 17 // 18 19	// 20 21 22 23 24 25*
I		
II		
III	U V W X Y Z	

\*14 & 25: Mini sequence of events that still operate in the larger frame but can be grouped together, i.e. not a substructure

*Orange:* Beginning (of frame)

*Yellow:* Middle (of frame)

*Blue:* Major turns

*Green:* Ending (of frame)

## **1 - A Fisherman casts his net daily to feed his family.**

This is the beginning of the story, which is an unstable beginning: the Fisherman and his family are very poor. This means he is in an unstable state as there is a lack of financial security. Over the course of the story, his wealth slowly builds in the background of other substructures / tales / plot until we reach the end, where he is deemed “the richest man on his day” (Dawood 105). His daughters both marry royalty, which means this newly acquired status is not temporary / won’t die with this immediate family. The wealth transcends to generations and creates extreme security throughout the bloodline (or, until we hear the next “one day...”). So, the Fisherman not only raises his status, but the status of his future relatives. This creates a stable ending, resolving the unstable beginning.

So, here we are introduced to the main conflict, which is a family depending on this Fisherman to eat. It is also the first introduction to one of our seeds of development, the number four: “He used to cast his net four times a day” (Dawood 79). We will see this number a few times throughout the tales. Here, it creates *disequilibrium* because the Fisherman can only cast his net four times, and that cap dramaticizes this particular day when he keeps catching useless items. It leads to him keeping the Jinnee’s bottle instead of throwing it back. While he does say that he could make money off of the bottle, if he had another chance with his net, we can say that he most likely would have thrown the bottle back, or kept it to the side, but it could never have been what he was looking for—he’s a fisherman! So, with the parameter of “four times,” the Fisherman is forced to focus his attention on the bottle, which leads to the rest of the tale.

After the quote mentioned above from page 79, we enter the middle of the tale with the words: “It chanced that one day...” (Dawood 79). The Fisherman begins to catch oddities. After the donkey, he says, ““By Allah, this is a strange catch!”” (Dawood 79). This sentence that uses the word “strange” is starting the work of setting us, the readers, up for the use of magic. Magic is a key structural component, as the story cannot exist without it and without our acceptance of it. We are getting the sense that something is unusual about this trip, which only grows with the number of times the Fisherman does not catch anything we would expect to find in the ocean. This is also because we’re being set up to expect fish each time, and when it’s something else, we become suspicious about what’s going on and come to expect something weird. Therefore, when the Jinnee comes out of the bottle, we accept it because the story has us anticipating oddity.

## **2 - His net catches a Jinnee’s bottle.**

**3 - Fisherman lets the Jinnee  
out of the bottle.**

Here, we have a partial “new beginning,” by which I mean we have a new conflict that deepens the story/takes it in a new direction. Now, the narrative has an escaped character.

**4 - The Jinnee says he’s going to  
kill the Fisherman and explains  
his promises.**

This intensifies and completes the new beginning above, in #3. Not only is the Jinnee not where he belongs (outside the bottle), he is a threat to our main character. It doesn’t seem that the Jinnee will change his mind.

**5 - The Fisherman gets the Jinnee back  
into the bottle and refuses  
to let him out again.**

This part is important because it is our first provisional ending. The story could end here because the Fisherman solves the problems, or ends the new beginnings, outlined in #3 and #4. The Fisherman could go to the market and sell the bottle, and rectify the main conflict of feeding his family. But, this makes for a boring story because it would continue the daily life of the Fisherman. Nothing would have changed in his life other than this one weird day where he caught everything but fish. So, while structurally it could end, it’s probably better that it doesn’t.

**6 - Jinnee pleads to be let out, but  
Fisherman says no, you deserve  
what happened to King Yunan  
and launches into: *The Tale of King  
Yunan and Duban the Doctor***

Going into this tale, we’re introduced to a new beginning in the frame—why the Fisherman is telling this story. We have to wait to see what the lesson is/how it explains the Fisherman’s reason for keeping the Jinnee locked in.

—— {introduction to first substructure, or subframe I}

**A - There was a King Yunan.**

(beginning)

**B - King Yunan had leprosy  
with no cure.**

(middle/substructure main conflict)

**C - A doctor that stopped  
through heard of King Yunan's leprosy.**

(middle)

**D - Doctor tells King Yunan  
he can cure him.**

(middle)

**E - King Yunan is cured of leprosy.**

(end)

After King Yunan is cured, we have a major turn because the main conflict—the King being sick—of this substructure story has been solved. We have a neatly tied beginning, middle, and end. This could be a provisional ending, but I would not categorize it as such because the Fisherman's reason for telling this tale is not revealed with the King having leprosy; this doesn't answer the initial question of what tale illustrates the Jinnee's fate nor resolves the problem of the frame shown in #6. With F, we start a new section of this substructure, or a new beginning.

*// - marks a major turn in the story (also seen in visual representation)*

**F - There was a jealous vizier.**

(beginning)

**G - The jealous vizier tells King  
Yunan not to trust the Doctor.**

(middle)

**H - King Yunan tells the jealous vizier  
he won't listen to him. He  
doesn't want to be like  
King Sindbad, and launches into:  
*The Tale of King Sindbad and the Falcon***

(middle)

—— {introduction to second substructure, or subframe II}

**I - King Sindbad had a loyal falcon.**

(beginning)

**J - King Sindbad and his people  
go on a hunting trip.**

(middle)

**K - King Sindbad cuts off  
his loyal falcon's wings.**

(middle)

**L - King Sindbad realizes this  
was a mistake.**

(middle)

**M - King S is terribly  
remorseful.**

(end)

—— {return to first substructure, or subframe I}

**N - The jealous vizier still convinces  
King Yunan to kill the doctor.**

(end of second beginning in substructure, pointed out in E and shown in F)

After King Yunan finishes his tale—substructure II—and we return to substructure I, we have another major turn between N and O. This is because the jealous vizier introduced with F is resolved; he has successfully influenced King Yunan. His effect on the story is completed, and with that, we have a major turn to: life/events/consequences after his manipulation.

*// - marks a major turn in the story (also seen in visual representation)*

**O - Doctor pleads to go  
home before his execution.**

(beginning)

**P - King Yunan lets the  
Doctor go home.**

(middle)

**Q - Doctor is killed.**

(middle)

**R - King Yunan reads the  
magic book.**

(middle)

**S - King Yunan dies from poison.**

(end)

With S, we see the end of a lot of beginnings. First, we have the end of the second major turn of substructure I, the beginning outlined in O. We have the end of all of substructure I that began with A, which means we have the full resolution of 6—why the Fisherman mentioned the tale in the first place. This is another provisional ending, but in a slightly different way than the one with 5. With the end of S, we still have the Jinnee in the bottle, and everything else that was true



in 5. The one thing we have now that we didn't with 5 is a more interesting story. By now, we've heard a couple tales and have been taken on an entertaining journey. I call the end of substructure I and the return to the frame (just before 7) the *realest* provisional ending. Everything is neat and tidy with no loose ends. One could argue that even though the Jinnee is the bottle, he still is a loose end because the Fisherman knows about his existence. Even though the Fisherman explains his reasons and shows that the Jinnee only has himself to blame, can we really expect the Fisherman to go back to his daily life knowing there's a Jinnee trapped somewhere? It depends how much weight we put on this story. The less serious we take it, the less the above question matters.

—— {*return to frame*}

**7 - Jinnee convinces  
Fisherman to let him out.**

**8 - Jinnee kicks  
away the bottle.**

*// - marks a major turn in the story (also seen in visual representation)*

This is a major turn because the main conflict becomes unresolved again. With kicking away the bottle, the Fisherman is without money again and also without more chances to cast his net. The Jinnee is also permanently out of his bottle, so we no longer have the chance to return to the beginning equilibrium of the Jinnee in the bottle. The story *has* to end in a different place than it started. In my opinion, it is most concerning that we are back to the same problem with the Fisherman. The point of the tales is becoming lackluster.

We also have a major turn because we're entering new territory. The story has to become something new because it has disposed of its chance of resolution.

**9 - Jinnee takes Fisherman  
to the magic lake with four fishes.**

Here, we have the continuation of the seed of the number four. Now it shows up as the different colors of the fishes and a way that the Fisherman can get his money. We also have the lake in between four hills. This number pushes the story along because it's the beauty of these four fishes that inspires the King to search for their meaning, motivating the second half of the story.

## **10 - Jinnee exits into the Earth (and does not return in this story).**

The Jinnee swiftly and permanently exists. This is interesting because it shows us that it is possible that the Jinnee could be acting as a *function* of the story. Once he shows the Fisherman a way to make money, he disappears. In other words, he became no longer necessary once he progressed the plot by (1) kicking his bottle away and (2) giving a way to make money to the Fisherman (the start of a resolution to the main conflict). We can see that perhaps the journey to solve the main conflict is really the only thread throughout a story. Characters are constructed to push the story along that thread, although maybe we expect a more complicated execution of this. Actually, the Jinnee pushed the Fisherman away *to then have the opportunity* to push him further along. Similar to the retrograde motion of planets, it might appear that a planet is moving backwards, but it is actually still on the path of forward motion. In between S and 7, it seemed like the Jinnee returned the Fisherman to his beginning, but he made it so the Fisherman could get himself out of poverty in the long-term rather than the short-term solution of fishing as he did in 1. We still have yet to see if the four fishes actually have monetary value, and until then, the Jinnee acting as a function on the Fisherman's journey is a hypothesis.

10 is also the completed ending to the beginnings talked about in 3 and 4 that was partially resolved in 5. The Jinnee's presence has been definitively resolved.

## **11 - Fisherman brings the four fishes to the King.**

## **12- The King gives the four fishes to slave-girl.**

With the mention of the slave-girl, we have a new beginning. We have to see if she can successfully prove herself.

## **13 - The King pays the Fisherman...**

...which shows the discussion in 10 is not a hypothesis. We can now say for certain that the Jinnee's arc was dependent on the Fisherman's. This would be a very good place to end the story, and it would have if the slave-girl's backstory hadn't been introduced. It's almost as if this story is saying what the Fisherman has isn't enough—a "job" isn't enough, and the Fisherman needs more. So, we continue on by way of another major turn.

*// - marks a major turn in the story (also seen in visual representation)*

**14\* - The slave-girl cooks four fishes.**

Here, we have a small repetition story, where the slave-girl (and the vizier) cannot successfully cook the four fishes because of the magic surrounding them. It is outlined below:

**14 - The fisherman brings new four fishes.**

**14 - Slave-girl cooks four fishes.**

**14 - The magic woman burns the four fishes.**

Here we have a large presence and a big spectacle of magic. This seed violently pushes the story to new territories. We have a strong new beginning: what is going on with these fish? So far, this story has relied on characters sharing knowledge (stories) that other characters don't know in order to justify their actions. Now, we have every character in the dark, which is why I find this the strongest of all the beginnings of this story. It changes the dynamic and pattern of the structure.

**14 - The Fisherman brings new four fishes.**

**14 - Vizier cooks four fishes.**

**14 - The magic man burns four fishes.**

**15 - The King has to solve the riddle.**

**16 - The Fisherman takes the King to the lake.**

**17 - The King sneaks away from camp.**

*// - marks a major turn in the story (also seen in visual representation)*

The King leaving the camp starts a new section of the frame. Him leaving behind the camp also leaves a loose end: what is going to happen to his men?

**18 - The King finds The Stone-King.  
King asks for answers.**

**19 - The Stone-King launches  
into his tale: *The Tale of The Enchanted King***

This is noteworthy because this is the only tale that is actually the backstory of a character. Again, like in the strong beginning of 14, this is a new way of structuring the story. So, this substructure is a “strong” substructure. This makes the contents of the story more literally impactful to the narrative. With the other two tales (substructures I and II), it was the *moral* of the story that impacted the frame. Now, in substructure III, the actual events matter (and it’s possible the moral is insignificant).

—— {*introduction to third substructure, or subframe III*}

**U - There was a King of the  
Black Islands.**

**V - The Stone-King’s wife left  
for a long time.**

**W- The Stone-King follows wife.**

**X - The Stone-King attempts to  
kill the male-mistress.**

**Y - The Stone-King attempts  
to kill wife.**

**Z - Wife puts the Stone-King  
and Kingdom under spell.**

—— {*return to frame*} +

// - *marks a major turn in the story (also seen in visual representation)*

**20 - The King kills male-mistress.**

With this return to the frame during 20, we have the beginning of the end. This is because from here on out, we have no new beginnings and only the tying of loose ends. (This is also why 20 marks a major turn.)

**21 The King disguises himself  
as male-mistress.**

**22 - The King gets the Stone-King's  
wife to lift spell on Stone-King  
and Kingdom.**

Solve: removes the enchantment. A trapped Kingdom is free.

**23 - The King kills the  
Stone-King's wife.**

Solve: removes the possibility of the enchantment returning.

**24 - The two Kings return  
to the King's palace.**

Solve: we see what happened to the camp left in 17.

**25 - The King honors the  
Fisherman with a robe.**

25 is another instance where we have a sequence of events that can be grouped under: the solving of the main conflict, or how the Fisherman finally raises his family's status not just for his lifetime, but for generations to come. This part also shows the "more" the Fisherman gets, discussed in 13.

**25 - The King honors the Fisherman  
by him and Stone-King  
both marrying Fisherman's daughters.**

**25 - The King honors Fisherman  
by appointing his  
son a high position.**

**25 - The Fisherman becomes  
the richest man of his time.**

**25 - The Fisherman's children are  
all "taken care of" and  
live wealthy.**

*END*

Something that still doesn't make sense to me is the second half of the tale, marked with the end of 13 and the beginning of 14. The Fisherman does stay relevant, but the story takes on a whole different journey. If it was mentioned in the beginning that there was a missing kingdom, I would feel the structure justified the major turn. But, the only beginning we get is the poor Fisherman, so we're set up to expect resolution to his poverty, which happens a few times. The way the structure is then set up leads me to believe that the story is just as unaware of its journey as we are as readers. The story itself feels like a participant in its reading, or so deeply "in" itself it lacks a bird's eye view. It has the naivety we expect from a first person narration, but not from a third person one, which is why I feel a disconnectedness. I don't see this as intentional or as a hidden meaning because we would have felt the presence of an invisible narrator, like in *Perfume* by Patrick Süskind.

I view the story as the Fisherman's story that so happens to lead to the unlocking of a kingdom. Truly, we are witnessing this Fisherman's luck turn around. He went from suffering with no way out to incredible riches—and he didn't work for it. This is not your American Dream story, but one of pure luck and happenstance. The preposterousness makes for comedy and entertainment—there's little room for a serious moral message, which is a perfect goal if you're looking to distract your lover. This worked for the couple in two ways: first, a serious moral ties someone to reality, so in Shahrazad's mind, the less the King remembered, the more chance she had to live. From the King's perspective, perhaps he felt so cured by Shahrazad because she was able to distract him long enough for his hurt to heal, even though he saw it differently. Nonetheless, the concept of distraction is powerful, which is how this tale functions in the larger work of *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights*.

## Works Cited

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