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**Young Charlotte: Deciphering the Basics of American Balladry
through ‘Reverse Folklore’**

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Abstract:

This investigation delves into the universally accepted criteria that folklorists employ to distinguish authentic folk literature from similar, yet non-authentic, materials. These criteria have been established through rigorous fieldwork and studies in the discipline of folklore, transcending boundaries of culture, language, geographical context, and historical periods. A few key characteristics of authentic folk literature include oral transmission, existence of multiple versions, and the anonymity of the author or creator. A defining feature is the collective authorship attributed to a group rather than an individual. This collective authorship not only differentiates folk literature from classical literature but also ensures an honest and accurate representation of the incidents narrated within the folklore. The paper presents an in-depth analysis of an exceptional case - the poem 'Young Charlotte'. Originally authored by an individual and published in a newspaper, 'Young Charlotte' was subsequently embraced as part of American folk literature. The poem has since evolved into a ballad with over two hundred distinct versions disseminated across America. The study illuminates the unique journey of 'Young Charlotte', tracing its transformation from a single-authored newspaper poem to a widely recognized folksong within American folk literature. It further discusses the various adaptations and variations that the ballad has undergone as it traversed different times and places, thereby reflecting the dynamic nature of folk literature.

Introduction:

Folklore, as a discipline, encompasses two integral aspects of any culture: folk art and folk literature. This concept is eloquently articulated by *Maria Leach* in her seminal work, '*Rainbow Book of American Folktales and Legends*'.

“American folklore is many things. It is tales and legends and anecdotes and jokes, songs, tunes, dances, games; it is proverbs and sayings, rimes and riddles; it is lore of special regions and special places; it is beliefs and the wisdom that comes with living. It is all the little practices and gestures and ceremonies of daily life. It is solemn and humorous, tragic and ridiculous. It is so deeply rooted in our daily life that we don't even know it!” (Rainbow 11)



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As *Leach* suggests, folklore serves as a repository of knowledge about the universe and humanity itself. It provides insights into the natural world, societal norms, and human behaviour. The expansive scope of folklore is evident in this assertion. It underscores how deeply folklore is woven into the fabric of everyday life, often to the extent that individuals may not consciously recognize the knowledge they derive from it. Folklore, thus, serves as an unspoken guide, subtly shaping perceptions and behaviours within a community.

The expansive field of research in this subject can be broadly divided into three primary components. The initial phase involves the meticulous collection of data from oral performers, transforming oral literature into a readable textual format. This process is crucial for preserving and documenting the rich tapestry of folklore in a tangible form. The second component revolves around theoretical discussions, where the terminology and concepts integral to the discipline are deliberated upon. These discussions provide a robust theoretical framework that underpins the entire research process. The final component is the analytical aspect of the research. Here, the collected content is scrutinized and interpreted using the theories and terms established in the theoretical discussions. This analytical process allows for a deeper understanding of the content, revealing patterns, themes, and insights that might otherwise remain hidden. Each of these components plays a vital role in the research process, contributing to a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of folklore.

In conducting research on any given topic, it is imperative for the researcher to possess a comprehensive understanding of the characteristics of folk literature. Across the globe, there are several fundamental characteristics that are universally accepted as crucial for distinguishing genuine folk literature from imitations. These characteristics include oral transmission, the existence of multiple versions, anonymity of the creator, utilization of the language of the folk, and simplicity of expression. While additional features may be included in this list depending on the specific culture being studied, these core characteristics are essential as they reflect the fundamental essence and nature of folklore.

The whole folk literature can be classified into two major parts; versified and non-versified literature. The form of '*Folk Ballad*' falls under the versified category of folk literature. The form is defined as



“A form of narrative folk song, developed in the Middle Ages in Europe, to which has been applied very ambiguously the name ballad (Danish *vise*, Spanish *romance*, Russian *bylina*, Ukrainian *dumi*, Serbian *junačka pesme*, etc.). This type of folk song varies considerably with time and place, but certain characteristics remain fairly constant and seemingly fundamental: 1) A ballad is narrative. 2) A ballad is sung. 3) A ballad belongs to the folk in content, style, and designation. 4) A ballad focuses on a single incident. 5) A ballad is impersonal. The action moving of itself by dialog and incident quickly to the end.” (Standard 106)

The ballad of ‘*Young Charlotte*’ has long posed a conundrum to American folklorists, prompting two key questions: is it an authentic folk ballad or a deliberate creation by an author? Furthermore, if it is indeed a poem intentionally crafted by an individual, identifying the original author proves challenging due to the numerous versions of the ballad in circulation. Tracing the origins of each version is a laborious and time-consuming endeavor. Nonetheless, scholars such as *Phillip Barry* have dedicated themselves to this intricate task. Barry states;

“The process is rather one of individual invention, plus communal re-creation. One needs only to observe, as a matter of everyday life, how the story of the most commonplace event, when told by one person to another, changes its form, and gathers about itself incidents with which the original event had nothing to do. 5 So with a ballad, the individual invents, — composes; the community edits, and recomposes. In a word, the part of the folk in the process of ballad making is accessory after the fact. That a given version of a ballad differs from another is due to the fact that every version has been through a process, lasting, it may be, for years or generations, of re-creation in the minds of the folk singers.” (Barry 365)

This one paragraph gives clarity about the whole process of ballad origin, its growth, and its circulation in terms of time and place. The first credits for the ‘*young Charlotte*’ better known as ‘*fair Charlotte*’ in the initial circulation times given to *William Lorenzo Carter*, who wrote this ballad before he went to Vermont in 1834 by Barry in 1912. In 1937 Barry gave the credits for writing this poem to *Seba Smith* who published a poem titled ‘*A Corpse Going to the Ball*’ in ‘*The Rover*’ newspaper in 1843. This poem was inspired by an article in the February 8, 1840 edition of *New York Observer* newspaper article about a similar incident. Despite Barry's retraction, there remains a degree of confusion among folklorists regarding the origin of the song. While some continue to attribute authorship to *Carter*, others ascribe it to



Smith. Eloise Hubbard Linscott, however, credits both individuals, with *Smith* being the song's writer and *Carter* being responsible for its dissemination throughout the continent.

In the narrative, the story is recounted either subsequent to the ballad of the same story being sung by the narrator or interspersed with a few stanzas of the ballad. The tale itself depicts a commonplace occurrence involving a young woman residing in a solitary abode situated within a forested area. On one occasion, she accompanied her friend Charlie to a New Year's Eve celebration in a nearby village. Adorned in an elegant dress, she prepared to depart, but her mother advised her to wear a shawl over her attire due to the frigid temperatures expected that evening. Disregarding her mother's counsel, she proceeded to the event with Charlie. The night was indeed bitterly cold, a sensation she had never before encountered. Upon arrival, she had succumbed to the extreme cold and perished.

Numerous iterations of the tale are prevalent throughout America, with varying cultural adaptations. Certain versions of the tale convey a moral lesson emphasizing the importance of heeding the counsel of the elderly. The California rendition of the tale, for instance, incorporates a couplet that reflects this didactic message.

...dress aright

And never venture thinly clad

On such a wintry night. (Rainbow 255)

The concept of '*reverse folklore*' is a fascinating aspect of cultural studies, as it challenges the traditional trajectory of folklore development. This term, introduced by *Maria Leach* in the *Rainbow Book of American Folktales and Legends*, refers to a unique process where a story, initially conceived as a literary work by a single author, eventually becomes part of the collective cultural narrative due to its widespread popularity and subsequent reinterpretations.

The ballad '*Fair Charlotte*', authored by *Seba Smith*. Despite its origins as a literary piece, the narrative was widely embraced by the American public, who not only disseminated it but also adapted it into various versions, thereby transforming it into a *folk ballad*. This process illustrates how individual creativity can merge with collective cultural expression, resulting in a dynamic and evolving narrative.



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By the time the *'Rainbow Book of American Folk Tales and Legends'* was published, folklore collectors had already identified thirty distinct versions of *'Fair Charlotte'*. This multitude of renditions underscores the fluidity and adaptability of folklore, demonstrating how stories can evolve and diversify over time. It also highlights the role of the community in shaping and perpetuating these narratives, further blurring the lines between individual authorship and collective cultural heritage. Thus, *'reverse folklore'* serves as a testament to the power of storytelling and its capacity to resonate across different contexts and generations.



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