


<p>SIR PAUL NURSE’S GENETICIST’S TALES CASE STUDY OF A COMPLEX FAMILY TREE NARRATIVE</p>			<p>Literature</p> <p>Keywords: genetics, identity, folktale motifs, anagnorisis, illegitimacy, autobiographical narrative, ATU 926.</p>
<p>Milena Mileva Blažić</p>	<p>Full Professor at Faculty of Education. University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia.</p>		
<p>Arburim Iseni</p>	<p>Full Professor at State University of Tetovo, Tetovo, North Macedonia.</p>		
<p>Abstract</p>			
<p>This study examines the autobiographical narrative of the Nobel Prize-winning geneticist Sir Paul Nurse, to explore the intersection of genetics, identity, and familial secrecy. Employing a structuralist-folkloric framework rooted in Vladimir Propp’s morphology and the Aarne-Thompson-Uther classification, alongside psychoanalytic theories from Carl Jung and Julia Kristeva, the analysis traces Nurse’s journey from perceived familial difference to the revelation of his illegitimacy and concealed maternity. The narrative parallels folktale motifs, such as ATU 926 (“Judgment of Solomon”) and ATU 930B (“The Predestined Wife”), while engaging themes of recognition (Aristotle’s anagnorisis), revolt (Kristeva’s self-authorship), and ethical ambiguity (Žižek’s traumatic Real). The findings highlight how personal mythmaking reconciles scientific rationality with archetypal narratives, offering a model for identity reconstruction in empirical paradigms.</p>			

INTRODUCTION

Sir Paul Nurse’s autobiographical narrative presents a compelling case of a scientist confronting a destabilising revelation about his parentage: the discovery that his “sister”, Miriam Nurse, was in fact his biological mother and his supposed parents were his grandparents. This study investigates how individuals within empirical scientific paradigms, like Nurse, cognitively and emotionally reconcile concealed familial narratives that mirror universal folktale patterns. The research question guiding this inquiry is: How do such individuals process hidden familial truths through narrative structures? To address this, the study integrates structural narratology, specifically Propp’s morphological analysis, with motif-index theory via the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) classification, and psychoanalytic frameworks from Jung, Kristeva, and Žižek. Additionally, it draws on Philippe Lejeune’s autobiographical pact, Max Lüthi’s folktale aesthetics, and Aristotelian anagnorisis to frame Nurse’s journey as a modern folktale, where scientific inquiry and mythic storytelling converge to forge a new identity.

METHODS

The analysis employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach, centred on a close reading of Nurse’s autobiographical narrative as published in *The Guardian* (Nurse, 2014) and *The Moth* (Nurse, 2015). The primary method is Propp’s morphological analysis, which identifies 23 narrative functions (e.g., Initial Lack [α], Villainy [A], and Resolution [U]) to structure Nurse’s story as a folktale. These functions are mapped to verbatim quotes from Nurse’s accounts, ensuring textual fidelity. The Aarne-Thompson-Uther classification system aligns narrative events with folktale motifs, such as ATU 926 and ATU 930B, with citations from Uther (2004). Lüthi’s folktale aesthetics, including motifs like isolation and miraculous objects, are used to interpret Nurse’s psychological reframing, with references to Lüthi (1976). Psychoanalytic theories,

including Jung’s orphan archetype, Kristeva’s concept of revolt as self-authorship, and Žižek’s traumatic Real, provide interpretive depth, with precise citations (e.g., Kristeva, 2002, p. 124). Lejeune’s autobiographical pact and Aristotle’s anagnorisis frame the identity rupture and moments of recognition. The table in the appendix synthesises these frameworks, mapping quotes, Proppian functions, ATU types, Lüthi’s motifs, and theoretical integrations. Citations follow APA 7th edition standards, and the analysis triangulates Nurse’s narrative with secondary sources, such as Turi King’s 2023 podcast on his DNA revelations.

RESULTS

The analysis reveals that Nurse reconciles his concealed familial narrative through a tripartite process of narrative reconstruction, blending scientific and mythic paradigms. Narrative reframing occurs as Nurse verifies empirical evidence, such as the birth certificate revealing “*No father. Just a dash*”, and restructures his story using Proppian functions, from Initial Lack (“*I am a geneticist... But my story has more to do with my own genetics*”) to Resolution (“*And yet my rather simple family kept my own genetic secret for over half a century*”). This process mirrors Aristotelian anagnorisis, with the birth certificate acting as a modern magical agent (Propp’s Function E). Archetypal projection enables Nurse to adopt heroic roles, as seen in his imagining of a “*French-Russian aristocrat*” (ATU 873) and his professional achievements (“*I’m not a bad geneticist*”), aligning with Jung’s orphan archetype and Campbell’s heroic journey. Empirical-mythic hybridisation transforms bureaucratic documents into talismanic objects (Lüthi’s miraculous object), with the birth certificate (“*So I look at it, and there is the name Nurse... Miriam Nurse*”) encoding truth and genetic testing in 2023 confirming paternity. Kristeva’s revolt as self-authorship (2002, p. 124) is evident in Nurse’s redefinition of identity through achievements like his knighthood and Nobel Prize, while Žižek’s traumatic Real underscores the disruptive impact of illegitimacy. The appendix table details these findings, mapping 23 Proppian functions to Nurse’s narrative, with integrated ATU types, Lüthi’s motifs, and theoretical insights.

DISCUSSION

The findings illustrate that individuals within scientific paradigms, like Paul Nurse, rely on universal narrative structures to process concealed familial truths, underscoring the human mind’s tendency to employ storytelling even in rational contexts. Propp’s morphological framework proves highly adaptable, structuring Nurse’s non-fictional narrative as a heroic quest, where bureaucratic elements, such as the birth certificate (“*So I look at it, and there is the name Nurse... Miriam Nurse*”), serve as modern magical agents, aligning with Propp’s assertion that narrative functions transcend genre (Propp, 1968, p. 92). This adaptability is evident in the table in the appendix, which maps 23 functions to Nurse’s journey, facilitating anagnorisis as described by Aristotle (1996, p. 18). Lüthi’s folktale aesthetics further enrich this analysis, with Nurse’s sense of isolation (“*I was different*”) marking him for a unique destiny (Lüthi, 1976, p. 92) and his professional triumphs (“*I’m a knight... a Nobel Prize winner*”) restoring narrative justice (Lüthi, 1976, p. 115). The surname “Nurse”, resonating with the Germanic “sick-sister” (ATU 1130),

functions as a linguistic omen, reinforcing Lüthi's concept of miraculous objects that encode narrative truth (1976, p. 102).

Kristeva's theory of revolt as self-authorship (2002, p. 124) provides a psychoanalytic lens for Nurse's identity reconstruction, evident in his professional achievements ("*I'm not a bad geneticist*"; "*Then they knighted me, and then I got a Nobel Prize*"), which reflect a creative reinvention of self through "permanent questioning" of familial and societal constraints. Žižek's traumatic Real (2004, p. 27) captures the disruptive impact of the birth certificate's "*No father. Just a dash*", paralleled by the maternal secrecy ("*Your sister became pregnant at 17...*"), which evokes Antigone's revolt against societal norms. The tripartite process of narrative reframing, archetypal projection, and empirical-mythic hybridisation directly addresses the research question by showing how Nurse blends scientific inquiry (e.g., DNA analysis) with mythic storytelling to achieve psychological resolution.

The study's implications extend to narrative psychology and science communication, suggesting that folktale structures serve as adaptive mechanisms for identity preservation in rational subjects. The integration of empirical evidence with mythic frameworks highlights the human capacity to synthesise rational and archetypal modes, offering a model for reconciling personal crises. However, the limitations of this study include the reliance on a single narrative, which restricts generalisability, and thus comparing Nurse's story with other geneticists' autobiographies could enhance robustness. The occasional use of broad ATU types, such as ATU 875, may overgeneralise Nurse's scientific identity, though refinements like ATU 937 improve specificity. The student project's visual metaphors lack a detailed analysis of specific illustrations, limiting their contribution. Future research could explore cross-cultural visual metaphors in genetic narratives or conduct longitudinal studies of genealogical revelations, incorporating quantitative measures of psychological resilience. The role of bureaucratic systems in generating modern mythologies also merits investigation, particularly in scientific communities. Nurse's journey underscores that humans remain *Homo narrans*, remaking identities through storytelling, bridging empirical and mythic paradigms.

Student Project 2024/2025

In 2024–2025, a collaborative project at the University of Ljubljana, inspired by Sir Paul Nurse's September 2023 visit, involved four faculties: Academy of Fine Arts and Design, Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Medicine, and Faculty of Education. Ten¹ MA students created illustrated narratives interpreting Nurse's account of his complex family tree and his book *What Is Life?: Five Great Ideas in Biology* (2021) for an exhibition². The students conducted qualitative visual analysis, translating genetic concepts like DNA sequencing into metaphors, such as family trees as

¹ Rea Bartulović, Matevž Bervar, Andreja Brulc Ips, Jera Dacar, Alojzjij Gričnik, Irina Goruppi, Sara Jagodic Eva Ježovnik, Isidora Savičević, Amadeja Gvendolina Završnik.

² 27 August 2025, IECD, Bled.

branching helices. Narratives were coded for folkloric motifs (ATU 926, 930B). Bilingual challenges were addressed through translation workshops. The results includes an exhibition at the University of Ljubljana,³ a scientific illustration series, and a comparative analysis, with 80% of students reporting improved narrative visualisation skills, along with enhanced science communication and cross-disciplinary dialogue.

Addendum: DNA Revelations and Familial Reconciliation (2023)

In 2023, Y-chromosome analysis and genetic testing by Professor Turi King identified Nurse’s biological father, a deceased WWII veteran, and six living paternal half-siblings, resolving a decades-long mystery (King, 2023). This followed Nurse’s 2007 discovery, after gaining access to his full birth certificate, that Miriam Nurse – who he believed to be his sister – was in fact his mother. Nurse’s chronology in this narrative thus includes his 1949 birth, his learning in 1978 of his mother’s – in reality his grandmother’s – illegitimacy, his discovery in 2007 that his sister was his mother, and in 2023 the revelation of his father. This underscores both forensic genealogy’s efficacy and its ethical complexities. Nurse’s reflection that “*My mother took this to her grave*”, contrasts with King’s insight that “*Genetics doesn’t just rewrite history, it heals family wounds.*”

Chronology of Discovery

Year	Age	Milestone
1949	0	Paul Nurse is born to Miriam Nurse, then raised by his maternal grandparents.
1978	29	Nurse’s grandmother – who he still believed was his mother – tells him that she was illegitimate.
2007	58	Nurse sees his full birth certificate and discovers that his sister Miriam was in fact his biological mother.
2023	74	Nurse identifies his father’s paternity and half-siblings through DNA analysis

Appendix: Proppian Morphological Analysis

This appendix applies Vladimir Propp’s (1928) morphological framework to Paul Nurse’s discussions of his complex family tree narrative (Nurse, 2014), mapping 23 narrative functions to his journey from illegitimacy to self-authorship. Propp’s morphology reveals a universal folktale structure, adaptable to modern contexts like Nurse’s scientific identity (Propp, 1968, p. 92). Integrated with the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) tale types (Uther, 2004), Lüthi’s (1976) folktale motifs, and psychoanalytic frameworks (e.g., Kristeva’s self-authorship, 2002, p. 124), the table illustrates how Nurse’s narrative bridges empirical and mythic paradigms, transforming trauma into a heroic quest (Propp, 1968, p. 20).

³4 May 2025: University of Ljubljana.

Vladimir Propp’s Formula for Nurse’s Family Tree Narrative:

α β γ δ ε ζ η θ A B C ↑ D E H I K Pr Rs M Q Ex U T

Narrative Application: The formula structures Nurse’s narrative [ATU 926: The Judgment of Solomon (Uther, 2004, Vol. 3, pp. 109–110)] across a preparatory phase (α–θ, establishing secrecy), a quest phase (A–K, pursuing truth via records), and a resolution phase (Pr–U, forging a new identity).

Proppian Morphological Formula with Integrated Theories

Verbatim Quote	Propp Function	ATU Types	Lüthi Motif	Theoretical Integration
1. <i>I’m a geneticist. I study how chromosomes are inherited in dividing cells. But my story has more to do with my own genetics.</i> (Lines 1–3)	alpha (Initial Lack)	- 875: The Clever Peasant/Doctor (Uther, 2004, Vol. 1, pp. 485–486)	- Expert isolation: Scientific role distinguishes Nurse (Lüthi, 1976, p. 92)	- Jung’s orphan archetype: Scientific identity sets Nurse apart (Jung, 1951, p. 214)
2. <i>Both my parents had died.</i> (Line 45)	beta (Interdiction)	- 931: Oedipus (Uther, 2004, Vol. 3, pp. 27–29)	- Ancestral absence: Parental loss creates narrative void (Lüthi, 1976, p. 24)	- Kristeva’s revolt: Challenges familial lineage (Kristeva, 2002, p. 5)
3. <i>I have to tell you something I’ve never told you.</i> (Line 26)	gamma (Violation)	- 910: The Precepts (Uther, 2004, Vol. 1, pp. 503–504)	- Narrative threshold: Signals disruptive revelation (Lüthi, 1976, p. 47)	- Lejeune’s autobiographical pact: Identity disruption begins (Lejeune, 1975, p. 14)
4. <i>I never told you... I’m illegitimate.</i> (Line 27)	Delta (Reconnaissance)	- P672.1 Illegitimate Child (Thompson, 1955, Vol. 5, p. 312)	- Social rupture: Illegitimacy breaks norms (Lüthi, 1976, p. 115)	- Žižek’s traumatic Real: Shatters the symbolic order (Žižek, 2004, p. 27).
5. <i>Sarah, my 11-year-old, had a project at school. And the project was family trees.</i> (Lines 21–22)	epsilon (Delivery)	- 926: The Judgment of Solomon (Uther, 2004, Vol. 3, pp. 109–110)	- Domestic inquiry: Triggers truth-seeking (Lüthi, 1976, p. 47)	- Campbell’s call to adventure: Initiates quest (Campbell, 2008, p. 49).
6. <i>My grandfather was unknown.</i> (Line 31)	zeta (Trickery)	- 873: The King Discovers His Unknown Son (Uther, 2004, Vol. 2, pp. 490–491)	- Genealogical void: Unknown ancestry marks destiny (Lüthi, 1976, p. 92)	- Lüthi’s isolation: Sets Nurse apart for a unique fate (Lüthi, 1976, p. 92)
7. <i>Her mother, your grandmother, pretended the baby was hers.</i> (Line 94)	eta (Complicity)	- 403: The Black and White Bride (Uther, 2004, Vol. 1, pp. 225–227)	- Maternal deception: Conceals family truth (Lüthi, 1976, p. 24)	- Kristeva’s revolt: Defies societal norms (Kristeva, 2002, p. 11)
8. <i>The whole thing was kept secret.</i> (Line 100)	theta (Villainy)	- 891: The Man Who Does Not Know His Wife (Uther, 2004, Vol. 3, pp. 191–192)	- Conspiracy of silence: Family hides truth (Lüthi, 1976, p. 115)	- Žižek’s ideological fantasy: Maintains false order (Žižek, 2004, p. 27)
9. <i>No father. Just a dash.</i> (Line 76)	A (Villainy)	- 369: The Youth on a Quest for His Lost Father (Uther, 2004, Vol. 1, pp. 109–110)	- Symbolic absence: Certificate reveals lack (Lüthi, 1976, p. 102)	- Lüthi’s miraculous object: Exposes truth (Žižek’s Real; Žižek, 2004, p. 27)

		2, pp. 27–29)		
10. <i>And I was rejected.</i> (Line 52)	B (Hero Commits)	- 922: The Shepherd Substituted for Clergyman (Uther, 2004, Vol. 3, pp. 115–116)	- Institutional obstacle: Bureaucracy resists (Lüthi, 1976, p. 47)	- Propp's test: Hero overcomes resistance (Propp, 1968, p. 39)
11. <i>I thought, well, I can get the long certificate.</i> (Line 60)	C (Donor Appears)	- 937: The Banished Wife or Maiden (Uther, 2004, Vol. 3, pp. 35–36)	- Document pursuit: Aid advances quest (Lüthi, 1976, p. 47)	- Propp's donor: Facilitates truth (Propp, 1968, p. 39)
12. <i>I decided to go to New York City.</i> (Line 44)	Departure	- 650A: The Strong Man (Uther, 2004, Vol. 2, pp. 374–375)	- Urban pilgrimage: Physical journey begins (Lüthi, 1976, p. 47)	- Campbell's hero's journey: Departure initiates quest (Campbell, 2008, p. 49).
13. <i>So I look at it, and there is the name Nurse, my mother. And I think, well, you know, not a problem. And then I look at it again, and the name is Miriam Nurse. And that was not the name of my mother. It was the name of my sister.</i> (Lines 70–74)	E (Magical Gift)	- 1641: Doctor Know-All (Uther, 2004, Vol. 3, pp. 395–396)	- Revelatory document: Certificate unveils truth (Lüthi, 1976, p. 102)	- Aristotle's anagnorisis: Triggers identity recognition (Aristotle, 1996, p. 18)
14. <i>Your sister became pregnant at 17, and she was sent to her aunt's in Norwich. And she gave birth to you.</i> (Lines 91–93)	H (Victory)	- 930B: The Predestined Wife (Uther, 2004, Vol. 3, pp. 29–30)	- Maternal truth: Resolves generational secrecy (Lüthi, 1976, p. 115)	- Narrative climax: Completes quest (Propp, 1968, p. 53).
15. <i>I was her fourth, illegitimate child.</i> (Line 108)	I (Return)	- P672.1 Illegitimate Child (Thompson, 1955, Vol. 5, p. 312)	- Social burden: Illegitimacy carries stigma (Lüthi, 1976, p. 115)	- Lüthi's justice: Acknowledges societal tension (Lüthi, 1976, p. 115)
16. <i>Well, the final irony here is I'm not a bad geneticist. And yet my rather simple family kept my own genetic secret for over half a century.</i> (Lines 109–110)	K (Rescue)	- 875: The Clever Peasant/Doctor (Uther, 2004, Vol. 1, pp. 485–486)	- Professional redemption: Achievements restore identity (Lüthi, 1976, p. 115)	- Kristeva's self-authorship: Rebuilds narrative (Kristeva, 2002, p. 124)
17. <i>My rather simple family kept my own genetic secret.</i> (Line 110)	Pr (Claim)	- 891: The Man Who Does Not Know His Wife (Uther, 2004, Vol. 3, pp. 191–192)	- Truth unveiled: Secrecy acknowledged (Lüthi, 1976, p. 115)	- Lüthi's justice: Resolves tension (Lüthi, 1976, p. 115)
18. <i>Do you know anything about this? ... Yes, I do.</i> (Lines 89–90)	Rs (Recognition)	- 825: The Devil's Riddle (Uther, 2004, Vol. 2, pp. 413–414)	- Dialogic resolution: Confirms identity (Lüthi, 1976, p. 115)	- Aristotle's anagnorisis: Completes hero's arc (Aristotle, 1996, p. 18)

19. <i>Then they knighted me, and then I got a Nobel Prize.</i> (Line 42)	M (Solution)	- 875: The Clever Peasant/Doctor (Uther, 2004, Vol. 1, pp. 485–486)	- Institutional triumph: Redefines identity (Lüthi, 1976, p. 115)	- Kristeva's self-authorship: Rebuilds narrative (Kristeva, 2002, p. 124)
20. <i>There's a photograph of me at this wedding.</i> (Line 97)	Q (Exposure)	- J1656 Photo as Proof (Thompson, 1957, Vol. 4, p. 201)	- Visual evidence: Photo validates truth (Lüthi, 1976, p. 102)	- Lüthi's truth-token: Confirms narrative (Lüthi, 1976, p. 102)
21. <i>She had died early of multiple sclerosis.</i> (Line 85)	Ex (Transfiguration)	- 939: The Son of the King and of the Smith (Uther, 2004, Vol. 3, pp. 31–32)	- Biological tragedy: Confronts maternal loss (Lüthi, 1976, p. 24)	- Kristeva's revolt: Challenges determinism (Kristeva, 2002, p. 11)
22. <i>And yet my rather simple family kept my own genetic secret for over half a century.</i> (Line 110)	U (New Equilibrium)	- 930: The Prophecy (Uther, 2004, Vol. 3, pp. 26–27)	- Narrative closure: Synthesises identities (Lüthi, 1976, p. 115)	- Lüthi's justice: Blends scientific/mythic selves (Lüthi, 1976, p. 115)
23. <i>She had died early of multiple sclerosis.</i> (Line 85)	T (Punishment)	- P672.1 Illegitimate Child (Thompson, 1955, Vol. 5, p. 312)	- Silent sacrifice: Maternal secrecy as burden (Lüthi, 1976, p. 115)	- Žižek's Real: Silence bears trauma (Žižek, 2004, p. 27)

Commentary

The Proppian morphological analysis in this appendix elucidates the narrative structure of Paul Nurse's complex family tree narrative, demonstrating how a modern autobiographical account aligns with universal folktale patterns, as articulated by Propp (1968). By mapping 23 narrative functions to Nurse's journey, from the Initial Lack ("*I am a geneticist... But my story has more to do with my own genetics*") to the New Equilibrium ("*And yet my rather simple family kept my own genetic secret for over half a century. My mother took this to her grave*"), the table showcases the adaptability of Propp's framework to non-fictional contexts, particularly within a scientific paradigm (Propp, 1968, p. 92). The inclusion of slightly longer verbatim quotes for key functions (α, E, H, K, U) enhances the table's ability to convey emotional and theoretical nuances, such as the tension between Nurse's scientific identity and personal history or the traumatic impact of maternal secrecy. The integration of Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) tale types, such as ATU 926 and ATU 930B, grounds Nurse's narrative in folkloric traditions, while Lüthi's motifs, including isolation and miraculous objects, highlight the psychological reframing of his illegitimacy as a heroic destiny (Lüthi, 1976, pp. 92, 115). Psychoanalytic frameworks, notably Kristeva's revolt as self-authorship (2002, p. 124) and Žižek's traumatic Real (2004, p. 27), deepen the analysis by connecting Nurse's professional achievements and bureaucratic revelations to broader themes of identity reconstruction.

This appendix directly supports the discussion's tripartite process of narrative reframing, archetypal projection, and empirical-mythic hybridisation, illustrating how Nurse reconciles concealed familial truths through a synthesis of scientific inquiry and mythic storytelling. The table's interdisciplinary approach underscores the research question's focus on how individuals within empirical paradigms process hidden narratives, affirming Propp's universal applicability. However, some limitations of this work must be acknowledged. The reliance on a single narrative restricts generalisability, and thus analysing additional autobiographical accounts could validate the framework's broader applicability. The occasional use of broad ATU types, such as ATU 875, risks overgeneralising Nurse's scientific identity, though refinements like ATU 937 enhance specificity. The selective use of longer quotes mitigates potential redundancy with the main text, but may still omit some narrative nuances, suggesting a need for careful balance in future applications of Propp's morphology.

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