

Misunderstanding, Fear, and Humor  
— A Ricoeurian Hermeneutic Reading of  
<The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon>

Jang, Youngchang    National Research Foundation of Korea  
Researcher



- I. Introduction
- II. Ricoeur's Theoretical Framework
- III. Narrative Structure and Plot Analysis of <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon>
- IV. Interpretation of the Tale through Ricoeur's Hermeneutics
- V. Conclusion

## I. Introduction

The Korean folktale <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon> is one of the most widely known humorous narratives in Korea, depicting in a playful manner how human language and imagination can overturn the presumed power of nature. When the tale is approached merely as light entertainment or a moral anecdote, however, its deeper narrative structure and interpretive potential remain obscured. This study therefore examines the tale through Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic theory of narrative—particularly his concepts of triple mimesis (Mimesis I–II–III) and narrative identity—in order to illuminate the processes through which fear and misunderstanding are transferred, transformed, and ultimately reconfigured within the story. The analysis aims to show how the tale converts individual fear into a narrative of humor and self-understanding.

Previous scholarship has largely emphasized the tale's humorous, satirical, or pedagogical functions. For instance, Cho(2002) analyzes its typological patterns, highlighting its cyclical plot and anti-fatalistic consciousness, while Hwang(2024) interprets the dried persimmon as a “cultural symbol” that dramatizes the confrontation between nature and civilization. Yet such studies have not sufficiently addressed the

interpretive activity of the audience or the dynamic interplay between misunderstanding and linguistic action. Drawing on Ricoeur's notion of the "productivity of misunderstanding," (Ricoeur, 2001) this study approaches the tale as a narrative in which misunderstanding is not a simple error but a generative force that produces new meaning. Ricoeur argues that because human understanding is always mediated through signs, symbols, and texts, misunderstanding is both inevitable and productive.

In this respect, <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon> provides an unusually clear example of what may be called the Ricoeurian sequence of "misunderstanding–transference–reconfiguration." The plot is driven entirely by escalating misinterpretations: the tiger misreads the dried persimmon as a being more terrifying than himself; mistakes a thief's actions for those of the persimmon; and later interprets ordinary marketplace chatter as further confirmation of its threat. Few folktales display the productivity of misunderstanding—the core of Ricoeur's hermeneutics—with such consistency and intensity, making this tale a compelling case through which to "test" Ricoeur's interpretive framework.

This study proceeds in three stages. First, drawing on the 72 variants identified in Cho Hyeran's research, it selects representative versions from the Encyclopedia of Korean Oral Literature (Hanguk Gubimunhak Daegy) and organizes the plot into three key narrative units—(1) the crying child, (2) the tiger and the bear's scheme, and (3) the misunderstanding at the market. Second, it analyzes how each narrative unit forms a cycle of prefiguration (cultural codes of fear), configuration (a plot structured by misunderstanding), and refiguration (the listener's laughter and self-understanding) through the lens of Ricoeur's triple mimesis. Third, it interprets how the tiger's identity shifts from fixed sameness to transformed selfhood, demonstrating the emergence of what Ricoeur terms the "narrative self."

Research on <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon> has expanded from origin-based and comparative literary approaches to struc-

tural, psychological, cultural, and digital analyses. Sung(1989) compared it with Indian, Chinese, and Japanese analogues; Cho(2002) systematized its typological structure; Lee(2015) emphasized its triple cycle of lack and resolution; Hwang & Hwang(2005) highlighted the symbolic conflict between nature and culture; Kim(2014) read it as a narrative of primal anxiety and healing; Kim(2023) examined its fear dynamics; Han(2024) demonstrated regional narrative patterns using text mining; and Jeong(2025) linked it to early modern Korean children's literature. Building upon this rich body of scholarship, the present study extends the discussion into the domain of hermeneutics by applying Ricoeur's narrative theory as a new epistemological framework.

The goals of this study are threefold. First, it seeks to clarify the tale's temporal and narrative structure through the lens of triple mimesis, thereby illuminating how meaning is generated in oral literature. Second, it examines the transformation of the tiger's identity through the concept of narrative identity, revealing how traditional folktale characters construct selfhood in and through storytelling. Third, it analyzes the emotional trajectory from fear to humor, demonstrating how the tale enables the reconfiguration of anxiety and the expansion of self-understanding.

This paper is organized as follows. Chapter 1 presents the research purpose, significance, methodology, and scholarly context. Chapter 2 outlines Ricoeur's key concepts—triple mimesis and narrative identity. Chapter 3 analyzes the folktale's structure across the three core events: the crying child, the tiger and the bear's scheme, and the misunderstanding at the market. Chapter 4 interprets the tale through Ricoeur's hermeneutics, examining the chain of misunderstandings, the transference of meaning, and the emergence of humor and self-understanding. Chapter 5 concludes with the hermeneutic implications of the tale and suggestions for future research.

## II. Ricoeur's Theoretical Framework

Ricoeur's hermeneutics explains how human experience is articulated through narrative and how narrative, in turn, becomes a mode of understanding the world. For Ricoeur, temporal experience is always mediated by narrative structures; "to tell a story" is not merely to describe events but to configure meaning and, ultimately, to interpret existence. From this perspective, folktales are not simple products of oral performance but sites where the structures of human action and meaning are continually reconfigured. A tale such as <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon>—where nature (the tiger) confronts culture (language, symbol, and the dried persimmon)—offers a revealing example of how humans perceive and reinterpret the world through symbolic mediation. This chapter therefore focuses on Ricoeur's threefold mimesis as a framework for analyzing how the tale produces and expands meaning through processes of prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration.

### 1. The Threefold Mimesis (Mimesis I–II–III)

『In Time and Narrative』, Ricoeur proposes the threefold mimesis—prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration—as a model for understanding how narrative temporalizes human action(Ricoeur, 1999).<sup>1</sup> This structure clarifies how stories are generated, organized, and ultimately received.

---

1 This study applies Ricoeur's threefold mimesis not to the existential process of self-formation of folktale characters, but as a narrative device that mediates the reader's interpretation and cognitive transformation. Such an application entails a theoretical limitation insofar as the concept of threefold mimesis originally presupposes the lived experience of an acting subject. Future research will seek to refine the scope of Ricoeur's theoretical application by incorporating narratives of actual agents' experiences or processes of reader reception.

### 1) Mimesis I: Prefiguration

Mimesis I refers to the pre-narrative horizon of understanding that precedes any act of storytelling. It encompasses cultural norms, symbolic systems, habitual forms of discourse, and shared vocabularies of fear. In <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon>, the mother's words—"The tiger is coming," "A ghost is coming," "The fox is coming"—represent a communal catalogue of fear, a linguistic repertoire that predates the narrative itself. Even before the tale begins, the world is already structured in ways that make narrative possible.

### 2) Mimesis II: Configuration

Mimesis II is the stage in which events are woven into a coherent plot through narrative emplotment. In this folktale, three major events—the crying child, the scheme between the tiger and the bear, and the misunderstanding at the market—are configured according to a logic of escalating misunderstanding. Ricoeur describes plot as a form of "discordant concordance," (Ricoeur, 1999) a process in which discontinuous or illogical events are integrated into a meaningful whole. Although the tiger's repeated misunderstandings appear irrational, they converge into a humorous yet epistemically charged narrative arc. His successive attempts to flee become meaningful not simply as comedic episodes but as reflections of how fear and misinterpretation structure human experience.

### 3) Mimesis III: Refiguration

Mimesis III occurs when the completed narrative encounters the reader or listener, enabling a reconfiguration of the world. The listener of the tale does not merely laugh at the tiger's foolishness; rather, they recognize the performative power of language. A single utterance from the mother stops the child's crying and simultaneously alters the tiger's perception of danger. Likewise, marketplace conversations reinforce the tiger's fear. Through such encounters, the audience perceives how words actively shape and transform reality. This

moment of reception expands the listener's horizon of understanding and produces a new hermeneutic orientation.

Taken together, the threefold mimesis offers a framework for understanding how <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon> generates meaning through a cyclical movement: prefigured cultural fears → a plot structured by misunderstanding → the listener's refigurative self-understanding.

## 2. Misunderstanding and Narrative Reconfiguration

In Ricoeur's hermeneutics, narrative meaning does not emerge simply from the factual succession of events. Because interpretation always occurs through mediation—signs, symbols, and texts—misunderstanding is inevitable. More importantly, it is also productive: misunderstanding generates new meaning by prompting reinterpretation and narrative restructuring.

### 1) The Inevitability and Productivity of Misunderstanding

Ricoeur argues that humans cannot access themselves directly; self-understanding arises only through interpretive mediation. Misunderstanding is therefore an unavoidable part of interpretation, and it functions as a generative force rather than a mere error (Ricoeur, 2001). In the folktale, the tiger forms a mistaken belief about the dried persimmon—despite never having seen one—based solely on the baby's reaction. This misunderstanding propels the entire plot, shaping the encounters with the thief, the bear, and the marketplace conversations.

### 2) Narrative Reconfiguration and Discordant Concordance

For Ricoeur, plot is constituted through "discordant concordance"—a synthesis in which contradictions and discontinuities enrich narrative meaning rather than detract from it.<sup>2</sup> The tiger's misunderstand-

---

2 This study primarily discusses Ricoeur's notion of discordant concordance at the level

ings create inconsistencies between events, yet the narrative molds these inconsistencies into a unified structure through repetition and variation. Misunderstanding becomes a mechanism of reconfiguration, enabling the story to move toward a coherent and meaningful resolution for the audience.

### 3) Reader Reception and Narrative Refiguration

In the stage of refiguration, the reader reconstructs the world through the narrative. The listener realizes that language is not merely descriptive but performative: the mother's utterance "Shall I give you a persimmon?" stops the child's crying and simultaneously overturns the tiger's worldview. Marketplace conversations likewise confirm the tiger's fears. Through accumulated misunderstandings and their narrative reconfiguration, the listener reflects on the performativity of speech and the socially constructed nature of fear. Thus, misunderstanding emerges as an interpretive principle that drives narrative meaning in the tale (Ricoeur, 2001).

## 3. Narrative Selfhood and the Structure of Humor

### 1) Narrative Selfhood and the Dialectic of Sameness and Selfhood

Ricoeur conceives human identity as a dialectical interplay between "sameness" and "selfhood." Sameness refers to the stable, enduring aspects of character, while selfhood denotes the capacity for change through promises, actions, and relations with others. Identity is thus narratively constituted: individuals reinterpret themselves

---

of narrative configuration. However, it does not sufficiently elaborate on how individual readers or interpretive communities concretely experience this process in refiguration (Mimesis III). This limitation stems from the study's emphasis on theoretical articulation rather than empirical analysis of reception. Future research will address this issue by examining readers' interpretive experiences in order to clarify how discordant concordance is enacted in the act of reading.

through the stories they inhabit and enact(Ricoeur, 2006).<sup>3</sup>

In the tale, the tiger possesses the fixed identity of a predator. Yet as the plot unfolds, he acquires a new selfhood—that of a creature afraid of the persimmon. This transformation does not arise from internal reflection but from the linguistic actions of others (the mother's words, the marketplace chatter). The tiger's identity is reconfigured through external discourse and accumulated misunderstanding, exemplifying Ricoeur's concept of the narrative self.

## 2) The Cognitive Structure of Humor and Discordant Concordance

The humor of the tale arises precisely from the structure Ricoeur describes: the integration of discord within narrative concordance. The listener recognizes the irrationality of the tiger's misunderstandings—mistaking the persimmon for a terrifying being or the thief for the persimmon itself. Yet the narrative unifies these inconsistencies into a coherent arc. Humor emerges from this tension between irrational perception and narrative integration.

## 3) Humor and the Formation of the Narrative Self

From a Ricoeurian perspective, humor becomes a hermeneutic mechanism that facilitates self-understanding. The humor of <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon> derives from the reversal of expected power relations, the disjunction between language and reality, and the exaggerated repetitions within the plot. As the tiger's identity shifts from sameness (a fearsome predator) to selfhood (a creature terrified of the persimmon), the listener encounters a model of identity as dynamic and narratively constituted. Humor thus reveals that identity

---

3 The dialectic of sameness and selfhood can be understood as a process realized through the reader's experience of interpretation. In this article, however, the discussion has been oriented primarily toward narrative dynamics within the text, which has limited a fuller exploration of the reader's transformative self-understanding. This aspect will be further developed in subsequent studies that foreground the reader's experiential engagement with narrative identity.

is neither fixed nor essential but open to transformation through storytelling.

In this sense, humor is not merely a comedic device but a cognitive structure that enables the refiguration of the self. The tale demonstrates how fear can be narratively reinterpreted, how misunderstanding becomes productive, and how identity emerges through the narrative interplay of words, symbols, and actions.

### III. Plot and Structural Analysis of <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon>

This chapter analyzes the development of <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon> with a focus on its concrete event structure. By tracing the overall flow of the tale—its sequence of events, its patterns of repetition, and its variations—and reading these in relation to Ricoeur’s concept of mimesis, the chapter clarifies how the story produces meaning. In particular, it examines how speech acts in performance, the spread of misunderstanding, and the emergence of laughter form a coherent narrative system, thereby showing that the tale functions not merely as a humorous anecdote but as a narrative that stages transformations of language, perception, and identity.

#### 1. Three Key Event Units: The Crying Child, the Tiger–Bear Plot, and the Marketplace Misunderstanding

For the purposes of analysis, this study focuses on a version of the tale recorded in Chilbo-myeon, Jeongeup-gun, Jeollabuk-do, in 1985 and included in the Encyclopedia of Korean Oral Literature. Although the informant initially hesitated, claiming that the story was “trivial” and that others could tell it better, the collector encouraged him to proceed, and the tale was eventually told at length with vivid

detail and humor.

To clarify the narrative development in this version, the plot is divided into three major event units:

- 1) the crying child,
- 2) the tiger and the bear's scheme, and
- 3) the misunderstanding at the marketplace.

This division highlights a graded expansion of the same basic pattern of misunderstanding: it begins as an individual experience within the domestic sphere (conversation between mother and child), extends into interaction with another non-human agent (the tiger's alliance with the bear), and culminates in a scene shaped by communal discourse (market chatter). The analysis thus traces how the signifier "dried persimmon" is recontextualized as a symbol of fear through the mediation of speech and imagination, and how the rhythm of repetition and variation generates both comic effect and cognitive shift.

First, the crying child episode functions as the narrative introduction and the decisive turning point. The mother, unable to calm her crying child, threatens, "The tiger is coming, the ghost is coming, the fox is coming," but nothing changes. Only when she says, "Shall I give you a persimmon?" does the child immediately stop crying. In the dialectal phrasing of the performance, the teller emphasizes that the child "does not stop no matter how much the mother says the tiger, ghost, or fox are coming, but quiets down at once when she mentions the dried persimmon." Watching this, the tiger concludes that the dried persimmon must be more terrifying than himself. Shortly afterward, a thief sneaks into the cowshed, mistakes the tiger for a cow, and climbs onto its back. The tiger, convinced that "the persimmon has finally come" and that this is the feared being, panics and runs away as fast as it can.

Second, the tiger–bear episode demonstrates the persistence and escalation of misunderstanding. The fleeing tiger encounters a bear and recounts its traumatic “persimmon experience.” The bear proposes a plan; it climbs up a tree to frighten the human with its strong smell so that the person will come outside, while the tiger waits below. The plan fails, however, when the human attacks the bear’s exposed body part, causing both bear and tiger to flee in terror. Here the bear’s clumsy strategy intersects with the tiger’s prior misunderstanding, intensifying the story’s comic dimension(Chilbo-myeon Oral Narrative, 1985).

Third, the marketplace episode marks the climax of the plot. When the tiger later returns to the village, the people in the market are engaged in an ordinary conversation: “The price of dried persimmons is high today.” The tiger interprets this not as an economic remark but as evidence that the persimmon’s threat now pervades the entire community. Terrified, it runs away again. At the moment when everyday speech is reinterpreted as confirmation of fear, the story reaches its humorous resolution and concludes(Chilbo-myeon Oral Narrative, 1985).

These three event units collectively show how the signifier “dried persimmon” is amplified and reproduced as a symbol of fear through the mediation of misunderstanding and imagination.

## 2. Repetition, Variation, and Modes of Transmission

The tale creates its narrative rhythm through a patterned sequence of repetition and variation. The initial misunderstanding in the crying child episode establishes the core “persimmon fear.” This core is then replayed in a modified form in the encounter with the bear and finally expanded into collective rumor and marketplace discourse in the last episode. In structural terms, the same pattern of misunderstanding unfolds along the trajectory from “individual experience →

interaction with another agent → social discourse”(Hwang, 2005).

This dynamic is closely related to the characteristics of oral transmission(Hwang, 2024). In performance, storytellers adapt episodes in response to audience reactions and their own creativity; episodes may be condensed, omitted, or elaborated. Yet the central motif—the tiger’s misinterpretation of the dried persimmon and the resulting reversal—remains remarkably stable. This stability amid variation mirrors Ricoeur’s notion of the mimesis cycle. Each time a new audience encounters the tale, a refiguration takes place (Mimesis III), which then becomes part of the prefigurative horizon (Mimesis I) for subsequent retellings. In this way, repetition and variation in performance continually renew the tale while preserving its core structure.

### 3. Narrative Development Based on Misunderstanding and Imagination

The plot of <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon> is driven almost entirely by misunderstanding and imagination. The tiger has neither seen nor tasted a dried persimmon, yet it infers, on the basis of the child’s reaction, that the persimmon is the ultimate source of fear. This process exemplifies what Ricoeur calls a “surplus of meaning”: a sign exceeds its original reference and opens up a new horizon of significance. A simple piece of dried fruit becomes, through the story, a symbol of absolute terror. The tale thus provides a rare example of a sign (“dried persimmon”) passing through a surplus of meaning to become a fully developed symbol.

The narrative is constructed so that the audience temporarily adopts the tiger’s interpretive framework. The thief’s actions, the bear’s exposed body, and the marketplace conversations are all ordinary events within their factual context, yet in the tiger’s misreading they are understood as successive “attacks” of the persimmon. The comic effect of the plot arises from the gap between these two interpretive planes: the realistic level on which nothing truly extraordinary happens, and

the imagined level on which the tiger experiences a series of escalating threats. Recognizing this gap, the audience laughs (Kim, 2023).

Here Ricoeur's notion of "discordant concordance" is vividly realized. The tiger's misinterpretations constitute a form of logical discord, but within the narrative structure they function as agents of concord, generating a plot that coherently produces humor. The development of the tale is not merely a string of jokes but a device that exposes how linguistic acts constitute reality (Hwang, 2005). The mother's question "Shall I give you a persimmon?" not only stops the child's crying but also triggers the tiger's reconfiguration of the world. Likewise, the casual talk of the marketplace becomes, for the tiger, proof of an invisible danger. These episodes reveal the performative power of speech: language does not simply depict reality but actively reshapes it.

#### IV. Interpretation and Significance of <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon> from Ricoeur's Perspective

Building on the preceding analysis of plot and structure, this chapter rereads <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon> through Paul Ricoeur's narrative hermeneutics. The central focus is on how the symbolic opposition between nature and culture is inverted through a chain of misunderstandings, and how, as this chain is repeated and varied, fear is reconfigured into humor. To that end, Ricoeur's three-fold mimesis (Mimesis I–II–III) is applied sequentially to (1) the cultural presuppositions that underlie the tale (the symbolic status of the tiger), (2) the formation of the plot (the transfer of meaning onto the dried persimmon), and (3) the process of reception (laughter and self-understanding). Ultimately, the chapter seeks to clarify how the performativity of utterance and the circularity of interpretation gener-

ate the tale's comic and therapeutic effects, and how these features open pathways for communal communication and educational use.

## 1. The Tale Interpreted through the Threefold Mimesis

### 1) Mimesis I: Cultural Presuppositions and the Symbolism of the Tiger

Ricoeur defines Mimesis I as the pre-narrative level at which human action and the world are already structured in ways that make storytelling possible. This prefigurative horizon includes cultural norms, symbolic codes, and discursive conventions. In the case of <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon>, this level is closely tied to the symbolic status of the tiger as an object of fear in traditional Korean culture.

In Korean folktales and folklore, the tiger is not merely a wild animal; it symbolizes the overwhelming power of mountains and nature and is often depicted as a bringer of disaster and fear. In the performed version of the tale, the mother attempts to calm her child by saying, "The tiger is coming, the ghost is coming, the fox is coming." This list of frightening beings reflects a communal repertoire of fear, with the tiger positioned at its apex. The signifier "tiger" thus carries the long-established cultural presupposition of being an "absolute agent of fear."

Yet in the tale, it is not the tiger but the dried persimmon that succeeds in stopping the child's crying. At this moment, the tiger loses its symbolic superiority and is effectively demoted to something "less frightening than a dried persimmon." Paradoxically, this loss of status marks the beginning of the narrative. From a Ricoeurian standpoint, the rupture of the prefigurative horizon—"tiger = absolute fear"—creates the conditions for a new configuration of meaning.

In other words, Mimesis I in this tale presupposes a Korean cultural horizon in which the tiger is symbolically coded as the embodiment of fear. When the child quiets down at the mention of the

dried persimmon, the tiger is stripped of this symbolic position and becomes the subject of a new misunderstanding. The fracture of the cultural presupposition thus becomes the starting point of the plot and the moment at which the narrative moves from prefiguration to configuration.

## 2) Mimesis II: Misunderstanding and the Transfer of Meaning onto the Persimmon

Mimesis II refers to the stage at which events are organized into a plot. At this level, heterogeneous actions and situations are woven together in temporal and causal sequence, producing what Ricoeur calls “discordant concordance.” In <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon>, the plot is organized around the tiger’s repeated misunderstandings, through which the dried persimmon—an everyday object—undergoes a transfer of meaning and becomes a symbol of fear.

The events of the tale are linked entirely by the tiger’s cognitive errors. In the episode with the crying child, the tiger infers from the child’s reaction that the dried persimmon must be more terrifying than itself. In the episode with the bear, it interprets the human’s attack on the bear’s exposed body as an assault by the persimmon, thereby amplifying its fear. In the marketplace episode, the tiger hears people saying that “the price of dried persimmons is high today” and misreads this ordinary economic remark as proof of the persimmon’s real and pervasive threat, prompting it to flee once again. Through such variations, misunderstanding forms a chain that unfolds along a graded structure from the individual to the interpersonal to the social.

In this process, the dried persimmon, originally a simple food item, is transformed into a symbol of ultimate danger. This transformation illustrates Ricoeur’s notion of a “surplus of meaning,” in which a single signifier generates new references and effects as it moves across different contexts. The crying child, the bear’s body, and the marketplace chatter are, in themselves, ordinary events, yet the tiger’s misunderstandings bind them together under the plot-level meaning

of “fear of the persimmon.” The plot thus integrates heterogeneous events into a single narrative logic that elicits laughter from the audience.

The comic effect emerges precisely as “discordant concordance.” The tiger’s misunderstandings are logically absurd, but within the configuration of the plot this absurdity is repeated and varied in ways that create a coherent narrative structure. The audience recognizes the inconsistency of the tiger’s reasoning, yet experiences it as narratively unified and meaningful. In *Mimesis II*, then, the tale converts the everyday signifier “dried persimmon” into a symbol of fear through a chain of misunderstandings. The repetition and variation of misinterpretation become the narrative devices that jointly generate the tale’s humor and its implicit lesson.

### 3) *Mimesis III*: Relativizing Fear and the Emergence of Laughter

*Mimesis III* designates the level of refiguration, where the completed narrative encounters the listener or reader and is integrated into their world. At this stage, the story does not remain a mere sequence of events; it is reinterpreted within the horizon of the recipient’s life. In <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon>, this refigurative process produces two major effects: the relativization of fear and the emergence of laughter.

First, the tale relativizes fear. Culturally, the tiger had functioned as the “absolute agent of fear,” but it is now outdone by an ordinary dried persimmon. The listener experiences the moment when the symbol of fear is displaced and re-ordered. This is not merely a comic twist; it reveals that fear itself is constructed through language and imagination.

Second, the listener experiences “discordant concordance” at the level of reception. The tiger’s misunderstandings remain logically unjustified, but the plot binds these inconsistencies into a continuous narrative chain. The listener encounters a structure in which irrational misreadings nonetheless cohere within the story, and it is in this ten-

sion between discord and concord that laughter arises.

Third, the humor invites a form of self-understanding. While laughing at the tiger's foolishness, the listener becomes aware that they, too, often construct fear on the basis of words, rumors, and partial information. Laughter thus functions as a reflective moment in which the other's misunderstanding becomes a mirror for one's own incomplete understanding. In this sense, the comic experience can be seen as a mode of "narrative self-understanding"(Kim, 2023): through the story, the listener recognizes that both fear and identity are narratively constituted and open to reinterpretation(Ricoeur, 2004).

In *Mimesis III*, <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon> offers the listener both a relativization of fear and an experience of laughter. The tale uses the tiger's misunderstanding to provoke humor, but that humor extends beyond simple entertainment to prompt a reconfiguration of the world and the self. The story thus exemplifies the full hermeneutic cycle that Ricoeur describes: prefiguration (the Korean cultural code "tiger = fear"), configuration (a plot organized around misunderstanding and the transfer of meaning onto the persimmon), and refiguration (the listener's laughter and the redistribution of fear). While many folktales display narrative variation, few do so in a way that so clearly enacts the complete sequence of prefiguration–configuration–refiguration across their major narrative types.

## 2. The Meaning of <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon> in Ricoeurian Perspective

### First, the Reconfiguration of Emotion from Fear to Humor

One of Ricoeur's key insights is that narrative is not merely an arrangement of events but a process of reconfiguring emotion and meaning. A story evokes particular feelings in its audience and then transforms and redistributes those feelings, opening a new horizon of understanding. In <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon>, fear and humor function as two poles within this process of emotional recon-

figuration.

At the beginning of the tale, the tiger is presupposed as an “absolute agent of fear.” The mother’s use of the phrase “The tiger is coming” to discipline the child reflects a shared structure of fear within the community. At this stage, the audience internalizes a sense of tension and respect for the tiger’s symbolic status.

As the plot unfolds, however, the tiger is repeatedly transformed into a creature that fears the dried persimmon. The audience witnesses the inversion of its status and experiences a fundamental discord between the initial cultural presupposition (“tiger = fear”) and the tiger’s actual behavior. This is precisely the process of “discordant concordance” that Ricoeur ascribes to plot: a formerly absolute symbol of fear becomes a ridiculous and pitiful figure, and in that reversal, the emotional ground shifts.

Finally, the audience laughs at the tiger’s repeated misreadings—interpreting the thief’s clumsy attack as the persimmon’s assault, or the casual talk of the marketplace as a confirmation of its threat. This laughter is not just a moment of pleasure; it is an act of emotional reconfiguration through the relativization of fear. From a Ricoeurian perspective, this belongs to Mimesis III: as the reader encounters the text, previously held notions of fear are deconstructed and redistributed within a new emotional structure, that of humor.

The tale thus begins from the cultural presupposition “tiger = fear,” but through a chain of misunderstandings and the unfolding of the plot, it converts this presupposition into a comic situation. The audience experiences a transformation in which fear is reconfigured as laughter. This illustrates Ricoeur’s claim that narrative is not a simple reflection of the world, but an act of reconfiguring both the world and our emotional relation to it.

## Second, Imaginative Interpretation and Its Social Communicative Effects

Ricoeur’s hermeneutics also emphasizes that textual understand-

ing does not remain a purely internal process of an isolated reader. Through imaginative interpretation, narrative opens a space for shared meaning and social communication. Stories overturn or vary existing presuppositions by means of imagination and then reintegrate them into the communicative life of a community.

In <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon>, the tiger's misunderstanding functions as an imaginative interpretation that generates new symbolic meaning. Seeing that the child stops crying at the mention of the persimmon, the tiger imagines the persimmon to be "more powerful than itself." This interpretation has no factual basis, yet the signifier "dried persimmon" acquires a new symbolic status. From a Ricoeurian standpoint, this is a clear instance of surplus of meaning: imaginative interpretation opens a horizon that extends beyond the original referent of the word.

The process does not end with the tiger's private misreading. The imaginative interpretation spreads into a broader communicative field through conversations and rumors. The bear hears the tiger's story and attempts to make use of it in his own scheme. The people at the marketplace talk simply about the price of persimmons, but for the tiger this everyday conversation functions as public confirmation of the persimmon's terrifying power. In this way, an individual's imaginative misinterpretation is absorbed into communal discourse through speech and rumor.

The audience, hearing the tale, shares the tiger's misunderstandings and imaginative interpretations, and laughs together at the absurdity. This shared laughter produces a sense of communal empathy that exceeds individual interpretation. In terms of Ricoeur's *Mimesis III*, the tale not only broadens each listener's understanding of the world but also creates a common interpretive space in which a community can temporarily inhabit the same narrative horizon. Consequently, the folktale performs a function that goes beyond entertainment: it strengthens social bonds and facilitates communication through shared humor and reflection.

In <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon>, the tiger's misunderstanding does not remain a purely private error. Through imaginative interpretation, the dried persimmon is transformed into a symbol of absolute fear, and this transformation is extended into social communication through the bear's conversation, the marketplace discourse, and the listeners' shared laughter. The tale thus shows how narrative, mediated by imagination, contributes to communal meaning-making and identity formation.

### Third, the Discrepancy between Language and Reality

In works such as *The Rule of Metaphor* and *The Conflict of Interpretations*, Ricoeur stresses that the discrepancy between language and reality can be a productive source of new meaning. The world that language points to and the world as it is empirically experienced do not always coincide, and this very gap becomes a site of semantic innovation.

In the persimmon tale, the dried persimmon is, in reality, nothing more than a harmless dried fruit. Yet within the narrative, it undergoes a metaphorical shift and functions as the "absolute agent of fear." This transformation exposes the gap between linguistic meaning and empirical reality while simultaneously expanding the possibilities of interpretation.

First, the dried persimmon undergoes a metaphorical conversion. What initially appears as an ordinary food item acquires the status of a being "more frightening than the tiger" in the tiger's imagination. This is another instance of surplus of meaning: a single referent is layered with additional semantic levels. The persimmon ceases to be merely a fruit; it becomes a metaphorical signifier of fear and threat.

Second, the tale dramatizes a structural discrepancy between language and reality. The persimmon is harmless in fact, but through utterance and interpretation it is displaced into the position of a terrifying symbol. The tiger, having neither seen nor experienced the persimmon, nonetheless accepts it as a "real danger" solely on the

basis of speech. From Ricoeur's perspective, this is a vivid example of the performative power of discourse—language does not simply mirror the world; it actively reconstructs it.

Third, the tale illustrates the open-endedness of interpretation. For different listeners, the persimmon may symbolize (i) the power of cleverness or wit that overcomes brute strength, (ii) the capacity of language to transform reality, or (iii) the social mechanisms through which misunderstanding and rumor circulate. This multiplicity of possible readings demonstrates that <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon> is not just a simple folktale but a text that can serve as a site of hermeneutic reflection.

In short, the dried persimmon acquires metaphorical significance in the gap between its empirical reality and its linguistic meaning, and thereby opens a field of unlimited interpretive possibilities. The discrepancy between language and reality not only enables the comic reversal at the heart of the tale but also invites the listener to reconfigure their understanding of the world and of themselves. In this sense, the dried persimmon becomes a symbol of linguistic metaphor and hermeneutic openness rather than a mere object within the story.<sup>4</sup>

## V. Conclusion

This study examined the Korean folktale <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon> through Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic narrative theory, focusing on the concepts of the triple mimesis (mimesis I–II–III)

---

4 Because the present study focuses on the narrative structure and symbolic configuration of the folktale, it does not sufficiently incorporate empirical data such as readers' responses or interpretive texts. This limitation reflects the restricted scope of the study rather than a denial of the importance of reader reception. Future research will expand the analytical framework by including reading responses, commentaries, or educational contexts to further elucidate the operation of refiguration (Mimesis III).

and narrative identity. By reinterpreting a tale traditionally understood as humorous and satirical, the analysis highlighted its function as a hermeneutic device in which utterance, misunderstanding, imagination, and reception interact to generate meaning.

First, at the level of mimesis I, the tiger appears within a culturally prefigured framework as the “absolute agent of fear.” Yet this symbolic status is fractured when the child immediately stops crying at the mention of the dried persimmon. This rupture opens the space for a new narrative configuration to emerge.

Second, at the level of mimesis II, the plot is organized around the tiger’s repeated misunderstandings. The three major episodes—the crying child, the scheme with the bear, and the marketplace misunderstanding—gradually transfer meaning onto the signifier “dried persimmon.” Through the repetition and variation of irrational misreadings, the plot forms what Ricoeur calls a “discordant concordance.”

Third, at the level of mimesis III, the audience experiences a re-framing of fear and receives the tiger’s misunderstandings as humor. This laughter is not merely pleasurable; it signals a shift in self-understanding, revealing how language transforms reality and produces surplus meaning.

In sum, the study demonstrates that the persimmon tale is not simply a comic folktale but a narrative that discloses, in Ricoeurian terms, how speech acts reconfigure both subjectivity and the world. The repeated misunderstandings and shifting layers of meaning reshape the tiger’s narrative self while offering the listener an experience of emotional reconfiguration—from fear to humor. This approach situates the tale within a broader hermeneutic framework and proposes a new direction for understanding Korean folktales.

Applying Ricoeur’s hermeneutic narrative theory to <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon> extends the scope of conventional folktale research beyond analyses focused on humor, satire, or moral instruction. This study contributes to the field in several ways.

First, the framework of triple mimesis clarifies that the narrative

does not unfold as an accidental chain of events but as a temporal configuration. The tale generates meaning through a threefold process: prefiguration through cultural codes of fear, configuration through the plot of misunderstanding, and refiguration through the listener's laughter and expanded self-understanding.

Second, analyzing the tiger through narrative identity demonstrates that identity is not a fixed essence but emerges through the dialectic of sameness and selfhood. The tiger begins as the culturally defined "embodiment of fear," yet becomes "the one who fears the persimmon," revealing the fluid and constructed nature of identity within storytelling.

Third, the concepts of misunderstanding and surplus of meaning illuminate how an ordinary object—the dried persimmon—acquires metaphorical and symbolic significance. The comic structure of the tale is thus not merely humorous but a hermeneutic event arising from the discrepancy between language and reality.

Fourth, from the perspective of refiguration, the laughter experienced by the audience represents not only the relativization of fear but also a shift in self-understanding. The tale thereby functions on a social level, producing communal resonance and cultural solidarity, and offering implications for education and cultural studies.

By integrating Ricoeur's hermeneutics with a Korean folktale, this study demonstrates that the tale's comic and didactic elements are part of a more complex interpretive process involving utterance, misunderstanding, imagination, and reception. This approach positions Korean folktale studies within a global theoretical context and opens pathways for reassessing the contemporary significance and pedagogical potential of folk narratives.

Finally, the findings suggest the need for comparative research with similar East Asian tales that share parallel structures of fear inversion and comic reinterpretation. Chinese tiger stories, in which humans use wit to overcome a fearful creature, reveal a comparable narrative movement from the "absolute fear" of the animal to its hu-

morous reduction—an effect explicable through Ricoeur’s notion of discordant concordance. Japanese oni tales similarly depict fearsome beings rendered powerless by human speech or cleverness, illustrating how language and imagination relativize absolute power.

Moreover, East Asian folktales share a pattern of collective transmission in which storytellers adapt narratives in response to audience reactions, creating variations across generations. Such practices provide fertile ground for examining Ricoeur’s hermeneutic cycle—prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration—at the communal level.

Future studies may compare <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon> with analogous narratives from China and Japan to identify a broader East Asian structure in which symbols of fear undergo comic transformation and generate social meaning. Such work would demonstrate that Ricoeur’s narrative theory is not limited to Western texts but offers a universally applicable hermeneutic tool for understanding storytelling traditions across cultures.

---

\* Submitted 2025.11.28.  
First revision received 2025.12.03.  
Accepted 2025.12.18.

## REFERENCES

- Ricoeur, P. (1999). *Time and Narrative, Vol. 1* (H. Kim & K. Lee, Trans.). Seoul: Moonji Publishing.
- Ricoeur, P. (2004). *Time and Narrative, Vol. 3* (H. Kim, Trans.). Seoul: Moonji Publishing.
- Ricoeur, P. (2001). *The Conflict of Interpretations* (M. S. Yang, Trans.). Seoul: Acanet.
- Ricoeur, P. (2006). *Oneself as Another* (W. K. Kim, Trans.). Seoul: Dongmunseon.
- Cho, H. R. (2002). *A Study on the Structure, Meaning, and Educational Use of the Folktale "The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon"* (Master's thesis). Korea National University of Education.
- Encyclopedia of Korean Oral Literature. (n.d.). Retrieved November 25, 2025, from <https://kdp.aks.ac.kr/gubi>
- Han, Y. J. (2024). An analysis of regional similarities in tiger folktales by transmission period using text-mining. *Ewha Journal of Language and Literature* 62, 23-58.
- Hwang, I. D. (2005). A comparative study of the folktale "The Persimmon More Frightening than the Tiger." *Korean Folklore Studies* 42, 28-376.
- Hwang, Y. J. (2024). Understanding <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon> as a narrative of conflict between nature and culture. *Studies in Oral Literature* 71, 41-148.
- Jeong, S. H. (2025). *A Study of Folkloric Imagination in the Formation of Early Korean Children's Literature: Focusing on the Fairy Tales of Sobn Jin-tae, Ko Han-seung, and Ma Hae-song* (Doctoral dissertation). Korea University, Graduate School.
- Kim, H. H. (2023). *A Study on the Types and Meanings of Tiger Folktales through Fear and Anxiety Psychology* (Doctoral dissertation). Konkuk University Graduate School, Seoul.
- Kim, S. Y. (2014). The narrative of primal anxiety and healing: <The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon>. *Journal of Literary Therapy* 32, 76-77. Seoul: Korean Society for Literary Therapy.
- Lee, S. J. (2015). *A Study for Rewriting "The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon"* (Master's thesis). Korea National University of Education, Graduate School of Education.
- Ricoeur, P. (1999). *Time and Narrative, Vol. 1* (H. Kim & K. Lee, Trans.). Seoul: Moonji Publishing.
- Ricoeur, P. (2004). *Time and Narrative, Vol. 3* (H. Kim, Trans.). Seoul: Moonji Publishing.
- Ricoeur, P. (2001). *The Conflict of Interpretations* (M. S. Yang, Trans.). Seoul: Acanet.
- Ricoeur, P. (2006). *Oneself as Another* (W. K. Kim, Trans.). Seoul: Dongmunseon.
- Sung, K. Y. (1989). A study on Korean oral transmission: The case of <The Tiger and

the Dried Persimmon), *Korean Studies Review* 1, 22-45. Incheon: Inha University  
Institute of Korean Studies.

Encyclopedia of Korean Oral Literature. (n.d.).

Retrieved November 25, 2025, from <https://kdp.aks.ac.kr/gubi>

## 오해, 공포, 그리고 웃음 — 리콥르 해석학으로 읽는 〈호랑이와 꽃감〉

장영창

본 연구는 한국 설화 〈호랑이와 꽃감〉을 폴 리콥르(Paul Ricoeur)의 해석학 이론에 기초하여 분석하고, 특히 삼중의 미메시스(Mimesis I-II-III)와 서사적 정체성 개념을 중심으로 고찰한다. 이 설화는 일반적으로 오해에서 비롯된 웃음을 다룬 해학적 이야기로 이해되어 왔으나, 본고는 그 서사 구조가 공포, 오인, 상상력이 결합되면서 의미와 주체성을 재구성하는 보다 심층적인 과정을 내포하고 있음을 논증한다. 리콥르의 이론적 틀을 적용함으로써, 본 연구는 이 설화를 단순한 웃음담이 아니라 감정과 자기 이해의 변형을 생성하는 서사로 재조명한다.

먼저 본 연구는 설화를 문화적 서사적 맥락 속에 위치시키며, 한국 설화 전통에서 호랑이가 ‘절대적 공포의 행위자’로 기능해 왔음을 지적한다. 미메시스 I의 차원에서, 호랑이를 공포와 동일시하던 문화적 코드가 ‘꽃감’이라는 말 한마디에 아이의 울음이 멈추는 장면에서 균열을 일으킨다. 이 순간은 상징 질서를 붕괴시키며, 새로운 의미 구성이 가능해지는 틈을 형성한다.

미메시스 II의 단계에서는 우는 아이, 곰과의 동행, 장터에서의 소문 등 일련의 오해가 연쇄적으로 축적되면서 플롯이 전개된다. 이러한 누적된 오독은 ‘꽃감’이라는 기표에 과도한 의미를 전이시키며, 비합리적인 인식과 반복된 오해 속에서 서사적 통일성을 형성하는 리콥르가 말한 ‘부조화의 조화(discordant concordance)’를 구성한다.

미메시스 III의 단계에서 청중은 웃음을 통해 공포와 의미를 재형상화

한다. 무서운 포식자였던 호랑이가 하찮은 꽃감을 두려워하는 존재로 변모하는 과정은 청중으로 하여금 감정적 지향과 자기 이해의 전환을 경험하게 한다. 이때 웃음은 공포와 정체성이 구성된 것임을 드러내는 해석학적 사건으로 작동하며, 서사가 세계 인식과 자기 이해를 어떻게 변형할 수 있는지를 보여준다.

이와 같은 리콤폴트 분석을 통해 본 연구는 〈호랑이와 꽃감〉이 단순한 민담을 넘어 발화, 오해, 상상, 수용이 통합적으로 작동하는 서사적 장치임을 밝힌다. 나아가 본 설화가 해석학적 성찰의 장으로서 중요한 가치를 지니며, 동아시아의 유사한 설화들 또한 공포에서 웃음으로 이행하는 유사한 서사 운동을 내포하고 있을 가능성을 제시한다. 이러한 접근은 구비서사 전통에서의 서사적 정체성, 감정, 그리고 해석 과정에 대한 논의를 확장하는 데 기여할 것이다.

**핵심어** 서사적 정체성, 삼중의 미메시스, 오해와 유머, 감정의 재형상화, 한국 설화 해석학.

## ABSTRACT

# Misunderstanding, Fear, and Humor

— A Ricoeurian Hermeneutic Reading of  
<The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon>

Jang, Youngchang

This study analyzes the Korean folktale *The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon* through Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic theory, focusing on the concepts of triple mimesis (Mimesis I–II–III) and narrative identity. While the tale is typically viewed as a humorous anecdote centered on misunderstanding, this paper argues that its narrative structure reveals deeper processes through which fear, misinterpretation, and imagination reshape both meaning and subjectivity. By applying Ricoeur's framework, the study reframes the tale not simply as comic folklore but as a narrative that generates a transformation of emotion and self-understanding.

The study first situates the tale within its cultural and narrative context, noting that the tiger traditionally functions in Korean folklore as an "absolute agent of fear." At the level of Mimesis I, the cultural code that equates the tiger with fear is disrupted when the child immediately stops crying at the mention of the dried persimmon. This moment fractures the symbolic order and opens a space for a new configuration of meaning.

At the level of Mimesis II, the plot develops through a chain of escalating misunderstandings involving the crying child, the tiger's alliance with the bear, and the mistaken assumptions made at the marketplace. These accumulated misreadings transfer meaning onto the signifier "dried persimmon," forming what Ricoeur calls a "discordant concordance"—a narrative unity created out of irrational perceptions and repeated misinterpretations.

In the stage of Mimesis III, the audience reconfigures both fear and meaning through laughter. The tiger's transformation—from a fearsome

predator into a creature terrified of a simple persimmon—enables the listener to experience a shift in emotional orientation and self-understanding. Humor becomes a hermeneutic event that reveals the constructed nature of fear and identity, demonstrating how narrative can transform perception of the world and of oneself.

Through this Ricoeurian analysis, the study shows that the tale functions not merely as folklore but as a narrative device that integrates utterance, misunderstanding, imagination, and reception. The findings highlight the tale's value as a site of hermeneutic reflection, suggesting that similar folktales across East Asia may also embody comparable narrative movements from fear to humor. This approach contributes to broader discussions of narrative identity, emotion, and the interpretive processes of oral storytelling traditions.

**KEYWORDS** Narrative identity, triple mimesis, misunderstanding and humor, refiguration of emotion, Korean folktale hermeneutics