THE LANGUAGE OF RIDDLES

New Perspectives

W. J. Pepicello and Thomas A. Green
What has teeth but cannot eat? What has a heart that's in its head? What has eyes but cannot see? What turns but never moves? What lock is there no key can open?

Riddles such as these, though long familiar to everyone, remain somehow endlessly fascinating. Like litanies that, if faithfully recited, will eventually give up the mysteries they invoke, riddles seem possessed of an almost necromantic power and force.

For the folklorists and linguists who are serious students of what has been designated "a minor genre," the riddle, far from being merely the witty bit of entertainment it is commonly supposed to be, is, in fact, a complex linguistic and aesthetic structure that, when subjected to systematic and scientific study, reveals a great deal about the major human systems—such as language, culture, and art—with which it is inextricably bound up.

Riddles conform to a model of communication made up of a code and an encoded message that is first transmitted and then decoded. As what Professors Pepicello and Green term "a licensed artful communication," the riddle employs quite ordinary language in conventional ways to satisfy the demands placed upon it as the art form that it is. And as an art form, the riddle is subject to constraints that are semiotic (some primary graphic, aural, or other code), aesthetic (artistic conventions that are also semiotic), and grammatical (linguistic restrictions). The riddle operates, therefore, within a cultural framework that is entirely predetermined, and represents what Pepicello and Green designate "a conventional performance."

The signified of riddles is not easily defined; and indeed it is possible—perhaps even necessary—to distinguish several signata. All riddles, the authors point out,

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