



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2024 Volume I: Myth, Legend, Fairy Tale

Introduction

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Myths, legends, fairy tales: these genres stem from a deep historical past, centuries or even millennia before the dawn of writing. For today's children, their abridgements or retellings often offer a gateway into reading. Given how closely many of us associate these genres with childhood, it is often hard to fathom how much attention they have also attracted from anthropologists and philosophers. For the latter, they offer entry points into broad questions including but not limited to: "how did writing change the way humans think?"; "do all myths across cultures have some qualities in common?"; "how do ancient mythologies and legends relate to contemporary mythscapes like the Marvel Universe, or to urban legends like the alligators that supposedly live in the NYC sewers?"

"Myth, Legend, Fairy Tale" created bridges between these two approaches. We read foundational philosophical and anthropological work about oral narratives and mythmaking alongside a selection of sources from around the globe. We also reflected on how these more abstract, academic debates can be brought back into the K-12 classroom. In our conversations, the Fellows brainstormed innovative approaches to teaching myths, fairy tales, and legends to children and adolescents. We also discussed some common problems and choices a teacher faces when choosing how to teach narratives like these. How can one teach a wide cross-cultural selection of sources without simplifying or stereotyping the cultures they come from? How does one handle the differences between the often much more explicit original versions of fairy tales and their expurgated nineteenth- and twentieth-century retellings? Are graphic novels or 'updated' versions of old stories a gateway into or a distraction from more 'genuine' literary and cultural experiences?

Successive weeks of our seminar deepened our collective awareness of the omnipresence of legends, myths, and fairy tales in our everyday lives: they are not merely ancient genres, but evergreen ones, with fresh examples sprouting around us daily. Our weekly sessions also continually reinforced an intuition with which I (somewhat selfishly) chose this seminar topic: even as academic writing about legends, myths, and fairy tales can inform K-12 teaching, the reverse is equally true. Teachers, who interact daily with children whose relationship to these genres is often franker and more credulous than adults', have insights into these genres' role in our decision making and self-fashioning that academics often cannot access with equal immediacy.

The Fellows' curriculum units reflect the depth and range of the experience they brought into our sessions. Several Fellows took myths, legends, and fairy tales as good gateways into teaching narrative form and rhetoric more generally. Because these stories are typically quite brief, students can more easily take an aerial view of their structure. Cheryl Bardoe's unit leans on narrative theory to enrich students' vocabulary for describing the different parts of a successful story. Alexander Elnabli's leads students into an increasingly

sophisticated understanding of allusion as a network of connections that bind texts, and textual traditions, together, while teaching them to reflect on the value of asking broad existential questions for which we often do not have non-mythical answers. Nancy Bonilla’s and Sean Griffin’s units focus on a popular contemporary young adult genre—dystopian literature—and connect it back to more traditional oral storytelling to help students understand why they are drawn to this modern genre and what lessons they derive from it.

The units developed by Daniel Croteau, Katie Yates, Kasalina Maliamu Nabakooza, and Felicia Fountain encourage students to think about the persistence of myth in their own self-understanding. Croteau does so through the prism of the continued cultural prominence of a mythical understanding of the hero. Yates focuses on the quest narrative; Nabakooza playfully connects mythical narrative to artmaking by leading students in creating fairy tale-inspired puppet theaters. Fountain’s unit frames the study of myth within the context of students’ attempts to discover their own family legends and mythologies and to reflect on their communal importance.

Jaimee Mendillo, Jessie Piper, and Rita Mercedes Begines-Cid work within more narrowly defined cultural contexts: Indigenous American myths, myths and legends developed by Latinx and Black American communities, and the legendary frameworks of medieval Spain. Mendillo leads her students into a more nuanced understanding of myth to introduce them to the wide range of cosmologies developed by different Indigenous American communities. The unit takes myth as an opportunity to dispel common preconceptions about the uniformity of Indigenous American cultures and belief systems. Piper’s richly researched account of the legend of La Llorona and the fairy tales surrounding Brer Rabbit teaches students crucial lessons about cultural development and mutual influence as well as about the dangers of appropriation. Mercedes develops her unit in the context of foreign language teaching, using a variety of contemporary retellings and adaptations to introduce students of Spanish to a celebrated medieval epic poem from Andalusia, *El cantar de mio Cid*.

Ranging widely in their approaches and in the ages of students for whom they were produced, these units exemplify how much myths, fairy tales, and legends still have to teach us, both as treasure troves of cultural history and as genres that remain pivotal to our self-understanding even today.

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