



## The Organ Tradition: Ancient, Modern Recycled

Curriculum Unit 84.04.02  
by Camilla Greene

I teach English at the Cooperative High School which is a school of choice in the New Haven educational system. This school has an enrollment of approximately 210 students who are motivated to learn. One of the enriching factors of the Cooperative High School is the ethnic diversity of the student population, yet these students, who are of average and above average intellectual abilities, are hesitant and reluctant to share their cultural heritages. One of the objectives of this unit is to have the students engage in cultural exchanges. Study of the oral tradition will be the vehicle or medium for helping students to realize that the magnitude and vast richness of the oral tradition is the result of contributions from cultures across the globe and each one of us has been taught at least in part by the oral tradition operating in our respective cultures. To share these cultural teachings with each other will serve to broaden our awareness of other cultures while reinforcing the fact that there is much that is common or shared by all cultures.

In my readings on the oral tradition, folklorists repeatedly bemoan the fact that curriculum on the oral tradition is nonexistent on most levels of education. One writer commented that the oral tradition, if a student is lucky, is touched upon in the primary grades and ignored until college. Therefore, another objective of this unit is to have juniors in high school investigate the oral tradition as it was incorporated in the earliest Greek writings prior to the birth of Christ; as it was used in the writings of a nineteenth century American poet; as crossed time and cultures in ballad form; and as it appeared in a modern twentieth century novel. A play by Euripides entitled "Helen" will be read in order to study a Greek dramatists use of the oral tradition. The students will then read sections of "Song of Myself" from the collection of poems called *Leaves of Grass* written by nineteenth century American poet, Walt Whitman. Whitman like Euripides made use of the oral tradition in his celebrated poem "Song of Myself", and even though many centuries and cultures separate these two writers, students will discover the writings of Euripides and Whitman have much in common. *Go Tell It On The Mountain*, a twentieth century novel by James Baldwin will be read. Students will note that while Baldwin made use of the oral tradition like Euripides and Whitman, his ethnic heritage and the age in which he is writing make his use of the oral tradition quite different. At this point in the study of the oral tradition, students should be able to find their own points of comparison between Euripides, Whitman, and Baldwin.

Students in high school English courses seldom if ever have an opportunity to do comparative studies of literature as they study one genre and then another year after year. In their courses of study the novel, the play, or poem is approached most often from the viewpoint of what insights it reveals about human nature or, in the case of a novel or play, the development of the character or plot. Although these elements of literature should be discussed, the main focus of study will be on the didacticism and the manner in which the writings

of Euripides, Whitman, and Baldwin preserve certain elements of their respective cultures. Students will have the opportunity to discover as much as they can about each culture or age by examining its use of and regard for the oral tradition particularly as it manifests itself in the literature of that age.

For the purpose of this unit, the oral tradition will be defined as the verbal information gathered and handed on within a community. This information concerns the heroes, customs, history, religion, rituals, and beliefs of a group or community. The group is most often a cultural group, but it should be noted that work groups also have oral traditions. The verbal information of a cultural group must adhere to certain characteristics before it can be considered a part of the oral tradition. First, the body of information must be passed down by word of mouth from one generation to the next. Second, the information must be accepted by the entire group. Third, the information must have undergone changes inherent in the telling and retelling of information. It should be noted that because of the changes which occur when verbal material is told and retold, the oral tradition contains many inconsistencies and irregularities. The fourth and last characteristic is that the information must have endured for a reasonably long period of time. The verbal format of the oral tradition has many names. It may be a song, a poem, a proverb or a saying, a ballad, or a story. If the story is exceedingly long and if it follows a certain formula, then it is considered an epic. The early Greek epics took as long as three days to recite.

Among the earliest literate societies in western culture is the Greek culture. Juniors in high school should be able to name a few of the early Greek writers. For instance, Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Aristophanes, and Euripides should be named. Class discussion should center around the contributions each writer made to the development of Greek literature. As Euripides is the writer who will be studied, the students should understand that Euripides plays centered around the characters who were developed and passed on from generation to generation through the oral tradition. All the Greek plays prior to and during the age of Euripides with perhaps one exception had mythological subjects. Using traditional mythological characters and subjects did not prevent Euripides from being innovative. In his dramas, Euripides incorporated new techniques which prepared the way for playwriting for the more "literate" society which was emerging.

Euripides in the fifth century B.C. had the advantage of writing after such Greek writers as Homer and Hesiod. Therefore, he could criticize the literary works written prior to his time while introducing new elements into Greek writings. Also Euripides had a wealth of oral tradition to incorporate into his plays. The audiences for whom he wrote his dramas knew a great deal about the mythological figures who were his characters and they knew much about the tales and adventures which involved his characters. Euripides audiences looked at his treatment of the mythological characters rather than looking for a new character or a new story. Greek audiences at that time were entertained by watching the characters whom they knew well cavort about the stage reciting stories or involved in plots which were also well known. Perhaps an analogy could be drawn by our fascination with watching again and again such well known stories as: *A Christmas Carol*, *Peter Pan* or *Cinderella*. We already know the story. The charm or fascination is in the retelling of the traditional tale.

No literary authority knows for sure when the character or name "Helen" was introduced in the oral tradition, but Homer certainly made much use of her character which was developed through the long period of time of the oral tradition. Homer's Helen is not the only account of this heroine. Euripides chose the sixth century poet Stesichorus' second account of Helen for his play. It was said that Steichorus was struck blind by his first account of Helen where he blamed her for causing the Trojan War. In his second account the sixth century lyrical poet denied that Helen had ever been to Troy. He stated that it was her phantom who went to Troy while the real Helen was transported by the gods to Egypt.

Euripides was ahead of his time. His play "Helen", written in 412 B.C., contains many innovative elements as well as traditional elements of Greek drama. Euripides creative talents make his plays more akin to drama as we know it today. It should be noted that lyric poetry was the earliest form for Greek writings. The poem was recited by one person and in later years the chorus was added. Then three Greek writers were to add one character each until there came to be as many as four people involved in presenting a poem. Slowly the concept of tragedy evolved in Greek writing. The word "tragedy" did not mean sad. In fact many Greek "Tragedies" had happy endings. "Tragoedia" actually means goat-song, and in Greek drama tragedy meant that profound issues, illuminating universal problems and their impact on the individual, were going to be presented. In this vein, Euripides was referred to as the most tragic poet meaning he was among the first to transform mythological characters into contemporary human beings. As if to break further with tradition, Euripides brings Menelaus on stage in rags and has him mistaken for a commoner. Here-to-fore in Greek drama kings were always dressed in royal attire. In Euripides' play, women were viewed in a new light. Helen is all goodness and wholesomeness. Perhaps Euripides meant to use this character of Helen to balance the baseness of his other women characters, Medea and Phaedra, who appeared in his earlier-plays. Euripides also broke from the traditional mold by emphasizing the fortunes and escapades, sufferings of man rather than focusing on the actions of the gods.

Euripides was a conventional early Greek playwright in certain respects. He did include the traditional prologue and epilogue. Helen delivers the prologue and the chorus delivers a short epilogue. Euripides has the choral odes signal new actions and the play leads up to a central action which takes place off stage and is recounted by the traditional messenger. The chorus in this play either serves as commentators or sympathetic listeners and in one instance offers some humorous dialogue to the play. For example, after Helen's long pleading speech to save her husband's life the chorus replies somewhat sarcastically "But I long to hear what Menelaus now will say to save his life."(1)

This play was written like a romantic comedy. There is amusement offered by the mistaken identity of Menelaus and the duped character of the jilted suitor Theoclymenus. But this play was more than a comedy. Euripides has much to say about the ravages of war and the sufferings it imposes upon the warrior, his family and community. Euripides' audiences would have appreciated his pacifist attitude because his play was performed at a time when the Athenians had suffered defeats in Sicily, and because of these setbacks Athenian democracy would never recover its former splendor.

Euripides' "Helen" like any other literary work of that time was closely aligned with the oral tradition and it tells much about the hopes, dreams, aspirations and customs of the time and culture. Menelaus tells the audience what was expected of a hero in that time, and the rituals, customs of mourning burial, hospitality and courtship are shown in this play. Euripides is referred to as the most modern dramatists of the ancient world. His use of humor, his pacifist views on wars and his new penetrating psychological insights into the virtue and goodness of the main character, Helen, certainly support his being called the most modern of the ancients.

In moving from the study of fifth century Greek writings to nineteenth century American writings, it should be noted that the oral tradition was still being incorporated into the literature. Such American writers as Hawthorne, Poe, and Whitman made use of the oral traditions in their literature. The nineteenth century American poets had a difficult time incorporating the oral tradition of the European cultures into their writings. These American writers wanted to write about an oral tradition which existed in the common regions of America. America in the nineteenth century certainly had a folk or oral tradition, but because of the comparative "newness" of the American folk or oral tradition, the more established and snobbish European

writers scoffed at American writers' attempts to use an American oral tradition. American writers ridiculed any American writers who imitated the traditional epic forms. Longfellow was criticized in 1855 when he published his American epic poem *Song of Hiawatha* because his epic closely imitated the meter of the Finnish epic *Kalevala*. (2) Poe did write a poem about the mythological woman Helen which he entitled "Helen" so Longfellow was not the only American writer at that time to borrow from the European oral tradition. Hawthorne and Whitman who were writing at the same time did much to bring respect and recognition to the American folk tradition. Hawthorne looked to the folk legends of the Puritans for characters and subject matter for his novel *The Scarlet Letter* which was considered the first American novel worthy of recognition by European men of letters.

It is interesting to note the change in thinking about the oral tradition from the age of Euripides in the fifth century B.C. to the nineteenth century. In the period when Euripides was writing, all literature borrowed from the oral tradition and only citizens of great intellect and wealth had access to the writings produced at that time. Needless to say the oral tradition held a place of prominence among the folk and royal citizens of ancient Greece. The oral tradition was not respected by the intellectuals of the nineteenth century. Some nineteenth century literary theorists held with the belief that oral tradition or folk tradition was a product of the common, uneducated, illiterate folk. These critics of the oral tradition failed to take into account that while it is true that much of the oral tradition is initiated and perpetuated by such a group of citizens, there is a folk or oral tradition in evidence on each level of the intellectual continuum. Further investigation of the complexities and subtleties of the oral tradition led modern theorists to refute the view that such oral information is the by-product of an unlettered mind.

Whitman sought to take the American folk tradition and "dignify" it by using it in a sophisticated literary context. It is argued whether Walt Whitman is an American poet or just a poet who applied European theories of poetry to American themes. Nonetheless, one cannot look at the oral tradition as it manifested itself in American literature without looking at the poetry of Whitman.

Whitman believed that great poetry was derived from the oral tradition of the folk or common people. Whitman's epic poem *Leaves of Grass* contains much information borrowed from the oral tradition. Whitman also tries to create a national American literature based upon the American oral tradition. The "folk" that Whitman looks to and listens to are the common people in America. He incorporates into his poem "Song of Myself" the slang, traditions, religious, social, and moral life of the common people. Whitman states that his poetry is "innate in mankind and not the result of genteel conventions." (3)

Students may wish to have some information about the many changes that occurred in the literature of the western world between the age of Euripides and the writings of Walt Whitman. *The Nature of Narrative* by Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg proves information on the tradition of narrative literature in the western world. The first three chapters discuss the earliest forms of narrative literature—myth, folktale, epic, allegory, and satire. The following chapters trace the incorporation or uses of the oral tradition in narrative literature. This information could help to outline not only what changes occurred in literature between the writing periods of Euripides and Whitman, but it could also help explain the change in attitude towards the oral tradition. Euripides was close to the oral tradition in that it provided the characters and plots for his writing while Whitman felt that he had to justify and dignify his use of the oral folk tradition.

Even though some 2400 years separate the writings of Euripides and Whitman, there are elements for comparison. The most significant similarity between these two important men is the fact that they both dared to break with the literary traditions of their times. Euripides' audiences probably were surprised and shocked

when Menelaus, a prominent hero and king, appeared on stage in the play *Helen* dressed in rags. Imagine their subsequent surprise when this king was mistaken for and spoken to like a servant. Greek audiences at that time were accustomed to seeing the gods, heroes and kings displayed on stage in clothing and manners befitting their stations in life. Whitman's innovations were no less startling. In 1855 the readers of Walt Whitman's epic poem "Song of Myself" were shocked and appalled by many elements of the writing. In this poem Whitman encouraged and challenged his readers to forget about their educations and religions and directed them to find out about the world firsthand when he stated that they should "...hold creeds and schools in abeyance..." (4) and they shouldn't "...take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead..." (5) Whitman told his readers to "...listen to all sides and filter them from yourself." (6)

Euripides and Whitman used their writings as a vehicle for turning men's thoughts away from the lofty "privileged" classes of their respective societies. Both of these writers wanted their readers or viewers to focus on the sufferings of the ordinary people or focus on the menial problems inherent in day-to-day living. Euripides' plays dealt with the sufferings of mankind. Most, if not all, of the Greek writings at the time of Euripides concerned the antics and the capricious natures of the gods. Humans were present in these early Greek writings for the amusement and sport of the gods. The human characters were not viewed as significant individuals. Euripides broke with this manner of presenting human characters. In his play *Helen* he focused on the sufferings and lamentations of a woman who loved her husband and believed him to be missing in battle or dead. Euripides didn't present just the anguish of his main female character, but he presented her through dialogue and actions so realistic that pity and empathy for the character was evoked from his audiences. This type of audience response was unusual in early Greek drama. Whitman in "Song of Myself" not only celebrated himself and all other individuals, but he also celebrated the common folk; the people largely ignored by men of education and status in nineteenth century America. Whitman, in section 13 of "Song of Myself" describes and glorifies a common Negro laborer particularly when he describes how "...The sun falls on...the black of his polish'd and perfect limbs." (7)

The comparisons that exist between Euripides and Whitman are numerous. Once the students get started looking for comparisons, they will be able to add many more points of comparison to those already suggested. The students may wish to investigate the elements of humor in the writings of Euripides and Whitman or they may wish to compare each writer's use of individualism in his writings. It should also be noted that each writer was criticized for contributing to the moral decay of his society because of certain elements in his writing. Whatever the interests or ability level of the students, they would be able to find, list, or investigate other elements of similarities between Euripides and Whitman.

Almost one hundred years after Walt Whitman published his collection of poems entitled *Leaves of Grass* which contained his epic poem "Song of Myself", James Baldwin published his first novel, *Go Tell It On The Mountain*. Like Whitman, Baldwin recognized the literary value inherent in the folk, the common folk tradition. But unlike Whitman, Baldwin did not have to search beyond his environment to write about the common folk. Baldwin's heritage is that of the American Negro. While Whitman had to observe the Negro from the street, Baldwin only needed to witness his own life and those of his fellow blacks. A black growing up in the black oral tradition from the time he or she is born. Baldwin incorporated the black oral tradition in his novel.

The main setting for *Go Tell It On The Mountain* is the storefront church in Harlem, called "The Temple of the Fire Baptized". The name of the church is significant in the oral tradition of Negro Americans because the baptism of a black christian is a jumping, hot, noisy experience. In the black religious experience you are not "in the spirit" of your religion until you feel the spirit and demonstrate your being possessed by the spirit in a hand-clapping, shouting, dancing way. Your being filled with the spirit is witnessed by the other members of

the church and with this experience you are accepted into the circle of the faith as a believer who has seen the light and is a true follower of Christ.

James Baldwin grew up in Harlem where his father was a minister at a neighborhood storefront church. Baldwin was a boy preacher so it is no coincidence that Baldwin's first novel concerns a fourteen year old black Harlem youth's searching for his place in his family, in his religion, in his Harlem community and the world surrounding his ghetto community. The story is designed to stress the state of John, the stepson of the head deacon of the church, Gabriel. The problem John faces is that he is feeling anxious about his future in this religious community. He observes the "spirit" as it takes hold of the members of the church, namely his father, Sister McCandless, and a nineteen year old young man John greatly admires, Brother Elisha. Like a detached observer John watches as "...They sang with all the strength that was in them, and clapped their hands for joy...He did not feel it himself, the joy they felt..." (8)

In the negro folk tradition, negro children are pestered by their parents to "get religion" and join the church. This pressure is brought to bear because of the parents' fears for the lives of their children. The only choices a poor black youth has is church or jail. As a poor black teenager you either "hang in the streets" which increases your chances of ending up in jail or you "hang in church" which is your salvation. Poor blacks have these two choices because they are isolated from the mainstream of American life which would offer many more options. In *Go Tell It On The Mountain*, John's stepbrother, Roy, who has chosen the life of the streets, angrily tells his mother "...You think that's all that's in the world is jails and churches?..."(9)

The black oral expression is in singing and speaking. The ministers in the black churches preach using a highly stylized format. "Signifying" is the term used to describe the blacks' extremely subtle and aggressive use of language. A successful black preacher has the ability to make signifying a very high oral art form. Most nonblacks when they observe this preaching phenomenon miss the essential creativity of the oral performance because they focus primarily on the singing and the dancing. Gabriel's sermons in *Go Tell It On The Mountain* are representative of this rich black oral tradition and Baldwin accurately records and describes this and other oral traditions that are a part of the American negro folk tradition.

## **LESSON PLAN #1 Sharing Ethnic Traditions**

---

**Objective** : Each student will present in written, oral, and visual form his or her family's folk tradition.

**Procedure** : Discuss the elements that make up a tradition. From the discussion elicit such elements as: tales, songs, ethnic restaurants, religion, language, books, records, costumes, proverbs and sayings, and prejudices. Discuss the significance of each of the elements in a folk heritage, and how these elements relate to the oral tradition.

**Presentation** : After discussing methods for gathering information about family folk traditions, instruct students to design a format that will include most if not all of the elements listed above. Give the students a reasonable amount of time to gather the information, write their family histories, and bring in any artifacts that they would like to share with the class. Each student will present his or her family folk tradition to the class.

**Notes** : Some students will have more than one ethnic heritage. Suggest that they investigate and report on

more than one heritage for extra credit, or suggest that they select the dominate heritage or the one which would prove easiest to document.

An excellent resource article for this lesson plan is Richard M. Dorson’s article “Is there A Folk In The City?” in a collection of essays edited by Americo Paredes and Ellen J. Stekert (see bibliography). The book is available at the Yale Cross Campus Library.

## **Lesson Plan #2 Comparison of Two American Novels**

---

**Objective** : Students will be able to write an essay of at least 250 words comparing one American novel with another.

**Preparation** : Though not necessarily in the same school year, students should have read Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It On The Mountain* discussing the ways in which both authors incorporate the American oral traditions in their novels.

**Procedure** : Using either the method of brainstorming or clustering ask the students to recall as many similarities and differences as they can regarding the plot, characters, and settings of the two novels. Write the list of similarities and differences on the board.

**Presentation:** Instruct each student to review the list generated through class discussion and think of a topic for his or her essay on some aspect of comparing the two novels. Each student should select items from the list and reorganize them according to his-or-her topic for the essay. The student should then write a rough copy of his or her essay which can be reviewed by either a classmate or the teacher. Then the student should write and submit his or her final copy of the essay.

## **Lesson Plan #3 Comparing Two Ethnic Versions of a Ballad**

---

**Objective** : Students will be able to list at least twenty differences between two versions of a ballad.

**Preparation:** Copies of the British and American Negro versions of the “Ballad of Barbara Allen” will be needed. The British version of the ballad can be located in the 1958 edition of the anthology, *Adventures in English Literature* , published by Harcourt, Brace and Company, page 62. The American Negro version of the ballad can be found in Henry Spaldings’ *Encyclopedia of Black Folklore and Humor* , (see Bibliography) pages 230-232.

**Procedure** : After several oral readings of the two versions of the ballad and after some discussion, ask each student to list at least twenty ways in which the two ballads are similar or different.

**Presentation and Discussion** : Ask the students to share their points of comparison. Through discussion ascertain why one culture would add or delete certain information from the ballad. Ask students to draw some conclusions about what is important in one culture as opposed to what is important in another. Ask students what is different about the language usage of the two cultures if this point was not initiated by the students.

Finally, ask if the students have any other examples of information crossing cultural domains.

## Notes

---

1. Rex Warner, trans. *Three Great Play of Euripides* (New York: New American Library, 1958), p. 166.
2. Gene Bluestein, *The Voice of The Folk* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972), p. 47.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
4. Frank Stoval, ed. *Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), p. 3, line 10.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 4, lines 37-39.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 4, line 42.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 13, lines 234-235.
8. James Baldwin, *Go Tell It On The Mountain* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1983) p. 14-15.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

Baldwin, James. *Go Tell It On The Mountain* . New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1983.

This novel chronicles the dramatic struggles of a black family of Harlem that has moved from the rural South to the Northern ghetto. 221 pages.

Bluestein, Gene. *The Voice of the Folk: Folklore and American Literary Theory* . Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972.

Eight chapters discussing the relationships between folklore and American literary theory; One chapter on Whitman's contribution to American and a chapter entitled "*Blues as a Literary Theme*" . 158 pages.

Grant, Michael. *Myths of the Greeks and Romans* . New York: New American Library, 1962.

This author traces each Greek and Roman myth in chronological order back to its ancient source. This 394 page book contains maps of the ancient world and photographs of Greek and Roman art.

Kimmy, John and Ashley Brown, editors. *The World of Tragedy* . New York: New American Library, 1981.

This book chronicles the changing view of tragedy in drama, fiction, poetry and criticism from Ancient times to today. It contains a chapter on Wordsworth and Hawthorne and references to Euripides. 464 pages.



Lester, Julius, "James Baldwin-Reflections of a Maverick" *New York Times Book Review* , May 27,1984.

This is an interview of James Baldwin conducted by Julius Lester a black American writer who is fifteen years younger than Baldwin.

Miller, James E. Jr. ed., *Whitman's "Song of Myself" Origin, Growth, Meaning* . New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1964.

This volume contains a chronological study of the rewritings of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* along with six critical essays of one essay by Roy Pearce is entitled "'Song of Myself' as Epic". 202 pages.

Paredes, Americo, and Ellen J. Stekert, editors. *The Urban Experience and Folk Tradition* , Texas: The University of Texas Press, 1971.

Spalding, Henry, ed. *Encyclopedia of Black Folklore and Humor*. New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1978.

A chronologic, comprehensive collection of black folklore and humor from the arrival of blacks in the new world to modern times. Contains, the black variant of the familiar European ballad "Barbara Allen", first published in Pepys' Diary around 1665, where it was called "A Scottish Ballad". 516 pages.

Stovall, Floyd, ed. *Walt Whitman* . New York: Hill and Wang, 1961.

This book contains a selection of Whitman's poetry and prose with an introduction and notes written by the editor. 471 pages.

Strouse, Jean., "Toni Morrison's Black Magic," *Newsweek* , 97:52, March 30, 1981.

An article a) on the black female writer, Toni Morrison, who writes about the black American experience and b) on her writings coincide with the writings of black male writers such as Ellison and Baldwin and other black women writers such as Walker and Bambara.

Warner, Rex, trans. *Three Great Plays of Euripides* . New York: New American Library, 1958.

A collection of three plays by Euripides: "Medea", "Hippolytus", "Helen" ; contains 12-page introduction written by the translator entitled "Euripides and His Age" and each play contains an introduction. 192 pages.

White, Joseph L. *The Psychology of Blacks: An Afro-American Perspective* . Prentice Hall, Inc. New Jersey Englewood Cliffs 1984.

This book contains a comprehensive study of the patterns of thinking for black Americans. There is much information on the oral tradition and the writings of James Baldwin. 201 pages.

---

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>