



Once Upon A Time

Curriculum Unit 84.04.04
by Diana Doyle

Most children seem to love fables and folk tales. They become captured by the powers of their own imaginations, listening to stories of magic, good and evil, and of weakness and strength. They love the talking animals, witches, trolls, princes, and especially the peasants that people the stories. If children become excited by and interested in what they read in school, there is a chance that they will read more on their own.

This unit is designed to teach fables and folk tales to middle school, primarily fifth grade, students of various reading abilities and interests. It is intended to be used in English classes to enrich and expand the learning experience and to serve as a springboard for writing activities. Because each fable and folktale is fairly short in length, it is possible for the teacher to make duplicate copies of each tale to be read. Every child can therefore have his/her own copy. By the end of the unit, each student should have a collection of stories to keep, and the school does not have the expense of textbooks. The only book which could not be copied in this way is "Alice in Wonderland." However, this book is available in inexpensive paperback editions.

The objectives of this unit are:

1. To instill enjoyment of fables and folktales at the simple level of reading and learning.
2. To cultivate an understanding of the nature of folktales and their subject matter both concrete and abstract.
3. To expose children to the "classics" of children's literature, fables, folktales, and a long book, "Alice in Wonderland."
4. To further reinforce an understanding of folktales, fables and fairytales by role playing, oral readings and play acting.
5. To introduce students to the oral tradition of storytelling.
6. To refine and practice creative writing skills.

STRATEGIES

The unit will start with the telling and reading of fables, basically those of Aesop. The short easy familiar “Lion and the Mouse,” “Hare and the Tortoise,” “Fox and the Grapes,” and “Ant and the Grasshopper” are all ideal introductory fables. These fables illustrate the distinctions of fables from other story writing.

The student should understand that a fable is a moral concept or idea illustrated by a simple anecdotal story and usually followed by an epigram or proverb. They should recognize that a fable is told on two levels. They should be able to distinguish the concrete subject of the fable (the actual story or plot) from the abstract subject (the meaning of the story or the moral). The concrete subject of “The Hare and the Tortoise” is a race between two seemingly ill-matched animals; the abstract subject tells us that steady, determined work will, in the long run, win out over flashy showmanship.

Students, after reading a few of Aesop’s fables, should also be aware of the characteristics of the “beast fables.” They should understand that although animals are the main characters, these fables are really concerned with the human aspects of existence. The animals are animals on one level only, the concrete level. On the abstract level, the animals take on human characteristics, and reveal the human foibles and weaknesses illustrated by the fable.

Students can read orally and silently “Fox and the Grapes,” “Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing,” “Dog and the Wolf,” and “Ant and the Grasshopper” among others. Class discussions should center on the concrete subject of each fable, followed by the discussions of the abstract (a much more difficult concept) subject. The meanings of the moral and its relationship to the abstract subject should also be included in class discussions.

Because the concrete subject of a fable is really a summary of the story, relating the concrete subject in class is excellent practice for storytelling and for summarizing. Students should work on presenting short, clear orderly synopses of the fables. It may be helpful for the students to write the concrete subject first, but the goal should be for the students to “tell” the story, then explain its meaning.

Students will find comparisons of fables interesting. Not all fables are from Aesop. “The Two Elephants,” an Indian fable, for example, is easily compared to the “Dog and the Wolf” of Aesop. Both fables are about freedom and slavery, and the same moral could be used for each one. A discussion of the universality of man’s experiences can be generated from this moral.

Children can also read some modern fables. Those of James Thurber immediately come to mind. “The Owl Who Was God” is a very good illustration of a modern beast fable, and can be compared with Aesop’s fables.

The students should also do some writing of fables. They can be given the moral and asked to think up a fable to go with it. They can also be asked to write a fable and to give a moral of their own. The students should also be able to state both the concrete and abstract subjects of their fables.

Folktales are very popular with children and immediately hold their interest. Children love to read or hear about the magic and mystery and the triumph of good over evil, of the “stupid” over the clever. Obviously, these tales can be interpreted in very sophisticated terms. The meanings can lie deep in the unaware subconscious of man. However, for nine and ten year olds, seeing the ugly duckling become a swan, or the simpleton win the princess is enough. From these triumphs, an understanding of one subject of the folktales can emerge the dreams and longings of man.

Many of the “classic” folk and fairytales have been performed by Story Theatre and are available on videotape. Since I feel it is both fun and valuable for the students to see another version or interpretation, I have selected the stories with the available videotapes in mind.

“Rumpelstiltskin”, a favorite tale, is a good starting point. I think the story should be told or read aloud by the teacher and then read orally by the class. It should be read at least twice before discussion begins.

Since this is a somewhat complex tale, it lends itself readily to role-playing. The students must think about the actions and the motivations of the main characters the King, the Miller, the Queen and Rumpelstiltskin himself. Who is the real villain of this fairy tale? In most folktales, there is a distinct line, a boundary between good and evil. However, Rumpelstiltskin is one exception, and its gray, fuzzy areas of morality give the students a great deal to think about.

As a role-playing activity, the students take the parts of the main characters and defend their actions. These students are questioned by the rest of the class about their behavior. Why did the King need more gold? Why did the Miller lie about this daughter’s ability? These are the types of questions asked by the class.

The students become very familiar with the tale, and form their own ideas and interpretations. They are then ready to watch the Story Theater production of “Rumpelstiltskin”, a delightful tongue-in-cheek approach to the story. The children can then discuss their agreements and disagreements, satisfactions and dissatisfactions with what they saw, becoming critics as they verbalize their reactions. The students should also practice writing their opinions by writing a critical review.

The students should be helped to continually practice “telling” the story. As each story grows more familiar to the students, they can try to narrate, clearly and in order, the events of the tale or part of a tale.

This same format can be followed with such folktales as “Jack and the Beanstalk”, “The Three Bears”, and “The Frog Prince.” The discussions, of course, would center on differing ideas. With “Jack”, the discussion could be centered on the justification of stealing the giant’s property and taking the law into one’s hands. Are we ever justified in stealing what we know is stolen? In “The Three Bears”, discussion and role-playing could be focused on trespassing. With the folktale “The Frog Prince”, the question of keeping one’s word becomes important, and the discussion can compare the actions to the characters in “Rumpelstiltskin.” Besides role-playing, each of these can be easily acted out, either as a whole story or simply for an important scene which demonstrates the central idea.

It is important, I think, to treat each tale by itself. One story told after the other will overwhelm the students with too much material and too much story. The students can easily become confused. Children (and adults) need time to absorb, contemplate and internalize.

Because folktales are universal, children are fascinated when they recognize a familiar story in an unusual setting. Folktales from other countries, (besides the familiar Grimms’) should be included in the children’s reading and discussion.

For example, “Jack Frost”, a Russian folktale, is almost immediately recognized as a Cinderella story. The students can pick out the elements of similarity a wicked stepmother and sister, a magical helper, gifts for the good girl and punishments for the wicked. A Chinese Cinderella, “Yeh Hsien”, is even closer to the familiar story. The Chinese heroine goes to the Cave Festival dressed in a green silk jacket, is almost recognized by her wicked stepmother and stepsister, runs away and drops a slipper. In both cases, as in Cinderella (or

Ashputtle as in Grimm) as the fortunes of the heroine rise, those of her oppressors fall, and all get appropriate rewards or punishments. An interesting sidelight for the class to notice is that the Chinese King, unlike his counterparts, is not a totally admirable figure. (In fact he is more like the King in Rumpelstiltskin). The Chinese King requests so much from Yeh Hsien's fishbones (her protectors and wish fulfillers) that the fishbones refuse to grant him any more wishes. No other "happily ever after" hero has been depicted as quite so greedy.

"Beauty and the Beast" is another favorite tale of enchantment and change that should be read carefully by the students. Like many folktales, it is filled with contrasts good vs. evil, jealousy and greed vs. generosity. The ugly monstrous beast with the gentle soul contrasts sharply with the image of Beauty's beautiful but monstrous sisters.

"Beauty and the Beast", like "Cinderella", can be found in many forms. "The Small Tooth Dog", an English folktale, is very similar except that the enchanted prince is now a dog. The youngest daughter, like Beauty, must save her father, pass a test, show her devotion, before the prince can return to his rightful form.

Another folktale in the same mode is a Russian story, "The Frog Princess." In this, Ivan, the King's youngest son, must marry, to his dismay, a frog. She, in turn, must compete with two human princesses for Ivan's father's approval. On the brink of success, as the frog princess is about to regain her true form, Prince Ivan errs, and she is taken away from him. His task is therefore to find her. (Pass the test) and to win her back.

This same theme is seen in the longer, more elaborate "East of the Sun and West of the Moon", a Norwegian folktale. The roles are reversed and the lassie must free her prince, the White Bear. She, also the youngest daughter, married to the White Bear to help her father, has been instrumental in losing her husband. To atone for her lack of faith she sets out on the quest to find her prince.

These stories can be easily acted out or narrated and mimed. The points of comparison—the three brothers or sisters, the enchanted prince or princess in the monster form, the failure (or almost) of a test, and the quest for the redemption and transformation of the bewitched human are areas of emphasis and action. Children can have fun being transformed from a frog to a human.

The students can also create their own folktales, especially their own Cinderella and Beauty and the Beast tales. They can work in groups and present their tales. One or two students in each group should be encouraged to "tell" the story, rather than read it.

The mythic tale "Cupid and Psyche" could also be included in this group. This myth, the story of the love of Cupid, the son of the goddess Aphrodite, for the beautiful mortal Psyche, a youngest daughter, closely parallels the story "East of the Sun and West of the Moon." Psyche, married to a monster, envied by jealous sisters, loses Cupid and must atone for her lack of faith. The story is the same, but the magic in the folktales becomes the machinations of the gods. Psyche, is hated and envied not only by her sisters, but by Aphrodite, a goddess. She has become angry with the attention the beautiful Psyche receives from mortals, the attention Aphrodite feels should be reserved for herself. She sends Cupid to destroy Psyche, but he is unable to kill such a beautiful creature and loves her instead. When Psyche is finally reunited with her Cupid, she is transformed into an immortal, becoming one of the gods, making her acceptable to Aphrodite. This is Psyche's "happily ever after." However, the actions of the gods seem to diminish the humans in this myth. Even Psyche, by becoming a goddess, leaves the human connection that is so much a part of the folktales.

"Alice in Wonderland" is the ultimate long fantasy or fairytale, almost a collection of small tales woven around a unifying frame. Alice herself threads all the stories together with her very real and very sturdy presence.

"Alice" should be read aloud by the teacher and by the students. Children enter quite readily into the magical world of Wonderland, especially after having read the folktales. The stories the students have been reading have common elements and ideas, but are separate stories. Now the children read and accept easily the events and the figures which people the Wonderland landscape. From the time Alice follows the White Rabbit down the hole and grows (transforms) larger and smaller, the children delight in and have fun with each event.

Because of movies, television and Golden Books, children sometimes feel that they "know" the story, that they have already read it. However, once the students actually start reading the words of Lewis Carroll, they are really hooked.

Each of the chapters is a small tale or adventure and can be treated and assigned separately. However, the children do look at the book as a whole. Writing assignments appropriate to each section can be given. For example, students can create shape poem after the chapter "A Caucus Race and a Long Tale." Because transformations in size and shape are so integral to this book, as well as to folktales, students can create a world of their own where they can control one change in themselves. The baby changing into a pig, the Cheshire cat changing places are examples of transformations found in Alice. To personalize the story, children can be asked to write about a time when they felt alone or different from anyone else, the way Alice first felt in Wonderland.

Alice becomes acquainted with several strange and wonderful characters in Wonderland. Characters such as the Mock Turtle, the Mad Hatter, the Duchess, the March Hare and the Cheshire Cat appear and disappear with startling regularity. Although the characters and adventures have a magical mysterious quality to them, they also have an air of whimsy and nonsense to enliven them. "Alice" is very amusing, and its humor immediately distinguishes it from the folktales which are far more serious. The characters in the folktales, the princes and the peasants, are earnest and sincere, the villains evil and threatening. The heroes have tasks to perform. Alice, on the other hand, is abrupt, impatient, curious, and very real. Her major task, it seems, is to ask questions. The folktale characters have little individuality. Beauty does not really differ from Cinderella. However, the magic the folktale heroes perform or endure has a purpose. Transformation and enchantments are due to wickedness and must be fought by goodness. In "Alice" transformations are funny and never serious.

As the class reads "Alice", they should begin to recognize the elements of similarity and understand and enjoy the differences.

This unit has purposely not been written with any time framework. I think the class and its interest will determine the length of time it will take to read, discuss, write, create, perform and "retell." Some classes would read more folktales, or more from other lands. Some classes would move right from Wonderland to "Through the Looking Glass." I think most children and teachers will enjoy reading and discussing the fable, folktales, and "Alice."

Suggested Lesson Plan - Fables

Reading: The Fox and the Grapes

Have a thermal spirit master copy of the fable available for every child. The class and the teacher should read the fable through a few times. Ask class to explain what happens in the story. Explain that the narrative is the concrete subject what happens in the story.

Class discussions should center on:

1. The meaning of the fable, the lesson it teaches - the abstract subject.

All students should be able to “tell” or explain the abstract subject.

2. The characteristics of “beast fables”

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| a. | animals are usually main characters in fables |
| b. | animals act as humans in the fables |
| c. | animals reveal foibles of human nature, display weaknesses and strengths, but especially the weaknesses |
| d. | fables teach a lesson. |

3. Discussion of allusion using the term “sour grapes.” The students will come across other allusions in their reading, so they should become familiar with the term.

Several fables should be read and discussed individually. Each time the children should be able to state the concrete subject, the abstract subject, the meaning of the moral, and the characteristics of the beast fable. They should be able to figure out which areas of human weaknesses are being examined.

Lesson Plan Folktales “ Rumpelstiltskin”

The teacher should read the story aloud to the class, then have the children read orally.

Discussion: Who was the real villain? Was it really Rumpelstiltskin?

The class is to conduct an inquiry. Rumpelstiltskin’s body has been found in the forest with the names of the King, the Miller, the Queen, and a woodsman in his pocket. Who was Rumpelstiltskin? Was he really a figure of evil or was he a lonely forest gnome? What was his connection with the names found with his body? Children are to take the roles of these characters and to answer questions from the class. They must be careful to stay in character, and to think up a good line of defense for their actions.

Questions would range from

to Queen - Didn't Rumpelstiltskin really help you out?

If it weren't for him, where would you be?

How could you marry a man who threatened to kill you?

Why did you promise Rumpelstiltskin your child?

Didn't he give you a chance by letting you guess his name?

to Miller - Why did you lie about your daughter?

Didn't you start the whole problem?

Why didn't you tell the truth when the King threatened your daughter?

to King - What do you know of Rumpelstiltskin?

What did you need with more gold?

How could you threaten to kill a simple peasant?

Several children can take turns answering questions and defending their positions. After the role playing, discuss the motives of all the characters. The class should answer, either orally or on paper, the following questions.

1. The characters would have been better off telling the truth. How may the truth help a person who is in trouble?
2. What would you do if you were told to accomplish a task which you knew you could not do? Would you have a problem admitting the truth?
3. Now that you are really acquainted with Rumpelstiltskin, has your opinion of him changed? If so, how? Why? Why do you think he is usually regarded as the villain?

Lesson Plan "Alice in Wonderland"

Chapter six "Pig and Pepper"

In this chapter, Alice meets the Duchess, the Cook, the crying baby who turns into a pig, and the smiling Cheshire Cat. This is a wonderful chapter full of clever conversation and changing scenes, and should be read aloud by the students for maximum enjoyment.

When Alice first sees the Duchess, she is holding the howling, sneezing baby, while the Cook continues to add more pepper to the soup. While crockery flies about, The Duchess sings a lullaby of sorts to the baby. The poem is almost similar to chanting poems in folktales, setting a spell. However, this poem does the opposite. Instead of being soothed, the baby only cries the harder.

Suggested questions for discussion are to help the students understand the shifts in scene and the transformations, as well as to point out some of the differences between this book and folktales.

What happens to the baby when Alice holds it? Does this remind the students of any folktales? How quickly does the baby change? What is Alice's reaction? Why is she not upset? Why is she relieved? Why does Alice

talk to herself so much? Does she mind being alone? The loneliness Alice feels at times in Wonderland make her more real to us. The children can all understand and sympathize with Alice's plight being alone. What happens with the Cheshire Cat? Are the students surprised when it speaks? If not, why not? Does the Cat remind them of any folktales? Point out the visual picture evoked by the Cat's fading in and out the way it does, and note Alice's reaction. What is one major difference between Alice and the folk heroines familiar to the class?

Student Bibliography

Aesop, *Aesop's Fables*, tr. V.S. Jones, Avenel Books, New York.

A very readable, nicely illustrated collection of the fables.

Asbj nsen, P. C., *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1953.

A collection of Norwegian folk tales.

Carroll, Lewis, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*, Bantam Books, Toronto, 1981.

A paperback edition, it includes the original illustrations.

Grimms' Tales for Young and Old, tr. by Ralph Manheim, Doubleday & Co., Garden City, New York, 1977.

Only one of the many editions of these tales.

Lang, Andrew, *Red Fairy Book*, The Viking Press, New York, 1978.

One of many available and popular books of folk and fairy tales.

Mayer, Marianna, *Beauty and the Beast*, Four Winds Press, New York, 1978.

A delightful, beautifully illustrated edition of this tale.

Teacher Bibliography

Dorson, Richard M., ed., *Folktales Told Around the World*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1975.

An extensive collection of tales with notes of themes and motifs.

Hamilton, Edith, *Mythology*, New American Library, Mentor Books, New York.

One source for a version of the "Cupid and Psyche" myth.

Kitzhaber, Albert and Stoddard Malarkey, eds., *Myths, Fables and Folktales*, Holt Rinehart and Winston, Inc.,

New York, 1974.

An excellent source for a variety of reading.

Lipson, Greta and Baxter Morrison, *Fact, Fantasy and Folklore* , Good Apple Publications, Carthage, Illinois, 1977.

Useful for ideas for expanding language arts skills.

Thurber, James, *Fables for Our Time* , Harper & Row, New York, 1939.

A collection of Thurber's clever and somewhat cynical tales.

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