



Yale-New Haven
Teachers Institute®

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1984 Volume IV: The Oral Tradition

Introduction

The use of folklore in modern American society proves itself in unexpected ways. Take, for example, the TV commercial for Lite beer featuring “The Creature” with bulging eyes: it walks on two legs but it’s not human. Much of the success of this commercial—as of the entire Lite series—depends on our teetering between the comedy and the potency of the scenario, between being safely “in the know” and actively “in the spirit” of the event. But it’s clear that commercial TV is drawing on the folk tradition of legend and fable—and commercial TV doesn’t draw on anything it doesn’t expect to sell.

Our seminar on “The Oral Tradition” was predicated not on a detached, historical approach, but on a sense of a complex, dynamic, immediate negotiation between the oral and the formal traditions (the formal tradition continually looks to the oral tradition for sustenance and renewal, and by the same token the oral tradition is continually under a scrutiny whereby the formal tradition both preserves and arrests it). Besides studying folktales and fairytales and ballads, then, we concerned ourselves with the formation of folktales into epic structures (as in *The Iliad*), as also with the incorporation of folk modes into ancient drama (Aeschylus), and nineteenth-century poetry (Wordsworth), and modern fiction (Baldwin, Walker).

The insight, energy, purpose, and variety that my secondary school colleagues brought to our seminar kept it at a bracing and impressive pitch. Those qualities are well reflected in the units assembled here. The units have been arranged in a pattern that will offer the folktale in terms of analysis and interpretation and application and, finally, participatory *realization* (i.e., knowing it in the pulses, as John Keats might have said). The content and organization of the units will surely prove valuable for other teachers in the secondary system. So will the attitude taken in the units, which bring both patience and vigor to a process of continual searching and refinement and ordering of the field of knowledge, and looking to it to bear on our human experience.

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