



## Heroes and Heroines in the Family

Curriculum Unit 93.02.03  
by Margaret Clancy

This unit will include a study of American Indian, European, Puerto Rican, Afro-American and American tales to show the students the common themes and the universal affirmation of man's ability to accomplish great feats by using a great deal of brain power and some brawn. My goal is to arouse in my 7th and 8th grade students a "can do" attitude towards life—an attitude of believing in themselves and their abilities—an attitude of hope—an American attitude that says everyone can be whatever he wants to be as long as he is willing to work for it. These attitudes are missing from the young, inner-city students I teach, and that worries me more than how well they are doing in my English class. I'm hoping a study of folktales will ignite some feelings of hope and confidence in my students.

Initially, because all children know some fairy or folktales, I expect that introducing the unit will be exciting for them. Folktales are "user friendly". Everyone thinks of them as light and entertaining, and, therefore, non-threatening. So I anticipate an immediate enthusiasm for reading and discussing the tales by the students. Indeed, I hope I am right because I intend to begin the unit with an open discussion by the students of their favorite tales. Because my inner-city classes break down into approximately one-third black, one third Puerto Rican, and one-third white, I also expect that this sharing will be diverse and bountiful. To get this part of the lesson going I will tell my favorite fairy tale first. I think most classes will need the teacher to go first, so the students know what is expected.

During this discussion time I hope different versions of the same tale arise, because it will allow the students to experience one of the unique characteristics of folktales. That characteristic being that folktales are ever changing because they are passed down from one generation to another, and as this happens they take on the changing customs, politics, and language of the times. And more directly, that folktales change according to the storyteller. As with every-day gossip, each time the story is told the storyteller has an opportunity to add or delete bits and pieces.

The English skills the students will use and develop more fully includes vocabulary development, increase in silent and oral reading skills, comprehension skills, writing skills, skills of interaction among the students, and the use of imagination. Xeroxed copies of most of the tales I use in this unit can be found in the office of the Yale New Haven Teachers' Institute. I feel the need to do this because there are many versions of the fairy tales and folktales used in this unit. It is important that teachers and students using this unit use the same versions I used.

I will teach the unit during the month of January to my 8th graders. I think this is a good time of year for the unit because students are just returning from vacation and will enjoy studying something “light” and a bit magical. Because we have team teaching at Fair Haven, I will use two periods to work on some of the lesson plans like writing a play for one of the fairy tales. Group lesson plans such as this can easily be done in a team teaching situation. For teachers not working in a team teaching situation alternate arrangements will have to be made. I have specifically selected 8th graders because their English Literature books devote a section to folktales. This unit will involve using their books, thus giving a sense of security to the student who needs to have a book in order to study. I expect to introduce the unit and teach American Indian folktales week one. Week two we will study European fairy tales, while Puerto Rican and Afro-American tales will be explored during week three. The unit will conclude with a study of American folktales. Lesson plans for this unit are at the end.

After the introduction to the unit I will show the students a video tape which tells of three independent Indian Nations currently existing in America: the Onondaga in New York State, the Navajo in Arizona, and the Lumma in Washington State. As they watch this tape they will learn of the customs and culture of these American Indians, and then they will be better able to understand the Indian folktales we’ll be studying in class. By starting with the American Indian I think the class will be very cohesive, because we do not have any American Indian students and no prejudices against them appear to exist. In fact, I believe there is great sympathy for the Indian. The point of all this is that the interest of the students should continue to be high as we move along studying some Indian folklore.

The first tale I will read with my students, “How Mosquitoes Came to Be”, is quite entertaining. It tells of a man-eating giant who the Indians fear. A man, the hero, tells the other Indians he thinks he can kill the giant. He is successful in killing the giant by using his intelligence and a knife, but although the giant is dead he says he will keep on eating humans forever. The hero burns the giant and throws his ashes in the air to scatter. Those flying specks become mosquitoes that suck our blood and make us itch.

“While this tale has an entertaining twist to it, it also has the hero, the little guy who had the courage to face an awful giant. He uses his brains to get close and find out where the giant’s heart was located. Knowing this he then is successful in killing him.

The second Indian tale I will use is “The Story of Corn Smut Girl”. This is appealing because it is similar to “Cinderella”. Many of the circumstances are quite different, but the handsome man marries a beautiful goddess, who looks dirty to others. This tale tells of how Corn Smut Girl and all her family disappear into the ground. At the spot where she went into the ground the Hopi Indians pray to her to send good crops of corn.

With this tale students should grasp the importance of kindness, being true to your word, and not judging a book by its cover. In this tale, unlike “Cinderella”, no one but her family sees her as the beautiful goddess. People make fun of the handsome warrior and his dirty bride. I hope my students will see that this warrior is as much a hero as the man who slew the giant in the first tale. I also hope they see the common theme and the affirmation of man’s ability to accomplish great feats by using a great deal of brain power and some brawn, as illustrated in these two tales.

I will allow time for discussion about these two heroes. I will then ask students to explain how situations in today’s world could be changed by similar actions done possibly by them. Perhaps they will begin to see that they—each individual—is important and special to himself and to society.

Week two will deal with European fairy tales, because they are ones students are familiar with and

comfortable reading aloud. For this part of the unit, then, I will ask students to read the tales aloud, thus increasing their skills in oral reading. To reinforce the idea that heroes and heroines come from ordinary people I've selected the following tales for reading: "Hansel and Gretel", "Puss in Boots", "Rumpelstiltskin", "Cinderella", "Jack and the Bean Stalk", and "Beauty and the Beast". Each points out how an ordinary person becomes a prince, princess, or other successful character by using intelligence, wit, and charm—all qualities everyone has.

I chose "Hansel and Gretel" as the first of the European fairy tales for several reasons. It deals with a brother and sister who are abandoned by their parents. Immediately, I hope all my students will relate to the tale because it concerns a boy and a girl. The issue of child abandonment is one that my students see or suffer daily along with other child abuse problems. I hope, then, to capture their interest with this tale and to bring them through the story to its virtuous conclusion that forgiveness and love are the greatest virtues of all.

Upon reading this tale I will spend some time discussing the correlation between Hansel and Gretel's fate and actions that are taking place today within our own families, neighborhoods, school, and community. Perhaps through such discussions students will understand that life can be cruel, but humans can overcome these cruelties and make a happy life for themselves without being cruel too. Of course I am not referring to the death of the witch here. That is another lesson all together. I refer to the way the children treat their father when they return. Self-reliance, ingenuity, and courage are the virtues that saved Hansel and Gretel, and I hope my students come to Understand that these same virtues can help them.

"Puss in Boots", "Rumpelstiltskin", and "Cinderella" all deal with ordinary people who are able to improve their lot with the help of a fairy or supernatural being. I hope these selections will ignite a sense of hope in my students also, for these are examples of good working in the world. Whether my students believe in God, a guardian angel, magic, or coincidence, I hope their imaginations allow them to enjoy the stories and crave more.

Following the reading of "Jack and the Bean Stalk" and "Beauty and the Beast" I will begin discussion by asking how these two tales differ from the previous three. My purpose is to have students recognize that in these selections the evil one is readily recognized by the hero or heroine, and that they move toward the evil to engage in conflict or submit. While in the previous three tales students should see that evil befalls the hero or heroine. These kinds of questions will increase the reading comprehension and reasoning powers of the students.

I will begin week three by introducing Puerto Rican folktales. "The Woodsman's Daughter and the Lion" and "Juan Bobo and the Princess Who Answered Riddles" are the two tales I'll read to the class.

In "The Woodsman's Daughter and the Lion" the lion agrees not to eat the woodsman if he brings the lion the first thing that comes to greet him when he gets home. The woodsman agrees only to have his youngest daughter be the first to greet him. The huntsman, true to his word, returns the next day with his daughter. The lion takes the daughter while telling the man where to dig to find much golden coin. The daughter is taken to an underground palace where she is given beautiful jewelry and clothes and treated royally. Months pass and the girl becomes very unhappy, because she misses her family. The lion agrees to let her visit them, but she must return before the rooster crows. This she does.

The lion lets her go to visit a second time. However, this time the girl finds her father ill. She becomes so distracted she forgets the time. The rooster crows before she gets back. As a result the girl must walk back because the coach has vanished. When she arrives she finds the entrance to the lion's cave is sealed up. She

hears the lion say that she had almost broken the evil spell that a witch had cast on him, a prince. But now that she was late she would have to walk across the world and wear iron shoes before she could find him and break the spell.

She promises to do this, and, after being fitted with a pair of iron shoes, she walks across the earth for many years in search of the lion. Finally she finds him and breaks the spell. The handsome prince explains that he was under the evil spell cast by a witch, and it was broken because of her love and loyalty.

Here students should see the common theme used also in “Beauty and the Beast” that illustrates how love and loyalty can bring great happiness to people, both the receivers and givers. In both of these stories the common person enjoys the rewards.

I chose “Juan Bobo and the Princess Who Answered Riddles” because I believe it gives a clear example of how an ordinary, even supposedly stupid person, can achieve great things. The hero of this tale uses courage, belief in himself, and ingenuity to win the hand of the Princess. I also chose this tale because it is in the *Vista Literature* which the students use in class.

In this folktale Juan Bobo tries to win the beautiful daughter of the King by asking her a riddle she cannot solve. His mother and friends are afraid for him because the King has declared that any man who fails to stump his daughter will be executed. But Juan Bobo, Simple John, gave the Princess a riddle she could not solve. She, in turn, begs Juan Bobo to give her the answer. He agrees if the Princess will give him her ring and one of her shoes. She agrees, and the next day she tells the court she has solved the riddle. The King is relieved because he doesn't want his daughter to marry this bumpkin. He orders Juan's execution.

However, Juan Bobo tells the King what really happened and shows the ring and shoe as proof. The King declares that Juan Bobo will marry his beautiful daughter. That is how, years later, the fool of the town became the King of the country.

Here my students see that a fool can make a good life for himself by using courage, ingenuity, and most importantly, a strong belief in himself. There is some of the shrewdness involved here as there certainly is with “Puss in Boots”. But I think both tales point out the resources man has for making a good life for himself.

With these tales I hope to awaken in the minds of my Puerto Rican students the knowledge that they have the same talents as Juan Bobo or the daughter of the woodsman. I want them to realize sex, race, color, or economic position have no bearing on success. Success comes from using the talents one has.

During this week we will also look at Afro-American tales. I have grouped all tales of African culture together, but “The Orphan with the Cloak of Skin” comes directly from Africa, while “Wiley, His Mama, and the Hairy Man” and “The People Could Fly” come from the black slaves of the South.

“The Orphan with the Cloak of Skin” tells of the travails of the step child and can be related to “Hansel and Gretel” and “Cinderella” because of the stepchild character. Many of my students come from broken homes, second families, etc.... so they should feel hope from reading this tale.

In “Wiley, His Mama, and the Hairy Man” we read a tale about a black mother and son who conquer the evil man. It will be pointed out to the students that tales like this one were about black slaves outwitting their white masters. Here, the Hairy Man probably refers to the white master. There is abundant use of charms, magic powers and ingenuity, all characteristic of the black slaves at that time. Often the only way they coped

with the misery was by telling these wonderful tales of blacks outwitting whites.

In this tale I hope my students will see Wiley's use of ingenuity when he gets the Hairy Man to make all the rope in the county disappear, thus untying Wiley's hounds who save him from the Hairy Man. or again, when Wiley's mother gets Hairy Man to promise he will go away and leave everyone else alone if she gives him her baby. Of course she gives him a baby pig—a baby that had belonged to her before she gave it to the Hairy Man. As with the other tales students should see that this tale shows the importance of family and the virtues of self-reliance, ingenuity, and courage. They should also see that the individual, the common person, is able to use his abilities to conquer evil and make a good life for himself. It is important that the students understand that the person must take action to change his circumstances. All too often my students complain about something or someone without any thought of how they might change the situation.

The last tale, "The People Could Fly", is one of magic and fantasy popular with the slaves of the South, because, like all of the fairy tales and folktales we've read, it provides hope. In this tale the people fly away to a better life. Make-believe is a wonderful way to cope with misery, and this tale does it well.

I will conclude the unit with a study of American folktales. Among those we will read are: "Davey Crockett", "Paul Bunyan", "John Henry", "The Saga of Pecos Bill", and "Captain John Smith and Pocahontas". Many of these stories are in the *Vista Literature* book, and there are Xeroxed copies of the other in the office of the Yale New Haven Teachers' Institute. As we read these American tales it will become obvious to the students that some of these things could not possibly have happened. As with the fairy tales and folktales we have already studied, students will see clearly that most, if not all, of the tales are invented. We will study the use of hyperbole and other techniques while we enjoy reading these stories.

I have deliberately chosen to conclude the unit with the story of "Captain John Smith and Pocahontas" because it brings everything together by providing a tale of how America came to live and grow. The unit starts with the Indians and ends with a tale uniting them with us, the new settlers. That should leave all on a happy note of hope, optimism, courage, and self confidence. Hopefully, I will see a new attitude in my students—a "can do" attitude towards life—an American attitude that says everyone can be whatever he wants to be as long as he is willing to work for it!

## **Lesson Plan—WEEK ONE**

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### A. Vocabulary

council skinning knife

pretend scatter

plunge particles

B. Writing Skills—Students will tell which tale they liked best and why. How would they act if they were the hero of the tale and why?

C. Project—Students have the option of drawing an Indian village or making one out of paper.

### Lesson Plan—WEEK TWO

### A. Vocabulary

complaisance mien  
virtue           Ogre  
thither          miller  
astonishment consumed  
rogue            enchanted

B. Writing Skills—Students will write an essay on the power of enchantment as seen in European tales.

C. Storytelling—Students are to select one of the European fairy tales to tell to the class. This may be launched by me telling my favorite tale first, and then inviting guests to come to the classroom to tell a tale. These guests might include other teachers, administrators, parents, or support staff in the school. Then students will tell a tale. This exercise allows them the opportunity to stand in front of a group and experience the empowerment of a storyteller.

D. Videos Students will watch the video, “Beauty and the Beast”. Students will be asked to make a list of all the similarities between the video and the tale and another list of differences. They will have to draw conclusions from this information. Are the important points of the tale also in the video? Why or Why not?

## LESSON PLAN—WEEK THREE

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### A. Vocabulary

pact            proclamation  
enchanted    avail  
preoccupied    befallen  
desperation    indignant  
bewitched    bumpkin  
loyalty        futile

B. Class Project—A group can write, produce, and perform a play of the Puerto Rican or Afro-American tales, or they can make puppets, hand or regular, and tell one of the tales through the puppets.

(I've chosen these activities at this time for two reasons. First, students are more than half-way through the unit of study and need some fun activities to keep their interest high. Secondly, by now students should be comfortable with the subject matter and with each other. Therefore, they should be able to work together easily. I want their work to be productive, but I also want to increase interaction among my students. This assignment will be provide the atmosphere for student sharing and interacting.)

## LESSON PLAN—WEEK FOUR

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Students will have to write their own folk or fairy tale about present day life. They will have to write of some evil that the hero or heroine overcomes and tell the audience how he or she did it. It has to be an evil or threat to safety that exists and that the audience can identify with. This assignment should generate a great deal of discussion and awareness of each student's potential. Completed tales will be published for everyone in the classes. In this way all will share their learning and thoughts with one another.

## Bibliography for Teachers

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Abrahams, Roger. *African Folktales* . N.Y.: Pantheon, 1983. (This book and the next are great sources of folktales for additional reading by teachers and students.)

———. *Afro-American Folktales*. N.Y.: Pantheon, 1985.

Alegria, Ricardo E.. *The Three Wishes* . N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1960. (This is a book of Puerto Rican folktales translated into English.)

Battle, Kemp P.. *Great American Folklore* . Garden City, NY.: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1986. (This delightful book includes legends, tales, ballads, and superstitions from all across the United States. It is a great reference for teachers and students.)

Bettleheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment* . N.Y.: Vantage, 1989. (This book I found To be a very good source for reinforcing the importance folk fairy tales have in children's literature. This book is a good reference for teachers.)

Curtis, Edward S.. *Indian Days of Long Ago* . Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1975. (This book can be used by teachers and students. It contains tales from many tribes.)

Hamilton, Virginia. *The People Could Fly* . N.Y.: Alfred A Knopf, 1985. (This book offers some very entertaining tales told by the slaves of the South. It is already on the reading list for New Haven's Middle School students, and it is enjoyable reading for teachers as well.)

Luthi, Max. *The Fairytale as Art Form and Portrait of Man* . Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984. (This book is a great source of European tales for teachers to read.)

Opie, Iona and Peter. *The Classic Fairy Tales* . N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1974, (I have used these versions of the fairy tales in my unit.)

Rovenger, Judith. "The Better to Hear You With: Making Sense of Folktales." *School Library Journal* , March, 1993. (This recent article takes another look at the importance of folk fairy tales in children's literature.)

Spalding, Henry Daniel. *Encyclopedia of Black Folklore and Humor*. Middle Village, N.Y.: Jonathan David Publishers, Inc., 1972. (An enjoyable collection for teachers and students.)

Tatar, Pilaria. *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987. (The author's thoughts on fairy tales are important for teachers to read. Very interesting.)

Yolen, Jane. *Favorite Folktales from Around the World*. N.Y.: Pantheon, 1986. (This is a Wonderful book for teachers and students. It contains Grimm's Fairy Tales, Russian, Italian, American Indian, Arab, and Japanese folktales.)

Zipes, Jack. *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1979. (In this book the author claims that history plays an important part in the formation of these tales. He also points out that the hero or heroine of each tale can take control of his own life by using his wit, courage and self-reliance, and that is why the tales are so popular.)

## Bibliography for Students

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Chaparro Jacqueline and Mary Ann Trost, Editors. *Vistas in Reading Literature* (Level 7). N.Y.: McDougal, Littel and Co.1989.

Piscitelli, Janice A. *Wings n' Things, A Handbook of Creative Crafts and Activities*. West Nyack, N.Y.: Parker Publishing Company. 1983. (This book will show students how to make hand puppets.)

## Videos

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*Beauty and the Beast*. Walt Disney Home Video.1992

*Winds of Change—A Matter of Promises*. Wisconsin Education Communications Board and Board of Regents University of Wisconsin System. (This tells of three sovereign Indian Nations; the Onondaga, the Navajo, and the Lumme. It helps the students understand American Indian culture and appreciate the Indian folktales in this unit)

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