



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1993 Volume II: Folktales

Cultural Understanding through Folklore

Curriculum Unit 93.02.05
by Christine Y. House

Folktales have enchanted people for centuries. They were an important source of entertainment for peasants and princes alike in days of yore and still serve the same purpose today. But, folktales also serve another purpose, that is, to tell us about the way life was for the common man. History books are filled with the names and dates and events which shaped our world. It is folklore, however, which remembers the hopes, fears, dreams and details of everyday lives.

Folktales continue to enchant people today for many reasons. They tell us our history, they describe where we live, what our values are and ultimately who we are. Children listen to folktales without prejudice. They don't care whether the story is from the Grimm tradition, from Africa or from the western hemisphere. They seem to be able to separate fact from fantasy, for the most part, and hear the underlying message of the story. It is for this reason that I have chosen folktales to serve as an interdisciplinary unit of study.

The focus of my unit will be to teach cultural understanding to third graders by reading, viewing and sharing folktales from a variety of sources around the world. It has become increasingly clear to me that many inner-city children don't have a sense of their own history. They do not know stories of their ancestry or their native homelands. Black children go "south" but can't say with certainty whether they've been to North Carolina or Alabama. Puerto Rican children go to "Por'rico" for visits but bring back only snippets of that culture. Through this unit, I intend to teach these children about their own cultures, as well as those of their schoolmates. I will emphasize the ancestry of the students in my schools, but I don't want to limit the study simply to folklore from Black, African or Puerto Rican traditions. Since we all live in the United States, I want to include stories from many lands, with a strong emphasis on the American Indian. They did, after all inhabit this land long before Europeans or Africans arrived. Also, many of our children are of Indian extraction, be it Cherokee, Blackfeet, Taino or Mayan.

This unit will provide a forum for children to construct mental, and possibly, physical pictures of the lands in which the folk characters lived. This will be achieved by reading stories from the various cultures and then conducting discussions to get the children to describe the physical aspects of the land in which the story occurs. At this point, children will also be asked to draw upon their own knowledge of such places as Puerto Rico and the southern parts of the U.S., and share it with the class. We will keep a record of these descriptions to be used later for the purpose of comparison and contrast. This can be done on a chart which can be reproduced in a smaller size so that the children can have a record for their own notebooks.

During this time we will look at actual pictures of the story locales so that the children are able to see how accurate their perceptions are. This will provide the basis for the geographical aspect of this unit and will provide an opportunity to look at the appropriate maps and the relationship of these areas to each other and to the rest of the world.

As part of the discussion following each folktale, we will also look at the values and messages that are found within. These too can be charted and saved for subsequent examinations of the similarities among the stories of various cultures. It might be important at this point to look at the reality of these messages so that old-fashioned ideas are not perpetuated in light of the modern world.

This unit can be divided into separate sections so that the focus is on one particular segment which can be isolated, if necessary, and used in connection with another part of the curriculum. For instance, United Nations Day is October 24. To demonstrate the common bonds among the nations of the world, the "Cinderella" portion can be used in the 5-6 days leading up to that week. (In the library, this unit will be used during the weekly library visits and will take 5-6 weeks to complete.) The segment on African folktales can be spread over a 4-5 day period during the month of February in celebration of Black History month. Puerto Rican and American Indian folktales can be done in November to correspond with Puerto Rican Discovery Day (November 19) and Thanksgiving, respectively, but they might get lost in all the other festivities. I would read the Puerto Rican stories in March because they really have more meaning to most of New Haven's students than St. Patrick's Day. I would begin the Indian stories in May because that is the traditional start of the Pow Wow season in the northeast. For each of the segments of this unit will require 4 to 6 class periods of 30 to 45 minutes in duration. The time can be adjusted, and stories can be added, as needed.

In preparation for the focus on Black, Puerto Rican and Indian folktales, I want to lay a groundwork with traditional folk and fairy tales from European, Asian and African cultures. I want the children to begin thinking about the parts of these stories which describe the hero or heroine and the forces of good and evil. We might even try to create a simulation of the original environment in which we place the Grimm brothers as story collectors or Charles Perrault in the court of Louis XIV. The purpose of this activity is to put a time frame to these folktales, in order to demonstrate the age of these stories. I will lead the children into a discussion of the origin and function of folktales, and then try to get them to imagine what life was like at this time and what people did to entertain themselves. The role of the storyteller will be examined in this context.

As extension activities following the stories, some of the children might be willing to learn a story to tell to the class. Some of the more adventurous or imaginative students might even be willing to write their own folktales, even based on modern times, to share with the class or the school. In preparation for this activity, I would invite some professional or amateur storytellers to the class; someone's grandparent would be ideal.

The objective of this unit is to put inner-city children in touch with their own ancestry through the study of folklore. In addition, I want to help the children to understand the origins and purpose of folktales and to help them to realize that these stories can tell us a great deal about the world in which we live. I will try to draw from as many cultures as possible to show that the truths of one culture are the same in many, if not all cultures. Finally, I hope to instill in these children a better sense of who they are and where they come from so that they will begin to have a better idea of where they fit into this world and where they are going.

To begin the unit on folktales, I will ask third grade classes to try to decide what a folktale is and whether or not it is the same as a fairy tale. We will record the responses on a chart and then compare these responses to actual dictionary definitions.

“Fairy tale, a story, usually for children, about elves, hobgoblins, dragons, fairies, or other magical creatures.” ¹

“Folk tale, a tale or legend originating and traditional among a people or folk, esp. one forming part of an oral tradition.” ²

I will ask the students to list as many folktales as possible and see if we can come to consensus on whether they are folktales or fairy tales and whether it is important to distinguish between them. We will also examine elements of the stories such as setting, characters and behaviors and try to determine which are real and which are fantasy and which have elements of both. This preliminary discussion will serve the purpose of making the children look at the stories in terms of their parts.

We will talk about the age of these stories, where they come from and how they might have come to us through the ages. We will then talk about some of the early collectors such as Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm who published their first volume of “Household Stories” in 1812. “French folktales were [among] the earliest to be recorded . . . In 1697, Charles Perrault . . . published a little volume of eight fairy tales.” ³ These stories were probably translated into English around 1729.

At this point, I will select one story which has a number of known versions, most likely “Cinderella” and read a number of the less familiar versions, starting with *Yeh-Shen: a Cinderella story from China*. I will also read a version of “Aschenputtel” from Grimm’s *Household Stories* and the Micmac Indian tale of “Little Burnt Face.” ⁴ We will also use *Mufaro’s beautiful Daughters* to represent African culture. After these stories I will lead the children into a discussion of the comparisons and contrasts found within. I want the children to become aware of the similarities in the stories and then to look at the differences. We will conclude this discussion with a reading of *Cinderella* as illustrated by Marcia Brown, because it is “faithful to both the French setting and the original text in her Caldecott award-winning book.” ⁵ Children will be asked to speculate about why this story is so universal.

Before leaving this particular discussion, I will talk to the children about the areas of the world from which these stories come. We will then try to locate these areas on a map which is mounted on a bulletin board. We will “flag” these areas and may even tag them with the titles of our stories. I will then provide smaller maps to the children for them to identify the areas we have discussed. These will be kept in a folder for future use and reference and eventually given to the students to take home.

The next story I will read to the children will be *A story, a story* by Gail Haley which tells of how Anansi the spider got stories from the sky-god and spill them all over the world. The story is from the Ashanti people of Ghana and I will provide maps of Africa for the children to locate Ghana. These, too, will be kept for future reference. This story naturally continues into a discussion of storytelling throughout the world, but since it takes place in Africa, I will bring the discussion back to that continent and focus on various types of stories, such as creation myths, pourquoi and legends or stories based on historical events. Virginia Hamilton has written *In the Beginning: creation stories from around the world* which can be used as the basis for selecting such tales from other parts of the world. There are other sources for creation stories. Some are listed in my bibliography; others can be found easily in the public library.

While still “in Africa,” following *A Story*, I would like to share a creation story, a “pourquoi” story and one or two others which will show traditions or a way of life. There is a lovely creation story from the Yoruba tradition of Nigeria and Benin in West Africa entitled *The Origin of Life on Earth* by David A. Anderson. Both of these

stories are beautifully illustrated and give an idea of what the terrain is like in that part of the world. I would ask the students to describe it so that we can record the details for future reference. Verna Aardema has retold and published a fair number of stories from Africa which show tribal traditions and give an idea of the climate and the flora and fauna. *Traveling to Tondo* tells of a civet cat who invites his friends to accompany him to his wedding. Delays along the way create a problem for the cat, and the lesson to be learned is that friendship can sometimes be carried too far. Another Aardema story which gives a view of traditions and land is *Bimwili and the Zimwi* which is about three sisters walking through the jungle to get to the ocean. The moral of this tale is that children must follow their parents' instructions.

Trickster tales are always fun to read to children and they are another type of story which is common to many cultures. Anansi the spider is the most notorious trickster from Africa, but there are other trickster characters. His origin is from the Ashanti or West African tradition. Anansi was brought to the Western Hemisphere on slave ships and survives in the same form throughout most of the Caribbean. In Puerto Rico, however, the character of Juan Bobo serves as the trickster sometimes, although he is more often the fool. In Mexico, Central America and the Southwestern U.S., the trickster is Coyote. This remains true despite the buffoon-like nature of the cartoon character "Wylie Coyote". *Trickster Tales* by I.C. Edmonds presents trickster stories from all around the world. Included is the idea that Tom Sawyer was a trickster who used his wiles to get his friends to white-wash the fence for him. Edmonds also makes mention of Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby, and says that this story "really came from Africa where the Rabbit was named Wakaima." ⁶ Edmonds reminded me of one of the favorite characters from my youth, Tyl Eulenspiegel. I will try to incorporate some of his "merry pranks" either into this unit or into the stories I read to other grade levels. Since we have already read one Anansi story, I would now share "The Fox and the Goat" from a collection of stories by Carter Woodson. ⁷

Pourquoi tales is the name given to the variety of tales from around the world which give an explanation for the way things are. I enjoy reading or telling them because there is always at least one youngster in the group who wants to know if it is really true. Verna Aardema has written a story entitled, *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears*. It explains how disaster befalls a baby owl after mosquito tell a tall tale. His punishment is to forever whisper (or buzz) in people's ears and to suffer the consequences (being swatted).

From this set of creation, trickster, pourquoi and traditional stories, the children should be able to describe the land in which they take place and then locate certain parts of Africa on a map. If this particular part of the unit is done during the month of February, it can be used to celebrate Black History month. It is a logical progression to discuss how these stories arrived in the United States. It is important to point out that most Black Americans are descended from people who were native to the West Coast of Africa. It is those stories which have been transposed into the Anancy stories of the West Indies and the Brer Rabbit of the American South.

I next want to focus on stories from Puerto Rico so as to introduce another culture which is well represented in our schools. I would begin by distributing maps of Puerto Rico and showing its distance from and relationship to Africa, Europe and the mainland U.S. Then, I would like to read some legends which tell about the original inhabitants of the island, the Taino Indians. These will serve as my creation stories as I have not found any tales which fit the traditional definition of such a tale. Several of these are also of the pourquoi type. In *Once in Puerto Rico* by Pura Belpre, the introduction can be condensed into a brief history of how the Taino Indians came to Puerto Rico. I would then read "The Legend of the Royal Palm" which tells how that particular tree came to be. "The Legend of the Hummingbird" is another pourquoi tale based on old Taino legends. Both of these stories are illustrated in black and white but they give a good description of the land. The children will be asked to describe or draw what they think the land is like and then we can compare their pictures to actual

photos from the island.

In the book *Puerto Rican Tales: legends of Spanish colonial times* by Cayetano Coll y Toste there is the legendary love story of Guanina. She is the sister of the chief of the Taino people. Guanina is in love with Don Cristobal de Sotomayor, a Spanish soldier. The Indians feel betrayed by the Spaniards and are going to kill Don Cristobal. He refuses to heed the warnings of his aides and after he is killed, Guanina tries to bring him back to life. When she cannot, she dies of a broken heart. They are buried together and legend says that at sunset, farmers near their grave can hear them singing as they come out to view the stars at night. While this story is not as fanciful or lighthearted as the others, I think that it is important to tell this story to convey a sense of history and connectedness with the Spanish conquerors.

On a lighter note, I would then read the story "Juan Bobo, the sow and the chicks," from *The Three Wishes: a collection of Puerto Rican folktales* by Ricardo E. Alegria. It is probably the most famous of the "Juan Bobo" stories about the foolish boy who dresses up the family pig in his mother's best clothes. This would be a good opportunity to ask students to ask at home for other "Juan Bobo" tales to share with the class or to invite someone from Casa Otonal (the housing complex for elderly Hispanics), to visit with us and tell some of the tales from their youth.

I would like to conclude this section by reading another story of Puerto Rican origin such as "Perez and Martina," which is told in many versions, about the coquettish cockroach Martina and her husband Perez the mouse. Other stories which might be used at this point were collected and retold by Pura Belpre. One is *Ote': A Puerto Rican Folk Tale* which tell of the little boy who outwits a nearsighted devil and saves his family. Another is *The Dance of the Animals*. Some of these stories may be available on filmstrips or on video which can be used as a change of pace.

Finally, I would like to read children a variety of legends from the American Indian traditions. This section of the unit could be expanded so that you are dealing with only Indian stories because there are so many and they are so varied. Indian folktales have a different rhythm and cadence from traditional western folklore. Most European and European-influenced folktales are based on the number three. There are three sisters or suitors or wishes, or people have three chances to solve the problem at hand. Some people believe that this number represents the Christian trinity and shows how widely that doctrine spread throughout the western world. Among the Indians, whose cultures and traditions were established long before Christianity reached the Western Hemisphere, the honored number is four. This comes from the respect which is given to the earth and all of its powers, particularly the four directions; North, East, South and West. Each direction has special powers and authority over specific aspects of life. Winds, the breath of life, come from the four directions, and each of the four seasons is controlled by one of these directions. It seems logical that the North controls Winter and that the East brings the Spring. These stories and beliefs still exist, despite years of oppression of the American Indian and attempts to eradicate the culture. What has emerged is an amalgam of Christianity and a deep-rooted respect for nature and its power. Indians do not try to control and manipulate the world around them but rather to work with what the Creator has given to them.

The stories which have been collected and passed along to us come from the ancient traditions of the Indians. They come from all parts of our country and are as varied in content as the weather and terrain. All tribes, however, have their own versions of the creation of the earth and various *pourquoi* tales. Before telling the stories, I would prepare some background material to show how different tribes lived in different parts of the country. It is important to point out that the Hopi and Navaho (or Dine), of the Southwest could not have lived in tipis because the hide coverings were not available nor would they have provided adequate protection from

the heat. Similarly, the peoples of the Northeast woodlands could not have hunted buffalo because there were none in that region. I will try to show the children that Indians are not all the same although many of them hold similar beliefs. I also want to make clear that these are old stories from a much earlier time in history and that most Africans and Puerto Ricans and American Indians now live much as we do today.

In May, I will begin the final segment by discussing the areas of the northern hemisphere where Indians traditionally lived. We will deal primarily with Eastern Woodland, Plains, Southwestern and Northwest Coastal tribes. After discussing how these folks lived, we will begin listening to stories which fit into the four major categories with which we have been working and see if we can identify the region from which they come. For trickster stories, I will use a number of coyote stories from the southwest and a variety of Raven stories from the northwest coast. (see Lesson Plan 3 for specific stories). There are a number of creation stories which can also be used here. In the book *A Heart full of Turquoise* by Joe Hayes the story "Clay Old Man and Clay Old Woman" tells of how the Pueblo came to make pots out of clay. "The Deeds and Prophecies of Old Man" is a Blackfeet (Plains) version of the creation myth.

Trickster characters are found in nearly every tradition among the Indians. The Zuni tribe of Arizona/New Mexico have Tarantula as their trickster while most other Southwestern and Plains tribes use Coyote. The people of the Northwest coastal tribes have Raven and the Eastern woodlands use Rabbit or Fox. Glooskap, a character from the Northeastern areas is sometimes used as the trickster and sometimes as the hero. In any case, these stories are fairly easy to find and usually give a pretty good idea of the native habitat.

Among my favorite stories from the American Indians are the "pourquoi" tales which explain why things are the way they are. I like the neat and tidy explanations given to what must have seemed great and ponderous questions. *The Gift of the Sacred Dog* by Paul Goble tells of the days before Plains Indians had horses and how they hunted buffalo with dogs carrying their belongings. As with all of his books, this one is beautifully illustrated with uncomplicated, yet powerful paintings of life on the Plains in years gone by. Mr. Goble has received numerous awards for his work. Another pourquoi tale which is well worth sharing is *How Raven brought Light to the People* by Ann Dixon. A great chief keeps the light from the sun, the moon and the stars locked up in three wooden boxes. Raven devises a plan to capture them and set them free. The flavor of the Northwestern tribes is handsomely conveyed through the artistry of James Watts. "How the Groundhog Lost His Tale" from *Cherokee Animal Tales* is typical of many Eastern Woodland Indian tales which were probably used as much for entertainment as for explaining the way things were.

As a culminating activity for this segment of the unit, I will ask the students to choose one of the Indian stories that they particularly liked and learn more about that tribe. I will encourage the children to work in groups of two or three. They will be asked to find some facts about the tribe which did not come out of the story and share it with the class. The students will be provided with whatever reference materials we have available for such research. The resulting data will be added to our fact chart for later inclusion in the student folder. In subsequent years, these same children might be willing to write their own folktale based upon events which occur in our school, or they might prefer to put on a play based on one of the tales we have stories we have read. Some adventurous souls might even be willing to write a play.

The intent of this unit is to show third graders that people all over the world have the same basic values, hopes and aspirations. We all want to understand the world around us, so that we can understand our place in it. With a broader knowledge of the people from whom we are descended, we begin to have a better understanding of ourselves. And, by learning about the heritage of our friends and neighbors, we gain more insight into what makes them the unique people that they are. Ultimately, I want to see our children become

better friends with people who are different from because they have learned a little bit about another culture and want to learn more.

Notes

1. *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* . New York, 1966. p.511.
2. Ibid, p.551.
3. Charlotte S. Huck, *Children's Literature in the Elementary School* . New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1976, p.187.
4. The version of this story listed in the bibliography is *Little Firefly* by Terri Cohlene.
5. *Huck* , op. cit., p. 187.
6. I.G. Edmonds, *Trickster Tales* . Philadelphia: J.B.Lippincott, 1966,p. 3.
7. Carter Godwin Woodson, *African Myths* (Washington, D.C.: theAssociated Publishers, Inc., 1928, 1964.

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