



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

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## Choose Your Path

Curriculum Unit 93.02.06  
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I teach remedial reading at Betsy Ross Arts Magnet Middle School which is a fully integrated city school with a strong drama department, and a dedicated English department. This year with the new superintendent, middle school reform is a priority issue. However, because Betsy Ross is an established magnet school it cannot share in the federal funds, which have been made available to start new magnet schools and to instigate middle school reform. So without the benefit of outside resources the faculty at Betsy Ross is being asked to devise new scheduling matrixes and to create new curriculums to more fully coordinate the arts classes with the academic classes.

I plan to use the resources of the Yale New Haven Teachers Institute to create a folk tale curriculum that could be extended to involve the reading laboratory with the fifth and sixth grade English and drama departments. Such a curriculum would meet a zeal need.

Towards this end the primary goals of this unit are to foster critical thinking skills, to sharpen writing skills, and to refine public speaking skills. These goals will be met by reading fairy tales, comparing fairy tales, writing fairy tales, and telling fairy tales.

I chose to base this unit on three familiar fairy tales: "Little Red Riding Hood", "Cinderella", and "Jack and the Beanstalk". The African story "Three Rival Brothers" plus two African-American stories "A Wolf and Little Daughter" and "Wily, His Momma, and the Hairy Man" expand upon the basic theme of the heroes using their wits and seizing whatever opportunity to achieve happiness, to grow up or simply to stay alive. A Roadrunner cartoon is thrown in for good measure. The students, however, will not be limited to these tales. On the contrary, they will be encouraged to find and share interesting stories from any number of sources: their family, television, and especially books.

The unit begins with the showing of a Roadrunner cartoon. This classic, never ending, different, yet always the same, saga of survival is familiar to all American children and I suspect to half the world. A discussion on the life and times of the Roadrunner can demonstrate to the class the many ways of looking at a simple story.

Roadrunner's narrow brushes with death at the hand of his nemesis, Wily Coyote, illustrate the archetypal conflict between good and evil, life and death, innocence and guilt, a duality so prevalent in western culture. Victory is indeed with the swift. And Wily, alas, never learns from his experiences. These two characters are flat. They never change, thank goodness, but a fifth grader is certainly capable of comparing them. One is a bird, the other a mammal. one is clever, the other, cunning. one is speedy, the other, ruthless. And most

Important, one always wins; the other always loses. As for themes or main ideas, there's the fatalistic—live by the stick of dynamite and die by the stick of dynamite, the scientific—what goes up must come down, the philosophic—what goes around comes around, not to mention the religious—do unto others as you would have others do unto you. The events of the plot are child's play to identify, though putting these events in the correct sequence might call for a second or third showing of the cartoon. Finally, to stimulate the students' creativity one can always ask, "Whence is the Roadrunner running?"

A Roadrunner cartoon is a natural lead-in to the more complex story of "Little Red Riding Hood." In this case a wolf, first cousin to the coyote, is trying to catch and devour an innocent. Unlike Wily Coyote, he succeeds. This major variation in the plot should be one of the main differences between the two stories that the students notice.

Iona and Peter Opie's version of this tale does not end happily for Little Red Riding Hood; however, in the African American version, "A Wolf and Little Daughter" Little Daughter sneaks back behind the picket fence. In this way she actively saves herself from the wolf, a point that needs to be made to little girls on the lookout for role models. Another point of contrast between the two stories is the absence of the grandmother in the African-American version.

The question of when is a wolf not a wolf? can be explored at this point. The video of "Little Red Riding Hood" produced by Shelly Duvall's Fairy Tale Theater makes it rather obvious that Little Red is over-protected by her father and the wolf is an older man who sweet-talks a young girl off the path. In this video the wolf eats both Grandmother and Little Red Riding Hood. A handsome young woodsman saves them by cutting open the wolf's stomach, and out come grandmother and granddaughter, fully clothed and a bit ruffled. After this dreadful experience, Little Red Riding Hood takes the initiative and leads the way in gathering rocks to put in the wolf's stomach. The film ends with the young lovers walking down the path hand and hand. Meanwhile, back in his lair, the wolf is belching rocks and speculating that the grandmother must have had gall stones.

James Thurber's "The Little Girl and the Wolf" is a very witty update on this tale. Yes, it too is violent, but Little Red does all the shooting. While this story is more of a fable with a moral tacked on the end "It is not so easy to fool little girls nowadays as it used to be," it demonstrates how the students can take a fairy tale and rewrite it to fit modern times.

Moms Mabley does the same with "Little Cindy Ella." In this rendition of the Cinderella story, Bobby Kennedy turns Cindy into a white girl, and she goes to a prom dance sponsored by the Klu Klux Klan. At the stroke of midnight she turns back into herself. The story ends with the words, "Her trial comes up next month."

Both of these tales fit an historical context. Both are politicized; though Thurber is hardly a feminist, ironically, his tale can be taken as a feminist personifesto. I'm not sure what the African-American students will make of Moms Mabley's routine. Though I am sure that when it comes to wishing, they can do better than Cindy.

There are so many treatments of the Cinderella story that a comparative study of the various versions should enable the students to exercise their critical thinking skills as they did on "Little Red Riding Hood". "Cinderella" is, like "Little Red Riding Hood" and "Jack and the Beanstalk", a story that all children already know so that the remedial readers can focus on more literate concerns than simple plot development. The German tale can be compared with the French. Though Grimm's "Cinderella" with its severed toes and pecked eyes will undoubtedly be the favorite, the students can watch and compare it to the Disney version to see how Perrault's tale has been Americanized.

Like the European version, Disney's Cinderella has animal helpers. Yet, the vengeful doves have become sweet bluebirds of happiness. The mice which in the Perrault story were turned into horses in the space of a sentence, consume at least fifty percent of the Disney cartoon with their antics. but these are small points. In the American version the heroine is hardworking. She has a dream. She holds onto her dream. Her dream comes true. And in the best romantic tradition her dream is to find true love.

Once the idea of true love's importance for both Cinderella and the Prince has been established, other more offbeat interpretations of this tale can be aired. one could argue that the main idea is "be beautiful and marry well". This story was being told long before Eleanor of Aquitaine established her court of love. It should not be surprising then that "Cinderella" reflects the practical advice of materialistic times. Then again, Cinderella goes to the weimaraners in William Wegman's endearing photographic illustration of the story. The result is a gentle social satire of a fairy tale that lays such stress on dressing for success.

The African Tale "Three Rival Brothers" has some of the same elements as the Cinderella story with a reversal of gender. The theme of sibling rivalry is especially strong as three brothers, each of whom possess a different magic object, vie for the hand of a chief's daughter. One has a glass that lets him see far off places. The second brother has a hammock that can take whoever is in it anywhere. The third brother has a powder that can cure sickness even death. They use all three gifts to find out that the princess has died, to travel to her side, and to cure her. The tale ends with the question. Who should marry her and get to rule the kingdom? After all, it took all three to save her. Three teams of student advocates can plead the brothers' cases.

The unit concludes with a study of three different tales. All have a hero with mother wit, gumption, and get up and go. John de Conquer, Jack, and Wiley not only talk the talk; they walk the walk.

In "John and the Devil's Daughter" which Virginia Hamilton retells from African-American traditional folktales, John de Conquer must do deeds before he wins his chosen love. She is none other than the Devil's daughter, not a princess, but certainly a powerful woman. It begins with John looking for work. A witch woman lets him borrow her eagle which John must feed to be flown thousands of miles. The eagle brings him to the Devil's daughter. For her part she knows a good man when she sees one. John says that he wants to work for her father, but she warns him that her father will kill him. John, who can't help but notice how good-looking she is, asks if she'll help him, and she agrees.

The devil gives John the impossible labor of clearing sixty acres of land in half a day. John gets a good start on it, but the daughter gets the job done by putting a spell on the ax which chops away on its own. The next task is to plant and harvest the corn by morning. Again John works hard, but the daughter enchants his plow which finishes the job on its own. Since the Devil is going to kill John no matter what, the two lovers flee on the Devil's own horses. He chases them in his seven-league boots and then on his bull, but the daughter changes herself and John into a duck and a fox, and then to thwart the bull, grows an enchanted thorn hedge. The lovers marry, farm, raise a family and live happily ever after.

The agricultural basis of this story is obvious. What farmer has not wished for tools that work by themselves and crops that grow overnight? However, the witch, the giant eagle, the shape changes, the seven-league boots are all fantasy right out of fairy tales.

Zora Neale Hurston has written an essay on High John de Conquer as a folk hero who came with the winds from Africa and who has the gift of laughter. He is the laughing trickster. Hurston compares him with King Arthur, a hero who will come to save his people whenever he is needed. All one needs to summon John De Conquer is a root. This John de Conquer tale will enable the African-American students to touch base with their

own African roots and hopefully to draw strength from them. In addition to reading “John and the Devil’s Daughter” the students read Hurston’s essay “High John De Conquer” to expose them to professional literary criticism and the Ideas found within it.

Like John de Conquer, Jack of beanstalk fame sets out on a fantastic adventure in order to improve his lot in life. The Fairy Tale Theater version of “Jack and the Beanstalk” stresses that Jack is awarded for showing enterprise. He Climbs the beanstalk not once but three times. It’s also true that he steals and kills, but in this version the gold, magic hen and harp all had belonged to Jack’s father. Jack is taking back what is rightfully his. In killing the giant he is avenging his father’s death. His helper on this quest is a rather weird cross-dresser who helps Jack find himself.

At this point in the unit the students research other fairy tales. They explore collections and anthologies looking for clever peasants like Jack and John who get ahead with help from their friends, their own wits, and magic. This would make a good group activity because the students could present their stories and ideas first to a small group and then to the class as a whole.

Finally, the teacher reads to the class “Wiley, His Mamma, and the Hairy Man”. An excellent version is in Virginia Hamilton’s *The People Could Fly* . Before the teacher begins, a student looks up the word “wily” in the dictionary and reads this definition to the class, so that they will have an idea of what to expect. Then the teacher asks if they can recall any fictional character who is wily—the answer being, who else, but Wiley Coyote.

As a result of these prereading activities the students approach this story with a purpose and expectations. They will be exercising their critical thinking skills by comparing “Wiley, His Momma and the Hairy Man” with “Jack and the Beanstalk” and “John and the Devil’s Daughter”. And they will be expecting a story with tricky characters who time and again outwit each other.

Like Jack, whose father was killed by the giant, Wiley’s father was killed by the Hairy Man. When the Hairy Man comes for Wiley, Wiley is helped by his dogs and his mama, who knows conjure. One day when Wiley is chopping wood in the swamp, the Hairy Man sends a wild pig to lead off Wiley’s protective dogs. Wiley resorts to climbing a tree to get away from the Hairy Man. The Hairy Man starts to chop the tree down, but Wiley yells some conjure magic that his mother had taught him and the wood chips fly back onto the tree almost as fast as the Hairy Man can chop them off. They are at a stalemate until Wiley asks for time to pray. Ever resourceful, he uses this moment to call for his dogs who come running to the rescue.

Wiley wins the first encounter. His mother advises him how to outsmart the Hairy Man for the next time which is sure to come. Wiley ties up his dogs and goes out to meet the Hairy Man. He talks the Hairy Man, who was overly proud of his ability to conjure, into changing into first a giraffe, then an alligator and finally into a possum which Wiley tosses into a sack and throws into a river. His mama’s plan seems to work perfectly except that the Hairy Man turns himself into the wind and blows himself out of the sack. Wiley finds himself up a tree again, but he talks the still proud Hairy Man into making all the ropes in the area disappear. The Hairy Man laughs at this challenge. All the ropes disappear including the ropes holding Wiley’s dogs. They come running, and once again the Hairy man is defeated. This is a fairy tale that upholds the rule of three. If Wiley can defeat the Hairy Man a third time, he’ll never be bothered again. It’s in this last attempt that the mother saves her son. The hairy man sends a creature out of the woods to lure away the dogs. Then he comes to the cabin and demands her baby. The mother extracts a promise from the Hairy Man that if he takes her baby he will leave all else alone. The Hairy Man agrees and is tricked into taking a piglet wrapped up in a baby’s blanket.

The twists and surprises of this plot make it very entertaining. The Hairy Man is not as stupid as Jack's giant. Because the Hairy Man does not fall for all of Wiley's tricks, the reader with his expectations is outwitted right along with the Hairy Man. As in most such tales the weak, with a little help, triumph over the strong. It's interesting to note that in "Wiley, his Mamma, and the Hairy Man" the mother plays such a strong part. By possessing magic of her own, she combines the role of a good witch with that of natural mother. She makes a strong contrast to Jack's mother who worries, complains and at last praises. Yet Wiley's mother is not so strong as, say, the Devil's daughter so that Wiley's role in his own salvation is not overshadowed. After all, Wiley saves himself twice.

Having studied these fairy tales, from European, African and African-American traditions the students have the background to recognize a good story. The next step is to learn how to tell a story. It would be wonderful if a professional storyteller could be hired to model storytelling and to teach a lesson on storytelling techniques.

Failing that, the students first choose a story to tell. Once the story is chosen it is copied with the print enlarged. The students are encouraged to mark on their copies. They can highlight parts that call for memorization such as "fee fie fo fum" or "Pit-a-pat, Pit-a-pat, pit-a Pat". They can underline important words that need to be stressed, circle sentences that should be whispered or yelled, and add margin notes for appropriate gestures. They practice by reading their stories into a tape recorder and listening to themselves. The teacher brings in some funny hats so that the students can tell their stories in character. Any students who can play an instrument or beat a drum may so augment their performances. Then when the students are ready, the class has a story telling session. The really good storytellers perform for other classes or at an assembly.

This folk tale unit is expandable to include the writing and drama classes of the school by offering a play-writing contest based on the Grimm version of "Cinderella", for example, complete with bloody toes flying through the air. A COPY of this story is supplied to all contestants. The contest is school-wide and a fifty dollar prize is offered for the best rendition.

The winning play is taken up by the drama classes which would put on the play complete with costumes and gory props. The dance department might even get involved to choreograph and perform the ball scenes. This finished play is performed for the entire fifth grade at assembly.

Cinderella films are shown on three consecutive days starting with the most familiar, Walt Disney's animated Cinderella which is based on the French version. The Story Book Theater production comes next and the last film to be shown is Jerry Lewis' Cinderella. Each film is accompanied by an evaluation sheet with three thought-provoking questions and plenty of room for lengthy written responses.

Such an activity fits in nicely at the very end of the school year when the grades are done, but the students are still in school. Teachers are more flexible about releasing their classes for special activities on these days. The students would be reading, writing, viewing, thinking and acting; in other words, they'd be learning by doing.

To summarize, in this fifth grade fairy tale unit, the main goals—the students will read, think, write and speak critically and creatively about fairy tales—are achieved using the following strategies:

The teacher models critical thinking by lecturing on the plot, theme and characters of a Roadrunner cartoon.

The students think critically by discussing and writing comparisons on written and video versions of “Little Red Riding Hood”, “Cinderella” and other tales.

Inspired by Moms Mabley and James Thurber, the students write their own modernized fairy tale. Students write and deliver speeches in a debate over which brother deserves to marry the princess.

Students research and read fairy tales to find a tale to tell. Students tell a fairy tale before an audience.

Students write a fairy tale in play form.

Students perform a play based on a fairy tale.

Students evaluate critically two films and a cartoon of “Cinderella”

## Cinderella Lesson Plans

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### **Goal:**

Students think critically by comparing three versions of the same fairy tale, “Cinderella”.

### **Strategies:**

Students view Walt Disney’s cartoon of Perrault’s Cinderella.

Students view Shelly Duvall’s Fairy Tale Theater video of Cinderella.

Students view Jerry Lewis’ comic film of Cinderella.

During each showing the students fill out the following questionnaire.

Students discuss the answers to the questionnaire in learning groups and with their teacher.

Depending upon their ability the students write a 3 to 10 paragraph essay that compares these movies.

## Folk Tale Film Critique

DIRECTIONS: Answer each question as completely as you can.

1. Write the name of the film and its director.

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2. What is the technique used to present the story? Live actors, claymation, animated cartoon drawings, puppets or any combination of these techniques.

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3. Describe the Cinderella character in this film. Tell what she or he looks like and does.

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4. Describe the Prince or Princess character. Tell what he or she looks like and does.

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5. Describe cinderella's family situation.

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6. Describe Cinderella's friends and helpers.

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7. Describe your favorite scene and tell why you liked it.

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8. Describe the special effects. Were they any good?

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9. If music was used, name your favorite tune and tell how it was used to reinforce the story.

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10. What main idea do you get out of this film?

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## Write Your Own Fairy Tale Lesson Plan

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### **Goal:**

Students write a narrative that combines realistic and fantastic elements. It can be as short as 2 paragraphs or as long as 10 pages depending upon the students ability and enthusiasm. The only thing it can't be is boring.

### **Strategies:**

- Students listen to the teacher read Perrault's version of "The Little Red Riding Hood" from Iona and Peter Opie's *The Classic Fairy Tales*.
- Students discuss how this version differs from or resembles the version that they remember from their childhood.
- Students read James Thurber's "The Little Girl and the Wolf".
- In a discussion the students compare the two versions. The length which is very short, the tone which is decidedly humorous, and the ending in which "the little girl took an automatic out of her basket and shot the wolf dead." are all points to consider.
- Students decide upon the wording for the theme of Perrault's story. Thurber states his in the form of a moral at the conclusion of his story.
- Students review the Cinderella fairy tale.
- Students read "Little Cindy Ella" by Jackie "Moms" Mabley taken from *The Book of Negro Humor* by Langston Hughes.
- In a discussion the students compare the two versions. The historical context of the story, the statement it makes about race relations in the United States, its use of humor to make that statement all are worth noting.
- Students decide upon the theme or message of "Little Cindy Ella".
- Students browse through anthologies of fairy tales to find one that they might want to rewrite. Those who wish to write an original fairy tale are encouraged to do so. Some students may feel more comfortable with this assignment if they can use familiar comic book characters.
- Students read their stories to their classmates to solicit praise for their wit and suggestions for improvement.
- Students submit a second draft of their fairy tales which could be copied and bound into a classroom fairy tale anthology.



## “The Three Rival Brothers” Debate Lesson Plan

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### **Goal:**

Students develop their public speaking skills by arguing the cause of a rival brother in a three way debate.

### **Strategies:**

- Students are divided into three cooperative learning groups.
- Students read “The Three Rival Brothers” from the book *African Myths* by Carter Godwin Woodson.
- Each group of students is given a brother to defend. One group defends the brother with the all-seeing mirror; the second the brother with the flying hammock, and the third group, the brother with the death-defying medicine.
- The groups brainstorm for reasons why their brother should win the chief’s daughter. The best 10 reasons are decided upon by the group and written on index cards by the group writer. The group decides on the order in which the reasons should be presented—the most powerful arguments being presented last.
- The group speaker practices presenting the brother’s case before the group.
- The entire class comes together for the actual debate. For added authority the principal or an administrator can preside as judge. The group speakers present their cases and the judge rules. Instead of choosing a brother the judge could take the view that the princess should decide on her own husband. Or if the Judge is particularly liberal he or she might rule that the princess gets to marry all three brothers.

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Bryan, Ashley. *The Ox of the Wonderful Horns and Other African Folktales* . Hartford: Connecticut Printers, 1971. This anthology of African tales is suitable for adults or children.

Courlander, Harold. *The Cow-tall Switch and other West African Stories* . New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1947. These West African folktales frequently resemble African-American folktales.

Dorliae, Peter G. *Animals Mourn of Da Leopard* . New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1970. These are animal tales and fables.

Dundes, Alan. *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel* . New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973. This is a collection of stories, essays, songs and routines from twentieth century African-Americans, but some of the material originates from an earlier tradition.

Feldman, Susan. *African myths and Tales* . New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1963. The format of this collection is scholarly; however, the stories can be read to children.

Hamilton, Virginia. *The People Could Fly* . New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985. The illustrations by Leo and Diane Dillon make this book accessible to children.

Hughes, Langston and Arna Bontemps. *The Book of Negro Folklore* . New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1958. This collection makes a valuable contribution African American studies.

Jagendorf, M.A. and R.S. Boggs. *The King of the Mountain* . New York: Vanguard Press, Inc., 1960. The majority of these African folktales are about animals.

Woodson, Carter Godwin. *African Myths* . Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, Inc., 1964. The folktales are clearly translated, but the illustrations will disappoint young readers.

Yolen, Jane. *Favorite Folktales from around the World* . New York: Pantheon Books, 1986. This anthology is very complete, and the accompanying commentary is most helpful.

## Student Bibliography

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Hamilton, Virginia. *The People Could Fly* . New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985.

Thurber, James. *Further Fables for Our Times* . New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956. The short fables and illustrative line drawings are very funny.

Wegman, William. *Cinderella* . New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 1993. Cinderella has gone to the dogs. But is it art?

## Video References

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*Cinderella*. Faerie Tale Theater, Gaylord Production, 1984. Produced by Shelly Duvall and directed by Mark Cullingham, this version stars Jennifer Beals as Cinderella and Matthew Broderick as the prince.

*Cinderella* . The Walt Disney Company, 1949. This animated cartoon is based on Perrault's fairytale. It is a classic.

*Cinderfella* . Directed by Frank Tashlin and starring Jerry Lewis and Anna Marie Alberghetti is a musical spoof on the original tale. The film critics do not rate it highly. It can be rented from Tommy K's Video Store at 1636 Dixwell Ave., Hamden. Not every store still carries it.

*Jack and the Beanstalk* . Faerie Tale Theater, Platypus Productions, 1982. Produced by Shelly Duvall and directed by Lamont Johnson, this enterprising tale stars Dennis Christopher as Jack and Elliot Gould as the giant.

*Little Red Riding Hood* . Faerie Tale Theater, Platypus Productions, 1983. Produced by Shelly Duvall and directed by Graeme Clifford, the lively version stars Mary Steenburger as Little Red and Malcolm McDowell as the wolf.

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