



Understanding Folk Tales

FOLK TALES

The names of Cinderella, Snow White, Paul Bunyan, and Pecos Bill may be familiar to you from stories you heard in your childhood. Children often delight in these stories of magical beings, fantastic creatures, and larger-than-life characters; in fact, folk tales and fairy tales have charmed listeners for centuries.

Folk tales are brief stories passed by word-of-mouth from generation to generation. Many folk tales can also be considered legends. **Fairy tales** are stories that deal with mischievous spirits and other supernatural occurrences, often in medieval settings.

ORIGINS OF FOLK TALES

No one knows for sure who first told these stories or when the tales originated. It is believed that workers passed these along to each other to while away the hours of tedious tasks, such as spinning thread or carding wool, and the stories passed in turn from parents to their children. Some tales spread across cultures, with each region adding its own particular touch to the retelling.

You may be surprised when you read some of the original versions of folk tales and fairy tales collected by the Brothers Grimm, as they called themselves. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were well-educated and patriotic Germans who wanted to preserve their culture. Their first book of tales, *Children's and Household Tales*, was published in 1812. Despite the title, the stories were not especially appropriate for young children. Violent and sinister, these early versions of the tales would not pass the approval of many modern parents.

The Brothers Grimm considered themselves folklorists and cultural researchers rather than authors of children's literature. Their original tales, however, authentically reflect the hard lives of the common folk of earlier days, when hunger and poverty were widespread. The brothers themselves experienced such hardships, which may account for the number of tales that include these elements.

Another famous recorder of folklore was Denmark's Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875). Andersen's

early years were marked by poverty and limited education. When his father died in 1816, Andersen had to learn how to make his way in the world. He turned to the arts, theater in particular. Though he did not succeed as an actor, a singer, or a dancer, he drew the attention of wealthy people who paid for his education. Writing became Andersen's creative outlet. His works show the influences of the fantastic stories he had read and been told as a child.

Although Andersen became the most celebrated Danish author of his time, he still felt like an outsider in the world of the upper class—a theme that appears many times in his fairy tales. "The Little Mermaid" and "The Ugly Duckling," the most famous of his fairy tales, are thought to reflect themes from his life, such as the desire for a different life, the alienation of the outsider, and the loss of love.

The Origin of Folk Tales

Some of these nineteenth-century tales originated or were influenced by folk tales from as far away as Ireland, Russia, and Japan. In fact, scholars believe that the story of Cinderella, also known as "Ashgirl," may be Chinese in origin. Today, collections of folk tales from around the world are growing in popularity. Browse through the children's picture book section of a library and find folk tales from another part of the world, such as the Middle East, Latin America, Africa, or Asia. How have these traditional folk tales influenced 20th and 21st century folk tales?



Cinderella, 1897. Gustave Doré.

ELEMENTS OF FOLK TALES

Symbols

Symbolism became a major element of the folk tradition: A well-chosen representation or image, such as an apple, more easily conveyed beliefs than did wordy explanations. Even a century ago, a significant number of people did not know how to read. Thus, the ideas represented by the recurring symbols in folk tales and fairy tales, such as beasts (especially wolves); dark, scary woods; fruit (especially apples); and articles of clothing (cap and shoes in particular), were more universally understood.

Motifs

A **motif** is any element that occurs in one or more works of literature or art. Themes and circumstances that occur frequently:

- transformation ("The Frog-King," "Beauty and the Beast," and "The Ugly Duckling," to name a few)
- abandonment by parents, either by death or by intention ("Hop o' My Thumb" and "Hansel and Gretel")
- incredible strength or size ("Paul Bunyan" and "John Henry")

Twisted Tales

The familiarity of many folk tales and fairy tales provides authors with the chance to twist and change the stories to suit their tastes. The results can be amusing or thought-provoking. Check out these twists on age-old tales:

- *Cinderella (As If You Didn't Already Know the Story)* by Barbara Ensor
- *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* by James Finn Garner
- *Don't Bet on the Prince* by Jack David Zipes
- *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by Jon Scieszka
- *Cinder Edna* by Ellen Jackson
- *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig* by Eugene Trivizas
- The musical *Into the Woods* with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim



READING FOLK TALES

When reading folk tales, record in your notebook the symbols and the magical elements that you observe. Doing so can help you dig more deeply into the tale, to reveal its likely significance to the early storytellers and their audiences. First, create a graphic organizer like the one below. On the left side, list the symbols and magical or unreal elements. In the middle, list the location of similar elements you may have encountered, whether in another story, in a comic book, or in a movie. On the right side, speculate, or make guesses, about what the symbolic or magical feature meant to the early storytellers or why they created such magical or fantastic characters.

Symbol or Element	Similar to...	Meaning or Importance
Three hungry crows	The less fortunate in other fairy tales	You will be rewarded or punished, based on how you treat those around you.

Understanding Folk Tales

Complete this page after you read about **folk tales** on pages 688–689. Try to answer the questions without looking at your book.

What is a **folk tale**? _____

What is a **fairy tale**? _____

How did most **folk tales** probably originate? _____

Who were the Brothers Grimm? _____

What is surprising about the original versions of **folk tales** and **fairy tales** collected by the Brothers Grimm? _____

Did the Brothers Grimm consider themselves authors of children's literature? Explain.

Explain how Hans Christian Andersen came to be a recorder of folklore. _____

Why did **symbolism** become an important part of the folk tradition? _____

Identify four recurring **symbols** in folk tales. _____

Define **motif**. _____

Identify three recurring **motifs** in folk tales. _____

dead, and came back to a house steeped in shadow and silence. It was all over so quickly that at first they could hardly realize it, and remained in a state of expectation as though of something else to happen

—something else which was to lighten this load, too heavy for old hearts to bear.

But the days passed, and expectation gave place to resignation—the hopeless resignation of the old, sometimes miscalled

MULTICULTURAL CONNECTION

Fate in World Folklore

If there is a message in “The Monkey’s Paw,” it is that people should not meddle with fate. The concept of fate, a power that determines the outcome of events before they occur, is one that dates back to the earliest civilizations.

As seen by Ancient Greeks. The ancient Greeks went so far as to personify fate in three goddesses called the Fates. These daughters of Nyx, the god of night, were often represented as three old women. Clotho spun the thread of life; Lachesis measured it out; and Atropos cut the thread, ending life. The Fates’ decisions were unalterable.

Dame Fortuna. The ancient Romans personified fate as one woman. Her name was Fortuna, and you can readily see the link between this name and our own word *fortune*. Romans consulted this goddess about the future, and in their art they showed her with a horn of plenty because she was the giver of abundance. They also showed her with a rudder, symbolizing her control of fate.

In the Middle Ages, this goddess was often shown controlling a wheel or globe of fortune. The turning of this sphere indicated that one’s fortune was subject to many ups and downs.

Determining all events. The belief in fate as determining all events in heaven and on earth was adopted by later Western European societies. It can be seen most dramatically in Elizabethan England through the plays of William Shakespeare and his contemporaries. The three Fates make a notable appearance in Shakespeare’s tragedy *Macbeth*. Here, however, they are depicted as three witches who accurately prophesy the rise and fall of the play’s hero, the Scottish lord Macbeth.

The magical number three. It is no accident that the monkey’s paw grants three wishes to three people. The very number three is considered magical and filled with fateful meaning in many cultures. In the fabled Eastern storybook *The Thousand and One Nights*, the magic genie in Aladdin’s lamp also grants three wishes. Again, fate sees to it that the wishes of the unwise and evil lead only to their downfall.

Why do people believe in fate? As Americans, we like to think we are free to choose our own destinies. However, the idea of fate for many societies has helped people to accept life’s good and bad. Many have found comfort in the face of disaster and death by believing that it was “meant to be.”

Exploring and Sharing

Research examples of the use of the number three in fairy tales and stories from other countries. Share your findings with the class.