

# Folk Tales and Storytelling

## Author

The play *Lost Tales* is a collection of **folk tales** collected from around the world. It contains excerpts from the play *Around the World in 8 Plays* written by Jason Pizzarello, Patrick Greene. The original play, with permission from the publisher, has been edited, embellished and hijacked by Milwaukee Youth Theatre's Lost Players.

## What is a folk tale?

A folktale is a story that is unique to a culture. It has been passed down through the oral or written history of that culture. Examples of folktales include **myths, legends, fables, fairy tales** and **tall tales**. The stories typically are from an unknown writer and are timeless and placeless. Folktales often share common traits and themes which suggest a basic similarity in belief across the culture that they come from. Every culture has its own stories which are shared as a means of entertainment, education or a way to teach values.

## Types of folk tales:

- **fable: (The ant and grasshopper, The boy who cried wolf)** A fable is a short fictional story that has a moral or teaches a lesson. Fables use humanized animals, objects, or parts of nature as main characters.
- **fairy tale (Hansel and Gretel, Cinderella):** A fairy tale is a story, often intended for children, that features fantasy characters such as elves, goblins, witches and sometimes even fairies. The term “fairy” tale refers more to the fantastic and magical elements within a story, rather than the presence of a fairy within that story.
- **myth: (Pandora's Box, Atlas)** A myth is a story that usually focuses on a particular hero or event, and explains mysteries of nature, existence, or the universe with no true basis in fact. Myths exist in every culture; but the most well known are part of Greek and Roman mythology.
- **legend: (King Arthur, Robin Hood, Dracula)** a legend is a story about human events or actions that have not been proved or documented in real history. Legends are told as if they are real events and are believed to be historical accounts. They usually tell stories about things that could be possible, so both the storyteller and the audience may believe they are true. The legend of the Philosopher's Stone (a magical stone that can make a person immortal and turn metals into gold) can be found in literature in the Middle Ages to the modern day *Harry Potter* series. Legends don't claim to be exact retellings of events, so they are neither wholly believed nor wholly doubted by the audience or the author.
- **tall tale (Paul Bunyan, Johnny Appleseed):** A tall tale is a story that contains elements that are so outrageous that they are clearly made up. It is told as if it is true but is meant to be enjoyed as simple entertainment.

## Discussion

Take some time with your class to think of one story that fits every type of folk tale. I've included samples in parenthesis by each.

## Activities

- Divide the classroom up into 5 or more groups and give each group one of the 5 folk tale styles. Tell the groups that they must keep their story style secret. Give each group time to go to the library and look for a story that matches their criteria. Once they have found their story, give them classroom time to turn it into a short 2 to 4 minute skit to be performed for the class. Each person in the group must have at least one line! After the group acts out their story, have the other students figure out which type of story it was and why.
- Some folk tales were used to explain things that people didn't understand, such as why the moon rises at night, or why a particular animal looks and behaves the way it does.
  - Have students brainstorm ideas of things that happen in the natural world that they don't quite understand. Gravity seems a little magical doesn't it? How about how very vast the oceans are? How do magnets work? Look at a globe and marvel. Collect these ideas onto a board or piece of paper, where everyone can see.
  - Now have each student think of their favorite animal. Different cultures feature certain animals heavily in their stories. In west Africa, cunning Spider appears in numerous stories. In the Americas, Coyote is a favorite. Have them think about their animal and describe it in writing. Describe how it looks but also, imagine it as a person and describe the animal as if you were describing a person. Is it shy, funny, loud or sneaky? Come up with as many descriptive words as you can until you have a clear image of what this animal is like.
  - After your students have written a few lines about their favorite animals, have them choose a natural occurrence from the list. Tell them that they are going to create a story called How \_\_\_\_\_ made the \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_. So, for example, if my favorite animal is a Fox and the natural occurrence that makes me marvel is the colors of a sunset, I might write a story called "How Fox made the Sunset Colorful." Or I could jazz it up a bit and write "How shy Fox painted the western sky". Once they have their titles (and you can let them help each other with that) tell them to let their imaginations go wild. As they write, students will work on their creative writing skills and maybe have a new, fresh perspective of the world around them.

## We are all storytellers

Storytelling is a social activity. It is the act of sharing stories. Sometimes it involves improvisation, theatrics or embellishment.

- **Improvisation:** Saying or doing something that was not pre planned but rather thought up in the moment.
- **Theatrics:** excessively emotional or dramatic
- **Embellishment:** A detail, especially one that is not true, added to a story to make it more interesting and entertaining.

## Discussion

- Going by this definition, ask your students if any of them have ever been a story teller? See if anyone is brave enough to tell a story from their own life.
- Storytelling is both an art and a skill that takes lots of practice. Some people are born with a natural gift for storytelling but most of us are not. You might be thinking "I don't know any storytellers" but everyone is a storyteller. Think about your friends. Who do you know that has a way of telling a joke that cracks you up every time? Or who can relay their dream from the night before and make it fascinating? Or maybe you know someone who can tell you what they had for dinner last night and make it funny? These are storytellers. When you think about the art of telling stories, who is the best storyteller you know? What makes them so good?
- Every culture has its own stories which are shared as a means of entertainment, education or a way to teach values. Looking around your classroom, how many different cultures are represented by the students there? Talk about the stories that are passed down in these different families. Are they the same? Are there some differences? Does anyone have a family that likes to tell stories? What kinds of stories are they? How about family stories? Does anyone have a family story that has been passed down?

## Activities

- Break the class into pairs. One person begins by telling their partner the story of what they ate for dinner the night before. They are going to tell this twice. The first time should be straight forward, just the facts. They should mention:
  - who they were with
  - what they ate
  - where they ate
  - what led up to eating the food
  - if they liked the food
  - What happened while they were eating

The second time they tell their story, they are to use the 3 strategies listed above: **improvisation, theatrics and embellishment** to make the story more interesting. After a set amount of time the second person should tell their story. Again, telling it twice with the second including the changes.

After everyone has gone, ask the class if anyone thinks that one of the stories was particularly interesting or well told. Ask that student to tell their story to the whole class. As a class, discuss why that story was so interesting, find out what that student changed within the story to make it more fun or interesting to listen to.

- Storytellers have had an important part to play in our world. They were the historians and entertainers of kings and peasants both. Oftentimes a storyteller would travel from village to village gathering and collecting stories to take back to the other villages.

Create some journals with your students and then assign them the task of "collecting" stories from 5 (or 7 or 10) other people that they know, and recording them in their journals. They can collect these stories from family, friends, teachers, classmates, anyone. These stories can be made up or real but they must come from someone else. They are not to gather their stories from books or online. When they have collected their quota of stories they can pick which one they like the best and illustrate it on larger pieces of paper to hang up in the classroom.

Follow this easy tutorial to make fun (and cheap) journals with your students:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xebqtx0iMRE>

## Lost Tales dramaturgy

IN MYT's production of Lost Tales, you will have the opportunity to watch stories from 7 different cultures.

- Czechoslovakia
- Inuit
- Arapaho
- Japan
- South Africa
- Ghanaise
- Irish

In order to understand the stories the MYT students were asked to do some **dramaturgy** research.

**Dramaturgy:** When we read folk tales from cultures we are not familiar with they might not make a lot of sense to us. Because of this it becomes necessary to do some research into these cultures so that we can be respectful in the retelling, be true to the story and make it more understandable to others. The research collected concerning the world of the play is called dramaturgy. This includes the social,

political, cultural and historical context of the play's world. Through this in depth material the play or story can be understood more deeply.

One of the stories you might see performed is called **The Man Who Married a Seagull**. It is an Inuit story, which is a culture very different from ours. Some of the questions we had to answer were:

- Who are the Inuit?
- What does the Word Inuit mean?
- What importance does fishing play to the Inuit people?
- What do they wear?
- What is their primary diet?
- What is an ice floe?
- What does the phrase "ice breakup" mean to the Inuit people.

Now it is your turn to do some dramaturgy research.

## Activity

- Pick out a folk tale to read to the class. This can be from your own library collection or from this wonderful website: <https://www.worldoftales.com> that hosts an incredible collection of folk tales from around the world that you can access for free. As you read the story, have your students make note of things they don't understand, phrases that don't make sense or things they found odd. At the end of the story come up with a list of questions to investigate concerning that story and its origins. Each student can take a different question to research or assign groups a series of questions that they have to answer in a presentation form.

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