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The Modern Quest: Teaching Myths and Folktales

Jeff House

We don't teach mythology.

Most of our students recognize mythology as a collection of Greek tales, supplemented by references to King Arthur and, perhaps, American folk heroes like Paul Bunyan. That mythology is anything more than a group of long-dead stories does not occur to them.

The truth, of course, is that these tales are a small part of the world of myth, and mythmaking is very much alive, a multicultural expression of universal symbols and beliefs. An effective approach to mythology should illustrate the connection among international myths, folktales, and legends that continue to be told in current literature and media, including films, songs, television, and cultural icons.

That such an approach to myths and folktales is rarely taken stems from the lack of background most teachers have in these areas. Because few undergraduate degrees require instruction in mythology and its related fields, most teachers acquire a BA without coming near them. Consequently, few high-school curricula require myth instruction because (in a tautological stance) few colleges require undergraduate coursework in it. And because of unfamiliarity with the subject, few teachers design units or courses with an in-depth approach. Finally, publishers usually provide excerpts from one, occasionally two, major works, most often *The Odyssey*, as coverage of the subject. It's as if Jack ascended the beanstalk, and the village folk forgot he was up there.

But an increased awareness and appreciation of myth and folktales has two benefits. First, in a time when international barriers are dropping politically, artistically, and socially, it behooves us to be-

come more aware of cultures that have often been better educated about us than we have about them. Knowledge of other people's cultural bases increases both respect for others and an appreciation of our own place in the world. Additionally, an understanding of the archetypes and themes that form the bedrock of myths and folktales allows a more effective study of classical and contemporary literature than a chronological approach. By noting how the trickster behavior of Odysseus in his confrontation with Polyphemus is echoed in Chaucer's "Miller's Tale," Shakespeare's fools, and R. P. McMurphy, we illustrate our heritage, making the connection between contemporary beliefs and values and those from past centuries that continue to influence us.

Allowing for the crowded schedule that already plagues an English department's curricula, a deeper acquaintance with myth and folktales can be achieved via the introduction of units throughout a three- or four-year program. This would consist of two phases: (1) an introductory unit on the ninth- or tenth-grade level illustrating prominent archetypes or themes through stories drawn from around the world; and (2) reacquaintance with these archetypes/themes on later levels by showing their appearance in varied works of literature.

The rest of this article will explain how sample units could implement these phases. To minimize the amount of study involved in creating these or other units on myths and folktales, I have drawn my examples from, and recommend, the following texts: *Best-Loved Folktales of the World* (Cole 1982), *World Mythology: An Anthology of the Great Myths and Epics* (Rosenberg 1989), *Favorite Folktales*

from *around the World* (Yolen 1986), and *Grimms' Tales for Young and Old* (Manheim 1977).

An Introductory Unit

My ninth-grade unit on mythology requires students to learn and tell stories to the class. As part of the unit students rehearse skills in outlining and notetaking as well as develop dramatic skills. Because we have no textbooks containing all the stories, students are responsible for obtaining copies of the stories themselves, or, if necessary, photocopying one from my collection.

The unit is carried out in the following way. On the first day, I pass out a sheet explaining the requirements.

- Students obtain a copy of their story and prepare a five- to eight-minute oral presentation.
- An outline of the story should be photocopied for all members of the class and passed out at the time of the presentation.
- A visual aid (drawing, film excerpt, craft, or the like) should be integrated into the presentation.

At this time, I pass out a sheet that shows the grading on the development of the story, the oral presentation, the handout, and the visual aide. The sheet also lists the categories and stories from which the students may select. Each department will identify the categories to be developed in later courses, and each instructor will select stories in accordance with personal interests. My list reflects an attempt to draw stories from a large variety of cultures as well as to incorporate tales with more female protagonists, such as "The Search for the Magic Lake" (1982), in order to counter the impression that all heroes are males or that only males are featured in important tales.

Creation Myths: Zeus and the Titans (Greece), Deucalion and Pyrrha (Greece), Isis and Osiris (Egypt), Pangu (Chinese), The Five Worlds (Native America)

Fertility Myths: Demeter and Persephone (Greece), The Death of Baldur (Norse), Indra (India), Ahaiyuta (Native America)

Hero/Warriors: Theseus (Greece), Perseus (Greece), Beowulf (Britain), Arthur and the Sword in the Stone (Britain), Sigurd and Brynhild (Norse), Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves (India), The Glass Hill (Norway), The Search for the Magic Lake (Ecuador)

Hero/Tricksters: Anansi's Hat-Shaking Dance (Africa), Coyote and the Lump of Pitch (Native America), Brer Rabbit, Businessman (Costa Rica), Nail Soup (Sweden), The Bad Wife (Russia), Puss in Boots (France)

The Quest: Jason and the Golden Fleece (Greece), The Holy Grail (Britain), Bao Chu (Chinese), The Water of Life (Germany), The Golden Bird (Germany)

Love: Pygmalion and Galatea (Greece), Narcissus and Echo (Greece), Dido and Aeneas (Rome), Pyramus and Thisbe (Rome), The Three Magic Oranges (Costa Rica), The Six Swans (Germany), King Thrushbeard (Germany), Thousandfurs (Germany)

A glance at this list makes it apparent that there is room for discussion about the similarities and repeated motifs among tales. Students will note that Arthur and Theseus both discover their birthrights via swords in/underneath stones; that Coyote's episode with pitch echoes Brer Rabbit's adventure with tar in the Uncle Remus tale; that Pyramus and Thisbe's tale parallels Romeo and Juliet's or that Pygmalion and Galatea's is the basis for *My Fair Lady* (1964). These connections will occasion discussions about how ideas are handed down from cultures in a number of ways.

On the second day, I model the unit by providing the class with outlines of the story of Oedipus, which I then relate. Following the presentation, I provide a copy of the story, showing how I reduced the tale to its key points to develop both an outline and a sketch I could work with in preparing the recitation. I then ascertain what information the students gleaned from the telling, leading into a discussion on notetaking.

Students are given two weeks to prepare their tales, during which time another unit of study is taught. When the tellings begin, three to four stories are told each day, with a short period for questions and discussion following each telling.

Following a review at the end of the unit, I give an open-note test. Success on the test is directly related to students' ability to take accurate notes.

Discussion and review of the categories always brings up modern parallels so that students already begin to see how heroes, quests, and other archetypes are a part of their contemporary world. Additionally, each of these categories can be expanded or modified, so that fertility myths, for example, can take into account the archetype of the earth mother/goddess figure that is enjoying a revival in our times, particularly in the environmental emphasis on Gaia, the Greek earth mother.

Following this introduction of categories and examples, students are prepared to see the deeper implications of the archetypes and themes in later courses.

Archetypal and Theme Development

Teachers often avoid discussion of myths and folktales after the freshman year because they can envision no way of incorporating the material into their present units. But awareness of mythological archetypes and themes enables a teacher to see how a particular literary work fits into a cultural heritage. For instance, a knowledge of tricksters and their varied incarnations throughout history throws further light on a discussion of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

In such characters as Tom Sawyer and the Duke and the Dauphin, Mark Twain has fashioned personalities that tap deep into our psyches. Representing the foolish subversive who fights authority, the trickster appeals to the child in us who questions puffery and silliness in outmoded or archaic institutions and thoughts. Similarly, he encourages us to nurture the child in us, to retreat to that foolish part of ourselves that renews and enables us to return to a more systematized world. Hence, for all the deceptiveness of the Duke and the Dauphin, we applaud their puncturing of people's vanity and greed, and we enjoy, even envy, Tom Sawyer's childlike imaginings.

By explicating the trickster figure, we both understand Twain's characters more fully and see the connection between cultures. As part of a unit on Twain's novel, two days could be used to reacquaint students with the trickster. A folktale read or recited could open the unit, something like "The Pied Piper," "Puss in Boots," a Native American Coyote tale, or a tale about Anansi the spider from Africa. Depending on preceding literature courses, students could then be reacquainted with trickster figures in classical literature, including Odysseus, Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Chaucer's fabliaux, *Tom Jones*, and *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*.

A second day of discussion could utilize cinematic examples of the trickster. These range from the silent-film work of Charlie Chaplin through the Marx Brothers and *The Music Man* (1962) into the present where the archetype shows up in such works as *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), *Animal House* (1978), *Beetlejuice* (1988), *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (1985), and *Real Genius* (1985). The trickster appears in television in such classic shows as *I Love Lucy* and *Sergeant Bilko*, as well as more recently in the form of Hawkeye Pierce in *MASH*.

Finally, students will be intrigued to note the prevalence of the trickster in a variety of cartoon figures from Bugs Bunny to Wily Coyote.

With this background, students are able to deduce in a discussion, or individual work, the appeal of the trickster, even providing personal anecdotes about trickster episodes in their own lives. Thus, the connection from the Greeks to the present world is made.

The fact that our educational system does not place a heavy emphasis on mythology and folktales does not address the reality that they nevertheless play a large part in our culture. By failing to acquaint our students with these cultural building blocks, we fail to illustrate fully their heritage and their connection with cultures outside their own. And by making them aware that myths and folktales embody more than a handful of tales about Greek gods and heroes, that they touch a core that reaches back to the roots of our evolution, we give them incisive tools that help them understand themselves and their place in the world.

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