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An Introduction to Traditional Literature

Stories define who we are or who we wish to be and help us make sense of our experiences. Whether we have a fight with a friend, are unfairly punished, or accomplish something we are proud of, it was in the telling and retelling that the meaning of the experience becomes clear. One story I have heard many times is how my Aunt Ilonka risked her life during the liberation of Budapest at the end of World War II to fetch me, a newborn, from the hospital, while my two grandfathers carried my mother home by a different route. Bombs were a constant threat; one demolished the house in which my aunt had taken momentary shelter soon after she stepped out into the street. There were countless acts of heroism by men and women during the war, but for me my aunt personified the concept of the hero.

As a nation too we have our stories. The telling and retelling of American history have shaped how we view ourselves as a people. Consider the story of the First Thanksgiving, which was developed as a holiday and national legend only in the nineteenth century. The telling of how starving Pilgrims were aided by helpful Indians and their sitting down together for a harvest thanksgiving has come to be prized by most of us, immigrants to this continent, as one of our central myths. Through this story we learn that we belong here and we can all live together peaceably. Though this myth has been violated far too often, it holds out hope for us as a nation as year after year we try to be more inclusive and more aware of who is not at the table. (For a Native American perspective, however, see Michael Dorris's essay, reprinted in *Through Indian Eyes: The Native Experience in Books for Children,* 1992).

Although we all have stories, they are not always easy to share with people outside our culture. Perry Nodelman (1992), a children's literature professor, points out that students in his classes seldom remember or retell stories outside of a limited number of German and English folktales and that they frequently report finding folktales from other cultures boring and "disturbingly alien." My own experience as a teacher has been similar. When asked to identify the story they most enjoyed out of a selection from Jane Yolen's *Favorite Folktales from Around the World* (1986), students in my children's literature class invariably choose European stories such as "Catherine, Sly Country Lass" from Italy or "It Could Always Be Worse," an Eastern European Jewish story. No one chooses "Urashima Taro" with its wistful ending or the various trickster stories, whether West African, Turkish, or Apache. What is more, I too have been baffled from time to time at a choice of imagery, the resolution of a conflict or the absence of conflict, and the meanings of themes.

It was this fundamental feeling that I do not sufficiently understand the folk literature that I am introducing to prospective teachers, as well as the desire to make this literature more meaningful for both my students and myself, that impelled me to explore traditional literature from around the world. The purpose of this general introduction is to provide an overview of the various ways in which people have examined folk literature; to make readers aware of the issues involved in the collecting, interpreting, and retelling of folktales; and to suggest some reasons for using international folk literature with children. The introduction to each section provides a closer look at the

specific genre and some of the ways in which it varies in different regions of the world; the introduction to each individual story focuses on details of the story and how it relates to its culture or to other stories. The country and, where appropriate, the ethnic origins of the stories are identified, and in most cases picture book versions are indicated on the anthology's Web site at www.ablongman.com/lechner. Through this anthology readers should become more familiar with the cultural contexts of traditional literature from a wide range of cultures. This anthology, however, is only a beginning. Starting with the background provided here, readers should be able to continue to seek further understanding of their own stories and those of other cultures and to select and use in the classroom the rich variety of folk literature. Because the definitions and categorization of traditional literature can be confusing, it is worth defining the terminology used in this anthology.

Definitions

A legend such as that of the First Thanksgiving represents but one of many different types of traditional tales. The terms "traditional literature," "folk literature," and "oral literature" have been used interchangeably to refer to stories that have become the cultural heritage of a community of people, shaped and reshaped through continuous usage to fit the needs of the tellers and audiences of a particular place or time. Strictly speaking, the three terms traditional, folk, and oral literature are not equivalent.

Traditional literature, for instance, may be oral or written. *Sundiata,* the epic of Mali, has been handed down orally for hundreds of years by professional oral historians called griots, but the original author of the epic is not known. Other epics, such as Homer's *Odyssey,* are in many cases the works of known authors and are considered literary works; however, they draw on myths and legends that had a long oral history before the written work was created. Charles Perrault in 1697 began a 300-year tradition of publishing fairy tales for children, fixing them in print, with the result that most people's encounters with folktales and fairy tales today are through books and films. In some cases even the collectors of folktales have had to rely on written sources, as oral sources were no longer available. In England, for instance, few living sources of fairy tales were found by nineteenth century collectors such as James O. Halliwell. Consequently, collectors had to turn to sixteenth and seventeenth century chapbooks (cheap booklets) and other printed sources for some of their stories (Briggs and Tongue, 1965). Many American tall tales and other folktales were disseminated through newspapers in the nineteenth century. Today many an urban legend is perpetuated via newspapers and the Internet.

Folk literature, once defined as the productions of the common folk, or illiterate/preliterate people, has also been redefined as having diverse sources and diverse audiences. Many of the stories might have begun as courtly tales but became so popular that they were retold and passed along orally as part of a community's stock of stories. Other narratives too, such as ballads, were probably composed by one individual but entered the oral repertoire of stories. One important criterion for defining a story as a folk narrative is that it has been accepted, adopted, and transmitted in many versions or variants, so whether the story began in print or in an oral telling, it has become the common property of all members of the community and continues to be shaped by its members (Georges and Jones, 1995).

Oral literature is actually an oxymoron, as the term "literature" comes from the Latin for "writing," but the expression is often applied to stories that are passed on orally (Dundes, 1992). For the purposes of this anthology the terms "traditional literature" "folk literature," and "oral literature" will be used interchangeably.

There are many genres of verbal communication. For teachers and their students some of the shorter verbal communications, such as jokes, proverbs, and riddles, may prove to be interesting areas to explore and to collect. This anthology, however, deals only with the longer narrative genres: didactic stories or fables, folktales, myths, and legends. These may be differentiated from one another by the attitudes of the traditional tellers and listeners toward the stories and by the characters in the stories (Brunvand, 1978). **Fables,** which frequently feature animal characters, are told with the intention of educating the listener or

reader. Although fables can be intended for an entire community, they are often aimed primarily at children to teach them the values of the community. Both the teller and the audience know that the stories are fiction, but the message is considered important.

Folktales too are seen as fiction. Their purpose, however, is less explicitly to teach, at least not in the direct manner of fables, and more to express the individual's and the community's hopes and fears, to provide entertainment and excitement, and to create role models of desirable conduct for individuals and groups of individuals (for instance, young adults). The characters in folktales tend to be humans who encounter adventures and problems much like those of the listeners in the audience, though often the characters and events can be seen as symbolic—heroes battling giants or dragons symbolizing the small person's fight against great odds such as tyrants or human resistance to evil. Folktales come in many varieties. Some are naturalistic, though exaggerated, as are tall tales; others have foolish protagonists, whom folklorists label as noodleheads, or tricky survivors known as tricksters. Folktales also include the familiar fairy tale or wonder tale characterized by enchantments, magical helpers, and heroic quests.

Eve Engle Kneeland, Director of Youth Services Auburn Public Library, Auburn, Alabama, is doing an evening of ghost story swapping with young people.
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Myths are considered sacred stories that deal with origins and explanations of natural phenomena and human institutions. Those who first told the specific myths believed them to be true and treated them as sacred. This anthology deals with both classic myths, which no longer hold a sacred status for any tellers or writers, and living myths, which are sacred to the cultures from which they spring. Thus myths are not fictitious stories.

Legends too have an aura of truth attached to them. They are unverified and often unverifiable stories, more closely related to history and biography than the other forms of oral literature. Legends reflect a people's ideals as embodied in the actions and attributes of their heroes, for instance Odysseus for the ancient Greeks, Roland for medieval France, Sundiata for the people of thirteenth century Mali, and the martyrs and saints of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Legends also tell of a people's history as recalled through oral tradition and are frequently used to create a cultural and political identity for the group. Finally, verging on the mythic are legends that tell of the significance of specific landmarks such as rock outcroppings, mountains, waterfalls; of plants such as the dogwood, which has ancient Greek, Christian, and Cherokee legends attached to it; and of ghosts and haunted places. Richard Dorson relates several such stories in *America in Legend: Folklore from the Colonial Period to the Present* (1973).

Although the stories in this anthology are grouped into categories, it is important to point out that these are overlapping categories. A legend might veer more toward the historic or more toward the mythic; trickster tales and pourquoi tales, which have been included among the folktales, can be closer to myths depending on the nature of the event the story describes. Coyote, for instance, might just act like a greedy fool in one trickster story, or he might be the one to bring fire to the world or to choose death as people's final lot in a myth.

Traditional literature was never meant just for children. Myths and legends were for the whole community and were often told by religious leaders or professional poets whose function was to recite the great deeds of the leaders or the history of the people. Folktales were told in a much wider range of settings, from

Hiroko Mochizuki, a member of the Hachioji Storytelling Group is telling stories at Minami-Osawa Library of Hachioji, Tokyo.

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formal community functions such as wakes to family gatherings and recreational occasions. An overview provided by Margaret Read MacDonald's *Traditional Storytelling Today: An International Source Book* (1999) demonstrates that these functions continue throughout the world, though in many places the locales for storytelling have shifted. In the twentieth century nontraditional settings have included public libraries, schoolrooms, parks, and storytelling festivals (Stone, 1986).

As long as the stories remain within the culture that shaped them, they are likely to create only a certain level of disagreement over interpretation. Sometimes ambiguities are deliberately built into the story, as in the African dilemma tales, but the basic world views, expectations for styles of expression, and ability to interpret tone (e.g., humor, irony, earnestness) are shared by tellers and audiences. Misunderstandings and at times controversies arise when people outside of the culture collect, interpret, and retell the stories or when the audience shifts from adults to children. Even Paul Goble, reteller of Siksika (Blackfoot) and Lakota (Sioux) myths and legends, though highly respected by Native Americans for his work, has drawn criticism when he tried to retell humorous stories about Iktomi, the Lakota trickster. Humor is possibly the tone that is most resistant to translation (Hearne, 1999). In the following sections the history of collecting, interpreting, and retelling traditional stories will be discussed, along with some of the controversies attending these activities.

■ Collecting Folklore: A Historical Overview

Just as there have been many reasons and occasions for telling stories, so the purposes and methods of collecting and retelling traditional tales have varied over time. One early compiler of oral tales was the ancient Greek Hesiod (~700 B.C.E.), a poet who earned his livelihood reciting narrative poetry and also used the new technology of the time—writing—to record the narratives and to use them as commentary on society (Powell, 1998). The oldest known of the Japanese chronicles, dating to the eighth century, is a set of histories, myths, legends, and folk songs (Georges and Jones, 1995). In the Americas the sacred book the *Popol Vuh,* was compiled from memory by a Mayan in 1558 to preserve the myths after their original writings had been destroyed by the Spanish (Montejo, 1999).

The systematic collecting of traditional literature, however, began in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In England study and preservation of ancient lore and customs were the primary interest of scholars of antiquities (Georges and Jones, 1995). In Germany, however, the Brothers Grimm started the systematic collection of folklore to create a national identity for the disunited German principalities, which had only recently been dominated by Napoleon. Determined to raise national consciousness, the Grimms collected folktales to demonstrate that Germans had a shared culture, equal in vigor to the classical and modern French cultures (Zipes, 1988). Within a short time after publication of the first edition of their *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* (1812) (*Children's and Household Tales*), which is better known as Grimms' Fairy Tales in English, other European nations began to collect their own stories with the same goal of national consciousness, and by the end of the

century countries as far away as Japan had begun to do the same.

To rule more effectively and perhaps more humanely, colonial governments also collected the folklore of "subject races," as a standard handbook of folklore research by Charlotte S. Burns put it (Dorson, 1965; Okpewho, 1992). Not surprisingly, when those "subject races" began to do their own folkloric work and read Burns's *Handbook of Folklore* (1914), they objected to both the designation and the purpose spelled out therein (Dorson, 1965).

The scientific study of the origins of stories and cultures was yet another nineteenth century purpose in collecting folklore. One school of thought, led by German scholar of linguistics Max Müller, proposed that European languages and stories started in one place (monogenesis)—India—and that all European myths and folktales could be traced back to their Indian origins. Others, such as Andrew Lang, a turn of the twentieth century English folklorist who popularized many international folktales in his *Blue* (*Yellow, Green, Red,* etc.) *Fairy Book* series, pointed out that people throughout the world have the same basic psychological and social needs and proposed multiple origins (polygenesis) for similar stories (Georges and Jones, 1995).

Ethnographers and anthropologists also collected oral literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to study different cultures. One group, the **cultural evolutionists,** assumed that humanity evolved at different rates but that all peoples must go through the same stages of cultural evolution from lower to higher levels of abstraction and sophistication. These researchers thought that by studying the beliefs and tales of contemporary "primitive" people, they would be able to understand the beliefs of ancient people such as the Greeks, who were, according this theory, at the same stage of cultural evolution as the African or Native American cultures of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Besides holding the stages of evolution concept, this group operated under the assumption that "primitive" people told stories to explain phenomena they did not understand (a primitive science) or to teach lessons. They believed that "primitives" were unable to think abstractly and symbolically or to create oral art for sheer enjoyment (Okpewho, 1983).

Another group, the **diffusionists**, basing their research on Max Müller's theory that all stories originated in one place, believed that each culture's stories are merely adaptations of others' stories as cultures influenced each other. They debated as to the routes stories took. One French researcher, for instance, identified ancient Egypt rather than India as the source of all other stories. Early diffusionists, however, agreed that literate and more "advanced" cultures influenced "primitive" ones, but not the other way around. One of the debates involved the route of African American stories; some argued that they were adopted from Euro-American sources and came originally from Europe, while others argued that they were adopted from Native American sources. Diffusionists discounted the idea that African American stories might be original or that they were related to African stories. William Bascom (1992), through extensive comparative work, demonstrated that a great many of them had African counterparts and were most likely of African origin (Okpewho, 1983; Dundes, 1992).

Researchers who espoused a diffusionist theory of folklore collected many variants of the same narratives across cultures to identify what they thought might be the oldest, "true" version of a particular story. To make comparisons easier, a Finnish scholar, Antti Aarne, published a classification of tale types in 1910; it was updated by the American scholar Stith Thompson in 1928 and 1961 as more countries analyzed their own stories and more recurrent tale types were identified. It became apparent, however, that the **Aarne-Thompson tale type index** applies best to the Indo-European tales; relatively few tales recur in their entirety throughout the world. What is more common is recurring story elements (**motifs**) in widely varying stories and cultures. For instance, a bird telling the truth about a victim's plight recurs in Africa, Asia, and Europe.

Collectors following either the cultural evolutionist or diffusionist theory of folklore concentrated on the themes and bare outlines of the narratives, ignoring the artistry of performance and the creativity of the performer who told the stories. Since the 1970s, however, researchers worldwide have been focusing on performance and the role of the performer and even of the audience in creating meaning.

Johnny Moses [Whis.tem.men.knee (Walking Medicine Robe)] is a Tulalip Native American storyteller from the west coast of Vancouver Island, Canada. He is just outside one of the storytelling tents at the National Storytelling Festival at Jonesboro, TN.
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The Study and Interpretation of Folktales

Three of the most influential theories of the meaning of folklore in the twentieth century were the functionalist, psychoanalytic, and structuralist theories. **Functionalism,** established by sociologists Émile Durkheim and Bronislaw Malinowsky, proposes that the role of folktales and other folklore is to meet specific societal needs, such as establishing hierarchies among people; defining relationships between men and women; teaching a group how to plant, hunt, or heal; and so on (Doty, 1986). The Finnish epic *The Kalevala,* for instance, includes many chants that the hero Väinämöinen (*Vay*-nah-moey-nen) recites that are thought to have been actual healing chants and teachings for novice shamans (medicine men and women) (Pentikäinen, 1989).

Psychoanalytic theories developed by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung are based on the assumption that stories are symbolic representations of human needs and fears. Freud focused on the psychosexual development of the individual from full dependency of the infant on the mother through stages that ideally culminate in a strong adult ego able to balance personal desires and responsibilities to lead a meaningful life (Bettelheim, 1976). At each stage the developing child must deal with conflicting desires and fears. For instance, the young child's desire for his mother's exclusive attention, which implies eliminating all rivals, conflicts with the need for the father as well. Freud stated that unresolved conflicts, become repressed in the unconscious and cause neurosis in the child or much later in the adult. He believed that dreams and stories symbolically represented these unconscious conflicts, and he developed a set of symbols with which to interpret them. The family structure on which Freud based his theories was the turn of the twentieth century nuclear family, and the stories he relied on for his symbol systems were Greek myths and Grimms' fairy tales. He drew on these stories—for instance, the myth of Oedipus—as metaphors to name his theories, but he and other psychoanalysts, most notably Bruno Bettelheim, also used the stories in psychotherapy (Bettelheim, 1976). According to Alan Dundes, a folklorist who uses Freudian theories to interpret folktales, only a few folklorists have utilized psychoanalytical techniques, which he considers to be a failing because it limits folklorists to a too literal interpretation of folk literature (Dundes, 1989). Literary scholars, on the other hand, have made much use of Freudian analysis of literary works as well as folktales. As an example, a Freudian analysis of the story of Rapunzel would identify the theme as representing a girl's sexual rivalry with her mother.

Carl Jung rejected the idea that all inner conflict was of a personal nature relating to the psychosexual family drama. He also rejected what he called the "personal unconscious." Instead he proposed that humans draw on a collective unconscious in which is

stored a universally shared set of images and ideas or archetypes that are part of our genetic heritage from prehistoric times. These images or **archetypes** are so powerful that they recur in stories throughout the world. Archetypes include characters and events such as the figure of the mother, in a range of variations with positive and negative qualities. Mother, grandmother, stepmother, godmother, mother-in-law, the Mother of God, mother earth, alma mater, motherland, any place of safety and perfection such as paradise, and animal helpers and other supportive characters are some of the positive archetypes of the mother. Witch, enchantress, dragon, the grave, deep water, death, nightmares, and bogies represent the negative archetypes of the mother. Jung, like Freud, believed that in reality humans see the mother figure ambivalently, as both positive and negative, not one or the other (Jung, 1969). An analysis of Rapunzel using Jung's archetypes might focus on the enchantress as a good/bad mother—both protector and oppressor of the child. Like Freudian symbols, Jung's set of archetypes were used extensively during the second half of the twentieth century for literary and folklore analysis, most notably by Joseph Campbell, author of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1968). As with Freud's ideas, however, the universal applicability of archetypes, in spite of the recurrence of many of the characters and actions in stories internationally, has been questioned. As for the hereditary nature of the collective unconscious, there is no scientific evidence that would support this construct. Nevertheless, both Freud's and Jung's symbols provide an important way of looking at stories. The symbolic analysis of folk literature, however, is probably best deferred until middle school and above, when children are at a higher level of cognitive development.

The **structuralist** approach looks at the forms folk narratives take rather than at the content and context of specific stories. Claude Levi-Strauss tried to find the most elemental structures of myths, which he identified as "binary opposites," by studying myths as they were changed or transformed among related cultures. He postulated that it is the resolution of the opposites that describes a culture's deeply held beliefs (Doty, 1986). Typical pairs of opposites include young-old, home-exile, innocence-experience, good twin–evil twin, and creation-destruction. In the Iroquois creation myth, for instance, the creative twin, Good Mind, and the destructive twin, Evil Mind, are set up in opposition. The resolution to their opposition is the full panoply of nature and the hope that good keeps evil in check. Good Mind brought forth elms, which spread their shade-giving crowns, rivers that ran both upstream and downstream so that people could travel with ease, and animals and birds that were always friendly to human beings, but Evil Mind created briars and other prickly undergrowth, fashioned the rapids and falls, making it hard for people to navigate rivers, and created monsters such as the horned serpent to fill people with dread. In the end (in some versions) Good Mind locks up Evil Mind, showing that good is stronger than evil as long as people stay on the path of Good Mind but the perfection that Good Mind tried to achieve is not present in our world (Bruchac, 1985).

Vladimir Propp (1968) took a different approach to structural analysis. Dissatisfied with trying to compare stories by looking at complete plots and categorizing them into tale types, as Antti Aarne did, or looking at specific motifs and using those for cross-cultural comparisons, as Stith Thompson did, Propp tried to identify recurrent action patterns in stories. He examined the functions of characters' actions for furthering the plot of the story. Using Afanas'ev's collection of Russian fairy tales, Propp identified 31 functions for an unvarying sequence of actions. Not all functions are present in every story, but the sequence is constant, according to Propp. The presence or absence of each function depends on whether the hero is a victim hero, that is, a character who responds to having been harmed, as is Beauty in "Beauty and the Beast" when her mean sisters make her forget to go back to the Beast, or a questing hero, that is, a character who goes into the world to accomplish something, as does Jack in "Jack and the Beanstalk." For a victim hero the story begins with function 1, in which a family member leaves the victim hero unguarded, and continues with function 2, in which the victim hero is told not to break a certain interdiction (prohibition), such as opening the door to a secret room, going near a well, or leaving the path in the woods. There might be a long setting of the stage before the

action begins, as when Beauty is first promised to the Beast by her father and she begins to discover the Beast's good qualities.

Often the sequence of functions for a questing hero skips functions 1 though 7 and begins at function 8, when he or she discovers a lack, for example, the hero loses something important such as the family cow and must seek his or her own fortune as in "Jack and the Bean Stalk," or a family member has been enchanted or abducted as in "The Seven Ravens," in which a young girl saves her seven brothers who had been transformed into ravens. In analyzing fairy tales, it is apparent that this approach works for some fairy tales, but the 31 functions are seldom all present in any one story.

Although Propp's own analysis has limited use because of the large number of functions, most of which are hard to fit to a wide variety of genres and cultures, other folklorists have modified his functions, reducing them in number so that the stories of cultures that do not have fairy tales could be analyzed. In *Reading and Writing Literary Genres* (2000), Kathleen Buss and Lee Karnowski provide a modified form of this type of analysis for use with elementary school children to help children identify similarities and differences among variants of popular fairy tales such as Cinderella. Besides Propp's functional analysis, Buss and Karnowski use tale type analysis, motif analysis, and stylistic analysis. This kind of comprehensive analysis combines both a universalist approach, stressing cross-cultural similarities, and a culturally specific approach to looking at stories. These two approaches, however, are seldom reconciled. In fact, most of the theories discussed above—evolutionist, diffusionist, psychoanalytical, and structuralist—focus on the universal rather than the culturally specific meanings of stories. Isidore Okpewho, a folklorist from Nigeria, while acknowledging some value in each of these approaches for the study of African folklore, also insists on looking at the particulars of the cultures.

Many scholars have concluded that traditional stories have universal and enduring themes that can be understood by anyone in any era. This idea is expressed in the following statement from Max Lüthi's *The European Folktale: Form and Nature* (1982):

> Although in many ways, like everything human, the folktale is to be interpreted historically, I have preferred to search for its lasting truths. Today more than ever I am convinced that, despite increased interest in the functions of tales and in what has been called folktale biology, the tales themselves merit the greatest attention, just as always. Even though much is clarified by their context, the texts themselves take on an ever new life with the passage of time. (p. xv)

In support of this view one might ask, "How can we communicate about, empathize with, and enjoy each other's cultural products if there are no points of commonality?" When I have asked my students to identify an important theme in the myth of Cupid and Psyche, I get a variety of answers, ranging from "trust is necessary for true love" or "don't be too curious" to "don't meddle in other people's business." The story speaks to contemporary readers, even if some of the meanings they draw from it would have been alien to the ancient Greeks. Additionally, when students read Gayle Ross's Cherokee story *How Turtle's Back Was Cracked* (1995), they have little trouble identifying the warning against boasting. A good story has a life of its own. As Donald Haase put it in "Response and Responsibility in Reading Grimms' Fairy Tales" (1993), the fact that the Grimms' fairy tales have been appreciated in so many different cultures and contexts since the early 1800s and the fact that they have provided such rich ground for interpretation and reinterpretation by people with wildly differing perspectives—theologians, psychoanalysts, feminists, Marxists, and Nazis, among others—suggest that each reader gets what he or she wants and needs from them.

The emphasis on the primacy of the text, however, has its limitations. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries interpreters of world folklore relied on European models. Even today Javanese shadow puppet plays, for instance, are interpreted quite differently by Javanese scholars and by Western scholars because they focus on different aspects of the plays. Western scholars focus on the fact that the plays are reenactments and extensions of an **epic** that was first developed in India, and that is closely tied to the Hindu religion. Javanese scholars focus on the moral and ethical themes of the plays. They do not see these plays as reflecting religious

beliefs because the majority of Javanese people are Muslim, not Hindu (Keeler, 1992). While differences in focus may be valuable, misinterpretations due to lack of knowledge about specific cultural values have posed serious problem in the past. A typical misinterpretation of Native American stories, for instance, occurred when outsiders brought their own ideas of who is likely to represent the hero in a story. Barre Toelken (1996), a scholar of Navajo folktales and myths, retells a Chinook sun myth from the Northwest, recorded in 1890, to illustrate how easy it is to misinterpret a story from a tradition outside one's own. It is the story of a chief who goes into the world to visit the sun. Once in the sun's house, he is surrounded by riches yet becomes homesick and wishes to return home. But on his way home he destroys each of the five villages and the inhabitants whose chief he had been, and at the end he is totally alone, building a small house. Nothing in the backgrounds of readers or listeners who are steeped in European and American hero tales would prepare them to interpret this story the way a Chinook listener would understand it. What kind of hero comes home to destroy his own villages instead of bringing back gifts or a prize? Toelken explains that in Chinook culture a chief is not supposed to go away on private errands but is supposed to stay home to lead and have goods come through him. In Chinook society it is the giving away of wealth, not the getting of it, that brings honor, and the chief in this story is not considered a hero. The story tells the listener that to act recklessly means to bring on tragedy to your people and to become socially isolated.

Similarly, an entire genre of oral tales, the **pourquoi** or "why" tales, which typically end with expressions such as "even today the turtle's back is cracked," had been misinterpreted by non–Native American scholars as purporting to be literal explanations of nature phenomena rather than teaching stories designed to impart social norms to children. Because early collectors and retellers focused on the **etiological** (explanation of origins) aspect rather than the instructional aspect of the stories, they viewed Native Americans as rather simple-minded observers of nature (Toelken, 1996). Toelken, like other contemporary scholars, says that when people assume that stories can be universally understood, they negate

Ki Anom Soeroto, a Javanese shadow puppeteer, examines a new puppet At his home in Solo, Indonesia. The puppet is of Bima, one of the five Pandawa brothers in the Hindu epic, *The Mahabharata,* on which most Javanese shadow plays are based.

Photograph by Ward Keeler, copyright © 1992, used with permission. From: *Javanese Shadow Puppets* by Ward Keeler. Oxford: Oxford University, 1992.

what makes a culture unique, and this leads to devaluing and even destroying cultures other than the dominant one.

In an attempt to reconcile the two positions, one might propose that there is a continuum of human experiences and values that all people share but that are given different emphases in different cultures or at different times during the history of a culture. Whereas in contemporary American life, for instance, young people are given a great deal of advice on how to prepare job and college applications to place themselves in the best possible light, or, as some people say, "toot their own horn," they are also taught throughout life the somewhat contradictory value of not being too boastful. The injunction against bragging is far weaker than that in traditional Native American societies; nevertheless, it is part of mainstream U.S. culture. What makes it hard to understand each other's stories is lack of knowledge about their context and lack of familiarity with the specific symbols, tone, allusions, and other storytelling conventions with which they

I Made Djimat is performing a Balinese mask dance, a humorous prelude to a comic romance, Putri Cina—The Chinese Queen of Bali. Mr. Djimat is a member of the Master Dancers of Bali, which reenacts myths and romantic narratives, including stories from *The Ramayana*. The performance took place at Duke University, Durham, NC.

Photograph © 2002 by Judith V. Lechner. Used with permission by Master Dancers of Bali; I. Gusti Raka Panji Tisna, director.

are usually told. Retellers, however, can help to bridge the gap between traditional and new audiences.

Retelling Traditional Stories

The question of who can tell whose story has become a politically charged question. Betsy Hearne (1999), folklorist and storyteller, who as children's literature professor focuses on folklore retold for children, lays out the issues. On the one hand, though collected with questionable motives and methods, folklore collections by nineteenth century collectors did preserve many of the traditional stories of Native Americans and African Americans. She cites Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus* as an example. Julius Lester gives his own acknowledgment of his indebtedness to Harris's collection in the introduction to his version of *The Tales of Uncle Remus* (1987). Cherokee storyteller Gayle Ross talks of making use of James Mooney's nineteenth century collection of Cherokee stories, which she compares to contemporary versions and then adapts for modern audiences. On the other hand, cultures change, and the unexamined use of nineteenth century folklore misrepresents the way contemporary cultures tell or interpret their traditional stories. Both Julius Lester and Gayle Ross, coming from within the culture whose stories they retell, adapt their stories to reflect changing language and world views. A storyteller or writer outside of the culture who is mining the same nineteenth century resources has a harder time adding the cultural context, nuances, and symbols that someone from within the culture is able to add (Hearne, 1999).

Contemporary storytellers and writers are also divided on the question of intellectual property as it relates to oral tales. One view is that oral stories belong to everyone and can be adapted by anyone, thus enriching the world's reservoir of literature. Others, however, believe that stories are cultural property and resent outsiders profiting from their lore (Hearne, 1999). Joseph Bruchac (1996) explains that Native Americans view oral stories as belonging to specific tellers; others must ask permission from the individual performer to retell their story, just as one would obtain copyright permission for reproducing a written work.

These debates have had positive outcomes for the collecting, interpreting, and retelling of traditional literature. The critics no longer come only from European or Euro-American backgrounds. Native American, African American, African, and Asian collectors and critics have been turning their focus toward their own cultures' stories, using a variety of critical approaches. Among other ways of looking at the stories, they have looked at the function of performers in retelling stories to fit the needs of their audiences.

Another important shift that has come about is in the way scholars in general approach collecting and interpreting stories. They no longer take the stance that the performer is merely a vehicle for the story, nor

A Xhosa storyteller from South Africa

Photograph by Harold Scheub. From: *The African Storyteller: Stories from African Oral Tradition* by Harold Scheub. Copyright © 1999. With permission by Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, Dubuque, Iowa.

do they believe that interpretation is the province only of the scholar. Collectors record the name of the storyteller and the place and circumstance of the telling. They also engage the storyteller and audience in helping to interpret the story. Kay Stone, who works with contemporary professional U.S. storytellers, involves them in interpreting the stories they tell. (Stone, 1993, 1996).

Increasingly, too, storytellers and writers are aware of the need to give credit to their sources, whether print or oral, to respect the context of the story and the appropriate time for its telling, and to inform the audience or reader of the ways in which they have adapted the story. Conscientious picture book illustrators of traditional literature research the culture from which the story springs, not simply to recreate folk designs but also to interpret the story in the spirit in which it is told (Hearne, August 1993).

Hearne urges teachers and librarians, when selecting picture book and anthologized versions of traditional literature, to learn as much as possible about the people whose stories they are using and to select books that provide adequate information about sources and the way the story has been adapted by the author. She identifies five levels of source notes, from best to worst, to help with the evaluation:

- S1: a citation that gives the source and the context of the story relative to the original source, that is how it was obtained, how author changed it, why, and so on.
- S2: a citation that provides a general cultural note.
- S3: a citation that appears only in fine print—the reader has to search hard to find it.
- S4: no citation, only a general cultural background.
- S5: nonexistent source note: the author/illustrator takes credit for the story (Hearne, July 1993).

Donna Norton reports a case study of the way a student of hers authenticated John Steptoe's *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughter*, a picture book retelling of a folktale from Zimbabwe. Although Steptoe gave background information and his specific sources, he did not say how he altered the story. The student used the information Steptoe gave as to his sources to discover the changes he had made to the story. As a result she was able to conclude that although Steptoe had made several changes in the story, he kept its cultural essence and accurately illustrated thirteenth century Great Zimbabwe (Norton, 2001). The changes Steptoe made are typical of the way authors and illustrators adapt stories to new audiences. He strengthened the "kind and unkind sisters" motif by developing a scene of friendly interaction between the kind sister and a little snake (really the king in disguise). He also eliminated details that would have required too much cultural explanation for the age of the audience and added visual details that gave information for a new audience that the traditional audience would not have required, such as scenery and clothing styles.

Adapting Traditional Literature for Children

Traditional stories, once the primary form of verbal artistic and instructional expression for all members of society, have become the province primarily of children. The change was well on its way for the upper classes by the time Charles Perrault published his first book of seven folk and fairy tales, *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé* (1697), popularly known as "Contes

de Ma Mere l'Oye" ("Stories of Mother Goose"). Though the lower classes throughout Europe told folk and fairy tales to adults and children alike, the aristocracy and upper bourgeoisie disdained them as literature. Even the *Précieuses,* the group of seventeenth century upper-class women (and some men) who invented elaborate fairy tales for adults, used the traditional tales only as a basis for their stories. Perrault, who was part of the group, did something new by publishing the traditional tales without a complicated framework story and without extensive embellishments (Zipes, 1989); he recognized them as inherently good stories. At the same time he directed them toward a specific audience, young people, though the ironic morals tacked onto the ends of his stories suggest that his true audience included adults. Although Perrault's Mother Goose stories were not meant exclusively for children, it was not long before fairy tales and folktales were published with the express purpose of educating children in the values and manners of eighteenth century polite society (Zipes, 1989).

Although the publishing of oral stories has fixed them in print—we can always return to the original print version for subsequent reprints—in reality each generation also rewrites the stories to suit the mores of its time and its society's views on childhood. Adapters have often chosen to simplify the stories to make them more aesthetic and literary, to clean up explicitly sexual content and other material that a particular era considers indecent, to shape the stories to political ends, and to create versions that the culture considers psychologically more appropriate for children than the oral versions had been.

Children are sometimes the beneficiaries of historic trends in attitudes toward literature. The elegant courtly romances of medieval England, once abandoned by the upper classes as too French and Catholic, became relegated to **chapbook** status. Cut down to readable size and language, these inexpensive booklets contributed to widespread literacy among servants, artisans, and tradesmen. Middle- and upper-class children frequently had to obtain chapbooks surreptitiously (Jackson, 1989). Though despised as vulgar by polite society, these simplified and often crudely written chapbook versions preserved the fairy tales and medieval romances, including those about

Adam Smith, a member of the Hampstead Players, as Merlin in a performance of "The Legend of King Arthur" for first through fifth graders at Yarbrough Elementary School in Auburn, Alabama.
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King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They served as gold mines of traditional literature for nineteenth century romantic poets and folklorists.

As myths, legends, and medieval romances became accepted children's literature, writers such as Charles Lamb (*Adventures of Ulysses,* 1808), Nathaniel Hawthorne (*Tanglewood Tales,* 1853, a retelling of Greek myths), Howard Pyle (*The Story of King Arthur and His Knights,* 1903), and Sidney Lanier (*The Boy's King Arthur,* 1917) began to produce simplified and lively versions of the stories. The trend of adapting and simplifying the literature of former courtly audiences continues to this day with children's versions of *The Odyssey, Beowulf,* and the Arthurian romances. The epics of non-Western cultures, such as the epic of

Sundiata, twelfth century king of Mali, and the adventures of India's God-hero Rama of *The Ramayana,* have now been added to the repertoire. Some of these adaptations successfully capture the tone and grandeur of the epics; others are mere skeletons of the great poetic originals.

Whereas the epics of the past had to be simplified to become usable for children, the folktales and fairy tales of the oral tradition had to be adapted to suit the literary tastes of adult buyers as well as those of children if they were to be marketable as children's literature. The Grimms found this out when Volume 2 of the first edition of their *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* (1815) languished unsold for years. Volume 2 contained stories that were transcribed in a style that was closer to the folk idiom of country storytellers than that of Volume 1, many of whose stories were told to the Grimms by their highly literate middle class friends (Bottigheimer, 1993). Over several editions of their collection, Wilhelm Grimm not only added more stories but also combined variants to come up with the "best" version. He also edited the stories to be more readable and dramatic in print, where the text on the page alone had to supply all the variations in tone one would observe at a live performance. Wilhelm Grimm did this consciously, as can be seen by comparing different versions of "The Frog King" over several editions of *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* (Neumann, 1993).

The tension between presenting authentic versions of oral tales, without the adornment of literary devices, and the need to provide readers with the same level of interest in the story one would experience during a live performance has continued to challenge writers (Goble, 1992; Esbensen, 1992; Kimmel, 1994). Goble in particular comments on the fact that his stories are sometimes criticized for not being descriptive enough. He says, "But then Indian storytellers were not descriptive. Instead, they would use a lot of movement to conjure up images. Gestures, many of which were connected to a universal sign language, would provide much of what these critics call description. The spoken narrative itself was quite straightforward" (Goble, 1992, p. 9). Audience participation was an important part of the performance. In his Iktomi books, Goble tries to achieve this sense of performance and audience participation by having the trickster Iktomi address the reader and by giving visual cues in the form of different color print as to when readers (listeners) were to comment. Most often, however, writers use styles from familiar literary models to heighten tension, create visual images, and paint character. Barbara Esbensen (1992), author of *Star Maiden* (1988), says that literal translations of oral stories do not make for good reading because of the lack of careful sequencing that a well-shaped written version would have, as well as the uneven pacing of events and descriptions. Sometimes information that a reader needs in the beginning is not mentioned until later in the story, because the traditional audience did not need these explanations and the storyteller forgot to add them for the folklorist or anthropologist-collector until the story was under way. Finally, in an oral telling, the audience can interrupt for clarification.

Sexual and scatological content are the most frequently omitted elements of oral narratives in children's adaptations. Most of the trickster tales, whether from Africa, Europe, or North America, have many scatological and sexual episodes. Coyote is greedy for everything, including sex. So are Anansi, a West African trickster, and Reynard the Fox from medieval Europe. In one humorous episode, Coyote, disconsolate, has a conversation with his own droppings. Not surprisingly, these episodes are omitted from children's collections.

Violent episodes in stories have also been toned down. Many a story ends in far milder forms of punishment than had earlier versions. This move from more violent to less violent versions was evident already in the Grimms' work; they had the woodsman save Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother, for instance, whereas Perrault's French version ends with her being eaten as a warning to young women against straying from the straight path and yielding to the sensual seductions of the wolf. Later in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries both Perrault and the Grimms were considered too cruel, and any mention of Little Red Riding Hood's being swallowed was omitted (Zipes, 1983). Other stories underwent similar alterations.

Besides sex and violence, attitudes toward customs that were taken for granted in traditional literature

have caused retellers to change or omit the stories. For instance, smoking tobacco was an integral part of ceremonial and religious customs among the Lakota (Sioux) and many other Native American tribes, but although he would like to do a story on the Peace Pipe, Paul Goble says he knows that a publisher is not likely to publish a book in which smoking is a central part of the story (1992). Wanda Gág (1936), who translated a number of Grimm fairy tales and folktales, mentions in her notes to "Clever Elsie" that she has altered the ending of the story because unless one knew the custom to which the story refers, her husband's wrapping her in a net with bells and sending her out of the village never to be seen again after she fell asleep in the rye, would seem incomprehensibly cruel.

Politics too have affected the availability of traditional literature as well as the way stories have been altered for children. The Grimms' original purpose in collecting and publishing German folk literature was primarily political; they were attempting to foster self-reflection among Germans, presenting what they considered to be the voice of the German people through folktales, mythology, poetry, and history. This purpose was heightened by Napoleon's recent occupation of Germany and the Grimms' desire to see Germany unified (Zipes, 1988). The politicization of Grimms' fairy tales, however, became most pronounced during the era between the end of World War I and the end of World War II. The Grimms were considered so quintessentially German that they were seen as the standard bearers for the nation during World War II, and their fairy tales were widely distributed (Bottigheimer, 1993). On the other hand, German-born storyteller Ruthilde Kronberg told researcher Kay Stone (1993), "As a child in Nazi Germany I used to get in trouble because I didn't do my homework. I read fairy tales instead. I think they saved my sanity because they taught me that the evil which was taking place around me would burn itself out. Which it did."

After the war the Grimms' tales came under attack by the American and English occupying forces, which prohibited their publication and removed them from German libraries and schools; valuable sets were sent to U.S. academic libraries (Bottigheimer, 1993). The stories were soon republished, however, and took further political turns as Germany was divided, with East Germany becoming a Communist state. In West Germany the new editions dropped some of the more violent or stereotyped stories, such as "The Juniper Tree" and "The Jew in the Thornbush." Some writers used parodies of the stories for social criticism. Others attacked the Grimms' fairy tales for their violence and sexist content. In East Germany, in spite of initial doubt about their authors' bourgeois origins, the tales were seen as belonging to the German folk and therefore worth preserving. The East Germans focused on stories that depicted class struggle—poor against rich—and, as the West Germans, toned down violence and brutality in the stories (Zipes, 1993).

The Grimms' fairy tales were not the only folk literature to be appropriated for political purposes. In the wake of the violence of the French Revolution, frightened English upper-class reformers railed against, and to some extent succeeded in suppressing, both fictional rags-to-riches stories and fairy tales with similar themes (Jackson, 1989). Throughout the communist world, folktales became elevated to a high status as the voice of the people. Those that were reprinted often emphasized the "right values," (e.g., clever and wise peasants outwitting oppressive overlords). In China, for instance, class struggle was sharpened by adding story details that heightened the wisdom of the peasants and made it evident that the rich were oppressive and unpatriotic. Stories were also rewritten to remove the magical and supernatural elements and to substitute the voice of the Communist Party for that of local gods, **demons**, sorcerers, and **shamans** (Dorson, 1965).

Women's changing role in society is also reflected by adaptations of fairy tales, especially in the last 30 years. Often conventional stories have been retold as parody or as social satire to highlight the fact that females are not helpless and can be instrumental in saving themselves from threat, as in James Thurber's "The Little Girl and the Wolf," and Michael Emberly's *Ruby* (1990) or even saving others, as in William Jay's *The Practical Princess* (1969), Babette Cole's *Princess Smartypants* (1987), and Robert Munsch's *The Paper Bag Princess* (1980). Because a great many traditional European stories cast women in the role of the villain or showed them as helpless victims, contemporary storytellers have sought out other variants of the stories in which women are not presented in such negative ways. Edith Phelps's *Maid of the North* (1981) is

a collection of traditional tales with strong, positively portrayed female protagonists.

Other recent changes include presenting the stock villain as harmless and misunderstood, altering through humor the point of view of readers and making them rethink their prejudices and society's practices. The wolf has been recast in several recent stories. Roald Dahl's ambiguous poem "Red Riding Hood and the Wolf" makes Little Red not only self-reliant and tough but also predatory. In the *True Story of the Three Little Pigs* (1989) by Jon Scieszka the wolf tells us that he has been framed. Eugene Trivizas's *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig* (1993) has a strong peace message. These adaptations are valuable means of looking critically at societal assumptions in traditional stories. As Temple, Martinez, Yokota, and Naylor suggest, however, in *Children's Books in Children's Hands* (2002), rather than suppressing stories whose values might no longer reflect society's values, students and teachers can openly discuss the implications of the stories, and teachers can also make sure that traditional stories that do not reinforce the same assumptions, for instance, of the passive female as prize for a prince, are also included.

■ Why Use Traditional Literature with Children?

Traditional stories are so much part of our cultural heritage that they provide constant sources of allusions in literature, daily speech, advertisement, and even decision making. Knowing the sources of these allusions enriches our lives. Classic and contemporary literature and films often utilize the themes and structures of folk literature—for instance, the hero's journey—an ever popular theme. Traditional stories can also act as models of language usage through their storytelling devices: tight plotting with a clearly defined conflict, repetition, use of parallel sentence structures, figurative language, description, and so on. Story characters pass on cultural values in either a positive or a negative way, they provide an opportunity to learn about our own and others' historic customs and values, and they can be vehicles for critical thinking as children learn to question accepted stereotypes in some of the traditional stories. A feeling of hope and optimism engendered by many of the folktales with happy endings is an important reason for using folktales with children, some of whose daily lives are not always hopeful. Children can better deal with the conflicts, pain, and sorrow of life not by being ignorant of them but by believing that they can be overcome. Psychotherapists such as Bruno Bettelheim (*The Uses of Enchantment,* 1975) and Sheldon Cashdan (*The Witch Must Die,* 1999) believe that fairy tales help children to resolve inner conflicts as they see story heroes overcome villains symbolizing their own unruly feelings. Most of all, traditional literature provides a vision of those things that unite us: our need and capacity for love, mirth, self-efficacy, wisdom, wonder, and making meaning out of the mysteries of our world (Temple et al., 2002).

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