Traditional Literature
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What is Traditional Literature?
- A body of stories and poems passed from generation to generation.
- Were not initially written down.
- Storytellers were inspired to produce new versions.
- Come in the form of folktales, fairytales.
- Considered a universal language recognizable in every culture of the world.

Value of Traditional Literature
- Engaging and easy to follow
- With its characterization, repeated or rhythmic chants, it draws children in.
- Its rich in multicultural and international literature.
- It’s considered public domain.
- It can reshape a historical event and gives children symbolic ways to think and talk about fears.
- Stories acquaint readers with plot.
- They are the oldest stories and the foundation upon which every other story has been written.

How Traditional Literature Works
Written Folktales, though may take less than a page to write down, are transformed into a multi-page picture books and brought to life by the use of these Elements of folk stories:
- Setting—can be sketchy. “Once upon a time—”, There was—, Often in cottages and castles, the forest, never a city.
- Characters—are either very good or very bad and take on 3 main roles:
  1. The Hero—The person whose desires and needs drive the story
  2. The Rival—The person who stands between the hero and the goal
  3. The Helper—The person or force who helps the hero
- Contrast in Folktales are common. For example:
  - good vs evil; young vs old; weak vs strong
  - hero vs villian; rich vs poor

Elements continued
Plots—Plots are more prominent in folk and fairy tales than in other forms of literature. Common patterns in plot mirror structures of human life and are variations of the same plots in tale after tale.

- Commonalities in folktales are called motifs and tale types.
- Motifs are:
  - Certain actors (fairy godmother, wicked stepmother)
  - Certain objects (pieces of clothing, crumbs to make a trail)
  - Certain actions (spinning straw into gold)

- Tale Types are folk narratives that form a recognizable pattern.

We see an example in the in the versions of Cinderella: 1) a girl loses her mother, 2) is forced to live with her mean step sisters, 3) animals help her out, etc.

Hero Cycle
A very common kind of plot seen in Western folk and mythology is the Hero Story. The tale of an unremarkable person who is called to a great adventure and undergoes many hardships before bringing some good.

The Hero Cycle:
- Tells many stories at once; a child’s journey to adulthood, a rediscovery of meaning in midlife, or a summary of a whole life journey.
- Unfolds in several steps
  1. The hero at home
  2. The call to adventure
  3. The test
  4. The helper
  5. The land of adventure
  6. A deathlike experience
  7. Meeting the goddess
  8. Atonement with the father
  9. Stealing or winning the boon
  10. The flight
  11. The return

- Fits a host of stories: Hercules, Jack and the Beanstalk, Puss and Boots, just to name a few.
The Role of the Reader in Traditional Literature

Sigmund Freud made two large claims that answer the question as to why people continue to come back to old stories that are told and retold in traditional literature.

Claim #1: The most important preoccupations of people’s lives—the most basic fears, secret desires, and strongest ambitions—are laid down in early childhood that involve drama with parents and siblings.

Claim #2: Humans have an amazing capacity to make symbols.

These claims solidify the fact that humans produce dreams, art, and literature as a symbolic way to explore their basic urges.

Example: Someone grappling with the fear of losing their family may feel connected to Hansel and Gretel.

Visual Depictions of Traditional Literature

The Evolution of Traditional Literature

Where did the literature in the oral traditions come from?

- The Kalevala—a long collection of ancient Finnish verses that recount the exploits of heroes and common folk that were committed to memory by storytellers.

- Stories arose because people wanted to remember the best things and pass them on.

- Most of the stories answered important questions about the human experience and what the young should know, aspire to, and believe, forging a cultural identity in the process.

The Oral Tradition

- Relied heavily on strong plots, legendary characters, fantastic events, good vs. evil, included chants and poetic language to aid memory.

As writing advanced oral traditions were pushed aside.

Retold in different places and at different times.

The Retellers of National Folktales

- Charles Perrault (1628-1703): Published a popular collection of French fairytales.

- The Brothers Grimm (1785): Believed that the spirit and the culture of the German people resided in the old tales.


- Hans Christian Anderson (1807-1875): Skilled reteller of traditional tales with his own particular twist.

Folklore and Folktales in America

- In the United States Joel Chandler Harris collected stories he learned as a boy from slaves in Georgia that were later narrated through a fictional character named Uncle Remus. Some of the titles in his collection include “Tar Baby” and “Brer Rabbit.”

- Native American Stories emerged in the 20th Century.

- The Great Depression New Deal program saw a harvest of American Folktales.

- Father west stories of ranch life were collected by Texan J. Frank Dobie.
Types of Folk Literature

African folklore - Anansi the Spider

This West African god frequently takes the form of a spider, and holds the knowledge of all of the folktales and stories; he is cunning and tricky, and uses his cunning guile to try to get what he wants. It is thought that Anansi was originally found in stories from the Ashanti and then the Akan people in Ghana, and from there the stories spread.

Type of Folklore Cont’d

Realistic Tales
Legends
Epics and Ballads
Fables
Myths
Pourquoi Tales

Myths

Myths

One method in which stories try to explain the mysteries of the universe to society.

Traditional Literature from Many Cultures

Classical Myths from Greece
Folklore from North America
Traditional Tales from the British Isles
Russian Folktales
German Traditional Tales
French Traditional Tales
Jewish Folktales
Scandinavian Traditional Tales
Asian Folklore

French Folklore - Beauty and the Beast

Themes: inner beauty vs. outward beauty, perception, judgment, societal pressure, society vs. the individual
Folklore Across the Cultures

As we at look at literature and think about the distinguishing features of each of the folklore of many different cultural groups, we find that there are far more similarities than there are differences.

When I look back, I am so impressed again with the life-giving power of literature. If I were a young person today, trying to gain a sense of myself in the world, I would do that again by reading, just as I did when I was young.

― Maya Angelou

The End!