

Folklore and Fables

by Zach Elton

"Old men's stories from front porches cast off into the wind..."

With these words, the Man in *Where We Stand* begins to describe the town he lives in, and invites the audience to listen to his story. Storytelling is one of the oldest traditions in the world, and it is essential to our understanding of community, culture, and the human condition. Scholars study the stories we tell, which fall under a broad category of folklore, to examine the impact they have on society.

Folklore refers to the beliefs, customs, and traditions of a community passed down through generations by word of mouth. This encompasses multiple forms of storytelling such as folktales, proverbs, rituals, dances, and even jokes. These beliefs and customs are not taught; they are simply stated verbally or picked up by demonstration. For example, in traditional western wedding ceremonies, customs such as wearing white, sharing a cake, and exchanging rings are never taught, but these elements are embedded in our culture's collective mind. One of the most essential parts of folklore, though, is the stories that are passed down.

Folk literature has served a myriad of purposes in the course of humanity. There are a handful of reasons that scholars, called folklorists, believe these stories have developed. Overall, these tales seem to meet some type of human need or answer an essential question. They contain universal human truths in a format that is simple and easy to understand. Some folklorists would say that to be a successful piece of folk literature, a story needs to entertain; explain the mysteries of the natural world; articulate fears and dreams; impose order on the apparent random nature of life; and help children develop a sense of morality, tradition, and community. A story does not have to include all of these, but most well-known ones contain most of these elements. The most popular branch of folk literature is probably the folktale, which are stories from a specific culture that begin in the oral tradition. No one is sure

how these stories develop, they are retold and solidified over time. Folktales are usually broken up into five subcategories: fairy tales, fables, myths, legends, and tall tales.

Fairy tales gain their name because they often have fairies or mythical creatures in them. The main character is usually royalty, or comes in contact with royalty over the course of the story, and they are helped along the way by some kind of magic. Thematically, these stories always deal with a battle between good and evil. A classic fairy tale is "Cinderella," which contains all of these necessary elements. Cinderella is abused by her wicked stepmother, but through the help of her magical fairy godmother, she meets a prince and falls in love.



ILLUSTRATION OF CINDERELLA.

Fables, on the other hand, usually don't have humans in them and are relatively short and simple stories that have a clear lesson at the end. The main characters are typically animals that act like people. One of the animals attempts to solve a problem by using trickery or deception, only to have the tables turned on them in the end. Though he did not create the fables, Aesop is given credit for cataloging them. His story "The Tortoise and the Hare" is probably his most famous. One day, a hare challenges a tortoise to a race. Because he is so far ahead, the hare takes a nap, but while he is

sleeping, the tortoise crosses the finish line. The lesson at the end of the story is that “slow and steady wins the race.”

Myths often teach an important life lesson or answer a question about humanity or some natural phenomenon. These stories are often set in ancient times and contain gods and goddesses. Myths hold the past, present, and future together by teaching us about the past, showing us how that informs the present, and offering advice for the future. For example, almost every civilization has some form of a creation myth, making it one of the most common myths on Earth. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, practitioners believe God made the world in seven days, and when the humans broke their promise to obey God, they became mortal. In this way, this myth shows the creation of the earth (the past), warns people to be obedient to God (the present), and informs the listener that death is an inevitable part of life (the future).

Legends are about a heroic person or some incredible place that contain some elements of truth. King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table is one of the most well-known legends in the world. Not much is known about the man who inspired the King Arthur stories, but it is speculated that he was an extremely skilled warrior who led British military forces against the Saxons in the 5th or 6th century. In the following years, the legends around Arthur would only grow. Soon, stories developed about the glorious kingdom of Camelot, Arthur’s undying honor, his association with the mystical figure Merlin, his trusty sword Excalibur, his wife Guinevere, and the Lady of the Lake. Although the Arthur who was the inspiration for the story was a real person, the legend has been embellished over time and is highly fictionalized.

Finally, one of the most popular branches of folklore in America is the tall tale. These are stories that contain unbelievable or mystical elements in them, but they are recounted as if they were absolutely true. There are predominantly two types of tall tales: ones that are based on historical figures and ones that are completely made up. For example, John Henry was a real railroad worker in the 1800s who was praised for his strength and speed while laying

the railroad tracks. Over time, word spread about him, and the story became that one day he raced against a steam-powered hammer and won, only to die from exhaustion afterwards. There are few that believe John Henry actually raced and died, but most folklorists believe he was a real person who worked on the railroad.

The second type of American tall tales are ones that are not based on real people but often deal with elements of America's culture or land. For example, one of the most famous tall tales is that of Paul Bunyan. According to the story, Paul Bunyan is a giant lumberjack based in New England who kept a blue ox named Babe as a pet and could knock down a fully grown tree with just one swing of his ax. This story was originated by lumberjacks in the 1800s in New England and Canada before it made its way into popular culture. Today, Bangor, Maine, claims to be the birthplace of the Paul Bunyan story. It even has a statue of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox in town, as well as a birth certificate on display at the city hall with a birthdate of February 12, 1834; however, Bunyan didn't really exist, and the tales told about him are completely made up.

Folklore is an essential part of every culture. Through these rituals, beliefs, and stories, a person is able to learn more about themselves and their community. Though *Where We Stand* is a completely new story, Donnetta Lavinia Grays uses many elements from folklore to make this piece feel familiar. Through her use of storytelling, audience interaction, and music, she creates an environment that makes an audience reflect on their own community and sense of morality.



PAUL BUNYAN STATUE IN BANGOR, ME.