Imaginative Literature

Proverbs, Nursery Rhymes, Fables, Fairy Tales, Folktales, Tall Tales, Legends, Fantasy and Myths

Characteristics of Traditional Stories

- Reading stories from oral tradition allow us to make important connections: to the past, to different cultures, to time-honored values and to family and friends.
- Some stories are easily classified, some may have elements of more than one type.
- Historical and cultural perspective are important elements of the story.

Proverbs

- Proverbs are short bit of wisdom that people all over the world have used for thousands of years.
- Proverbs offer advice and explanations on how we ought to feel about things that happen to us.
- They sum things up in a few well-chosen words.
- Examples:
  - "Easy come, easy go"
  - "Two captains sink the ship"
  - "Don’t cry over spilled milk"
  - "The early bird catches the worm"

Nursery Rhymes

- Nursery rhymes are short poems with rhythm.
- They may reflect historical events of the time.

Nursery Rhyme Examples

Ring a ring of rosies, A pocket full of posies, A-tishoo, A-tishoo! We all fall down.

Historical significance:

Most people believe this rhyme originates from the time of the Great Plague in the 17th century. The roses are the rosy colored rash displayed by sufferers; posies were a little bundle of herbs and spices said to ward off the plague; and a-tishoo the sneezing which accompanied the final fatal moments before the victims would “all fall down” dead.

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the King’s horses, All the King’s men, Couldn’t put Humpty together again.

Historical significance:

It is thought that “Humpty Dumpty” was a cannon mounted atop the St. Mary’s Wall Church in Colchester to defend the city against siege in the summer of 1648 during the English Civil War. The enemy hit the church tower and the top was blown off. “Humpty Dumpty” fell off and tumbled to the ground. The King’s men tried to fix him but couldn’t.
Jack and Jill went up the hill,
To fetch a pail of water;
Jack fell down, and broke his crown,
And Jill came tumbling after.

**Historical Significance:**
In the 1765 edition of “Mother Goose’s Melody” a woodcut illustration shows two boys, not a boy and girl as you would expect. This gives the explanation that the two boys were Jack and Gill and were really Cardinal Wolsey and Bishop Tarbes in 1518. Some suggest the rhyme mocks the collapse of the men’s uphill battle for peace between France and the Holy Roman Empire.

London Bridge has fallen down,
Fallen down, fallen down,
London Bridge has fallen down,
My fair lady.

**Historical Significance:**
It is possible the rhyme and game date back as far as the 14th century. Several versions can be found all over Europe. Some think that it refers to the destruction of London bridge in the 11th century by King Olaf and his Horsemens.

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**Fables**
- A brief story with a moral, which teaches a lesson about human nature. The moral is directly stated at the end or indirectly communicated through what happens in the fable.
- Usually includes animal characters that stand for specific human qualities, such as kindness or dishonesty.
- Aesop fables

Examples:
- “The Tortoise and the Hare”
- “The Fox and the Grapes”
- “The Boy who cried Wolf”
- “Two Ways to Count to Ten”
- “Race Between Toad and Donkey”

**Fairy Tale**
- A type of fantasy
- Conflict between good and evil.
- May be passed down and retold in different forms reflecting cultural values and perspective.

Examples:
- “Cinderella”
- “The Ugly Duckling”
- “The Emperor’s New Clothes”
- “Sleeping Beauty”
- “Hansel and Gretel”
- “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”

**Folktales**
- Orally passed down and retold in different forms.
- Reflects a culture’s values and trials.
- May teach a lesson.
- “Trickster Tales” are when a clever animal outwits another larger, more powerful opponent.

Examples:
- “One Grain of Rice”
- “Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters”
- “The Crane Wife”
- “Brer Possum’s Dilemma”
- “The Three Little Pigs”
- “The People Could Fly”
- “Master Frog”
- “Waters of Gold”

**Tall Tales**
- A humorously exaggerated story about impossible events.
- Stars a hero or heroine who is larger than life—that is bigger, stronger, and even louder than a regular person.
- Uses exaggeration to emphasize the abilities and achievements of the hero or heroine.

Examples:
- “John Henry”
- “Paul Bunyan”
- “Bess Call”
- “Pecos Bill”
- “Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind”
Legend
- A story passed down through many generations that is believed to be based on real people and events.
- Tells about a hero or heroine who has unusual powers.
- Focuses on the hero’s or heroine’s struggle to defeat a powerful force.
- Highlights a positive quality or way of behaving, including chivalry.

Examples:
- "Davy Crockett"
- "Johnny Appleseed"
- "King Arthur"
- "Racing the Great Bear"
- "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"

Fantasy
- Story made up of unrealistic events.
- Characters may or may not be realistic.

Examples:
- "The Hobbit"
- "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone"
- "The Hunger Games"
- "The Revenge of the Shadow King"
- "Dragon Rider"

Myth
- A story handed down from the past that tries to explain the meaning of life or a natural event.
- Characters have supernatural powers but also show human qualities like anger.
- Roman, Greek, and Native American myths are most common.
- Told over 3,000 years ago.

Examples:
- "Arachne"
- "Gilgamesh and Enkidu"
- "Orchis and Daedalus"
- "Hercules"
- "The Sky Woman"
- "Echo"
- "Orpheus and Eurydice"
- "Paethon, Son of Apollo"

Elements of Imaginative Literature
- Does the story tell about something real?
- Could the events be real or are they totally unbelievable?
- Are the characters human, animal or both?
- Do the characters do things that are typically human or are they superhuman?
- Does the character face a problem that must be solved?
- Does the story teach a lesson?
- Can you tell when and where the story takes place, or could it be anywhere?
- Does the story take place a long time ago?
- Are the people in the story common or royalty?
- Is there a mention of gods in the story?

Other words to know...
- Moral – a lesson
- Mood – feeling you have when reading a story
- Exaggeration – overstatement
- Personification – human qualities to non human things
- Motif – a common or repeating element in imaginative literature
- Cultural perspective – society or culture’s values
- Historical significance – how it relates to the past or history
- Inference – intelligent guess or conclusions that can be made
- Theme – message about life, underlying meaning