

A Few Thoughts on Folktales and Fairy Tales

by Margaret Willey

DEFINITIONS OF FOLK LITERATURE:

FOLKTALE: An adventure story that may be grounded in day-to-day life, with elements of humor, exaggeration and a broad, ordinary setting.

FAIRY TALE: An unbelievable tale that includes enchantments or supernatural elements and characters—wizards, witches, enchanted castles and spells.

ANIMAL TALE/FABLE: Like folktales, but peopled with animals that often talk. Fables usually contain a moral.

MYTHS: Folktales that hold a theory of the origins of the world and of humanity.

IMPORTANT ELEMENTS OF THE FOLKTALE GENRE:

Folktales come from an oral tradition of storytelling. Many of the folktales we read today have been around for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years, handed down from earlier generations and civilizations. They have much to teach students of all ages about earlier times and customs. A folktale can be a mini-history lesson, wrapped in a charming package. Folktales and fairy tales have certain motifs or patterns that are common among different countries and cultures. The same basic fairy tale (*Cinderella* is a good example) may come to us from all over the world.

TEN REASONS TO USE FOLKTALES IN THE CLASSROOM:

FOLKTALES...

- 1) are adventure stories and can be very exciting and suspenseful and thus appeal to a child's hunger to be challenged in a safe way. Children can have vicarious escapades via a well-told tale.
- 2) often have a sly, subtle humor that can be used to teach children about irony and "the art of the joke." This is especially true of trickster tales.
- 3) promote cultural awareness—the ways that we are alike and the ways that we differ from other cultures and countries. Folktales can be used to lessen a child's fears of people who seem different from them.
- 4) because they are highly structured, with a strong chronological sequence, can teach story structure to children who have had little exposure to pure story.
- 5) can lead to deeper understanding and appreciation of the arts—music, visual arts and dance, for example, because so many artists are inspired by folktales, fairy tales and myths.

- 6) can speak to the universal search for answers to the world's origins and so can encourage appreciation and tolerance for other religions and beliefs at a time when this is greatly needed.
- 7) can speak very simply and directly to a child's need for the world to simply make sense—they can provide security and reassurance, hope and a belief that love and goodness will triumph.
- 8) contain stock characters and because of this, children can easily identify with the protagonist, male or female, and thus sort out their own questions about character and identity through accessible people or animals-as-people. In addition, folktales provide a good introduction to the whole process of creating a strong, central character for young writers.
- 9) can encourage students to see themselves as oral storytellers. Folktales also lend themselves well to plays and theatrical productions and can provide an early understanding of theater arts.
- 10) can be used to help students identify many language elements: repetitive phrases, idiomatic words, idiomatic expressions, metaphors, similes, dialect, words in different languages, exaggerations, alliterations—all of which can make the story more lively, funny and “literary.”

CLASSROOM SUGGESTIONS FOR USING CLEVER BEATRICE, A RETOLD FOLKTALE FROM FRENCH CANADA:

Idiomatic language structure from the French: statements ending with “you” and statements ending with “we too.”

Discuss repetition of phrases: “I am only trying to win the bet,” “If you insist,” “I accept!” “Brothers of Mister Giant!” and how these phrases actively move the story along.

Discuss Beatrice's qualities as a folktale character: brave, polite and very clever.

Discuss use of alliterative words: whoosh-bang (tree falling down), ker-blam (fist upon door), Whoosh-wham (iron bar crashing).