Telling Tales

The invention of writing, more than 5,000 years ago, was a pivotal event in human history; indeed, without it there could be no recorded history. But even before writing began, stories existed, often in the form of folk tales. This much older spoken tradition probably goes back to the very beginnings of language itself. Folk tales did not need to be written in order to be preserved. They were passed on by word of mouth from one generation to the next. Most were anonymous and the work of many different people. As the tale was told and retold, it changed. Each teller modified it to fit a particular audience.

One famous collection of folk tales, first recorded around the fourteenth century, is *The Arabian Nights*, also called *One Thousand and One Nights*. The title comes from the efforts of the storyteller, Scheherazade, to keep her husband, the king of what is now India and Indochina, from killing her. She stopped each night’s story at a suspenseful point. That way, her husband would allow her to live one more night to tell its ending. Scholars think that many of these tales may have originated in Syria and Egypt, while others could have come from India. Their actual origin, however, remains a matter of conjecture.

Not until the early nineteenth century was a serious attempt made to give European folk tales a permanent written form. In Germany, two brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, collected hundreds of folk tales from all parts of the country. They published them in an anthology, now well known as *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*. In its pages Rapunzel, Hansel and Gretel, Cinderella, and Little Red Riding Hood make their first appearance in print.

One purpose of folk tales may have been to entertain. But that was not their only function. The reason they have survived for so long and are so prevalent in all human societies is that they educate their audiences. They seek to instill values that the society may consider imperative for its survival, such as a sense of right and wrong or the need for self-reliance. In addition to providing models for appropriate behavior, they give explanations, often derived from folklore, of the origin and meaning of the natural world.
Scholars have been struck by how frequently the same situations recur in folk tales from many different places; over three hundred versions of the Cinderella story, for example, have been identified. Perhaps the same stories appeared spontaneously in many distant societies. Or perhaps they were spread by travelers and adapted to fit the needs of their listeners. In addition to the same stories, the same themes are also found again and again. One of the commonest is the use of guile as a weapon of the helpless against the powerful. There are no better examples of this than the Uncle Remus stories of Joel Chandler Harris, based on African-American folk tales of the American South.

One of the funniest of the Uncle Remus stories tells of Brer Rabbit, who falls into the clutches of Brer Fox. He begs his captor not to throw him into the brier patch, saying he would rather be hanged, drowned, or even skinned alive. Brer Fox, being of a mean disposition, promptly does what his victim has begged him not to do. Brer Rabbit, of course, extricates himself with ease from the brier patch. He mocks Brer Fox as he scampers away by calling out that he was “bred and born in a brier patch.”

Folk tales, coming from every part of the globe, encompass the whole of human experience. From their early beginnings, long before the dawn of history, until the fairly recent past, they had no competition from other forms of entertainment. Today, worldwide television and radio, movies, and the mass marketing of books compete for children’s attention. Is there a danger that in the future folk tales will survive only in scholarly collections? Probably not as long as children, snuggled in their beds, experience the magic that begins with the spoken words, “Once upon a time.”

► Answer each of the following questions in the form of a sentence. If a question does not contain a vocabulary word from the lesson’s word list, use one in your answer. Use each word only once.

1. Why was it imperative that Scheherazade keep the king entertained?

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2. What is the meaning of generation as it is used in the passage?

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3. Why are the Grimm brothers **pivotal** figures in the history of folk tales?
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4. How would you describe the temperament of Scheherazade’s husband?
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5. Who first made up the stories of Cinderella and Little Red Riding Hood?
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6. Why would it be inaccurate to say that Scheherazade’s stories were **spontaneous**?
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________

7. In which parts of the world do folk tales commonly occur?
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8. What purpose do folk tales have besides being entertaining?
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9. Why do you think folk tales using the theme of **guile** are so common?
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10. Why did Brer Rabbit ask to be thrown into the brier patch?
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    ________________________________________________________________

11. Why do you think the same themes **recur** in folk tales from different countries?
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12. What is **The Arabian Nights**?
    ________________________________________________________________
    ________________________________________________________________
13. What is the meaning of **encompass** as it is used in the passage?
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14. In what way might a written folk tale differ from a spoken one?
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15. What **conjecture** is made in the passage about the age of folk tales?
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**FUN & FASCINATING FACTS**

- A person who collects the best writings of different authors or poets and arranges them into an **anthology** could be compared to a person who gathers a variety of flowers and arranges them into a bouquet. If this comparison seems a little far-fetched, consider the origin of the word **anthology**. It comes from two Greek words, **anthos**, “flower,” and **legein**, “to gather.”

- In addition to the definitions given in the word list, **imperative** has a grammatical meaning. It is the name for the mood of a verb used in giving orders or commands. In the sentence, “Stop him from crossing the street!”, the verb stop is in the imperative mood.

- William Shakespeare (1564–1616) is rightly regarded as one of the world’s great writers; yet it would seem that he couldn’t spell his own name! Samples of his signature that have survived show his name spelled in several different ways. Such variation, however, was common then with the spelling of many words, not just names. Not until the eighteenth century when dictionaries came into use was a single spelling for each word accepted as correct. A few words, however, escaped being standardized in this way; **instill** (which can also be spelled **instit**l) is one of them. When a dictionary gives two different spellings of a word, the one given first is preferred.