World Folktales

Summary

There are nine stories from eight different countries in this collection of traditional folktales. Although folktales come from different times, different continents and different cultures, they have many characteristics in common.

Taken together, they give us the wisdom of the world. The fact that folktales are still popular in the age of information technology shows their enduring quality. Adults share folktales with their children, in books, theater or film, proving their importance as teaching and learning tools. They illustrate ways of behaving and their consequences. They are also generally optimistic, with good triumphing over evil.

The Good Peasant's Son

In *The Good Peasant's Son* from Russia, a poor peasant widow gives her son their last 200 rubles to buy food. The son uses the money to rescue an old dog and an old cat from cruel owners.

The widow is very angry and throws out her son. But he continues to be kind to others. He is rewarded with a magic ring which brings him great wealth.

The Crocodile and The Hunter

Kindness is again rewarded in *The Crocodile and the Hunter*. A kind hunter shares his food with a hungry wildcat. Later, when a clever crocodile tricks the hunter into the river and prepares to eat him, the wildcat comes by and saves the hunter. The wildcat suggests a solution to the problem between the hunter and the crocodile. That solution forces the crocodile to move far away from the river. So as no one can guide him back to the river, the crocodile gets lost, which gives the hunter the chance to escape.

Breaking the Chain

A poor farmer called Juanantes in *Breaking the Chain* is led by his wife's greed into an evil chain. Each man in the chain is forced by an evil spirit to kill a man he doesn't know. When Juanantes is jailed for murder, his wife abandons him. In his despair he finds a way to break the chain and free himself from the evil spirit. He writes a new mandate which is read by a horseman who, if does what told, will break the chain for good.

Lukas's Luck

No one will help the poor farming couple in *Lukas's Luck*, who were once rich and are now poor. They have a new baby but no money and no food. In their desperation they invite a stranger to be the baby's godmother. The stranger is really a good spirit and she gives them a magic ducat that turns into endless wealth. Now the farmer is rich again. He invests his money wisely, helping his neighbors who truly admire him and his family.

Wisdom for Sale

An orphan Brahman boy in *Wisdom for Sale* has nothing to sell but his brains. He starts out with a tiny store in the market. His clever ideas lead him to a job as the king's most trusted adviser.

The Wooden Horse

A wooden horse that can fly is taken to the palace by the wizard. It brings all sorts of trouble to the prince, but it also gives him the possibility of meeting the princess of his dreams. He needs to sort out all kinds of difficulties: her father's mistrust and the princess's sadness when she thinks he has abandoned her. Eventually the wooden horse brings the prince and princess together in love.

The Wedding Box

A loving mother prepares a beautiful wedding box as a gift for her daughter, Hsiang-ling. The daughter gives it away to a poor woman. Years later Hsiang-ling loses her home and her family in a great flood. She finds a job working for the poor woman, who is now rich because of the wedding box. When Hsiang-ling's identity is discovered, the woman finds her lost family for her and they all live happily.

The Golden Apples

When Scandinavian god Loki gets into trouble with a giant, he trades the goddess Idun and her golden apples for his life. He kidnaps her from Asgard and takes her

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to the giant. But without the golden apples, the gods in Asgard grow old and weak. They force Loki to rescue Idun. When she returns with the apples, the gods regain their youth. Loki waits for his punishment.

Happy New Year

An old teacher gives away his year's salary to a woman in trouble in *Happy New Year*. He has always taught his students never to steal. Now he has to steal a few potatoes or he and his wife will starve. His kindness to the woman in trouble is discovered, however, and all ends well.

Background and themes

Characteristics: Folktales are ancient. For centuries they were not written down but told around fires after dark. They have gradually evolved in the telling and re-telling over the years, and will continue to evolve in the future.

Most folktales are myths fashioned from the imagination. The events they describe never really happened. Many do not take place in the real world but in the supernatural world – horses can fly, crocodiles can talk, years can pass in a sentence, rings can do magic, and evil spirits can cause misery. But although the events are not real, the lessons that they teach are real. We can learn a lot about a culture and its codes of behavior from its folktales.

Overcoming difficulties: Overcoming evil or hardship and winning a handsome reward is a common theme. When the protagonist finally overcomes the enemy, whether it is hunger, poverty, bad luck or an evil spirit, he or she is usually rewarded with wealth and riches.

Wealth and happiness: It is rare for the hero to be poor but happy at the end. This seems to reflect a general aspiration for wealth around the world and a belief that money can buy you love and happiness.

Luck: Luck is a key player in these stories, too. There is bad luck. In *The Wedding Box* for example, the young Chinese mother at the heart of the story loses everything in a flood. And in *Wisdom for Sale*, the young Brahman boy who sells his clever ideas has also lost his family in a flood. And there is good luck. Penniless Lukas asks a stranger to be his daughter's godmother, and she turns out to be a fairy who can conjure magic ducats from nowhere.

Journey from youth to adulthood: Another important theme is the journey from youth to adulthood – making your way in the world, often starting with nothing.

Folktales offer a variety of different destinies that await young people according to how they behave. Selfish behavior will usually bring trouble. Kind and helpful actions will be rewarded with a long and happy life. The stories stop at the point that a happy life can begin.

Type of endings: Most folktales are optimistic and traditionally have a happy ending. All the tales in this collection end well and good behavior is rewarded. One tale is much darker than the others, however.

Although *Breaking the Chain* from Guatemala has a good ending in the sense that evil is overcome, the main character Juanantes's life is ruined in the process.

Different types of folktales: Folktales fall into different categories. There are morality tales of everyday life, like *Happy New Year* and *Wisdom for Sale* in this collection, where magic plays no part.

There are animal tales like *The Crocodile and the Hunter*. Here animals sometimes represent human characteristics.

But sometimes the story is about the interaction of humans and animals and how that is important for the well being of the world.

There are tales of enchantment like *The Wooden Horse* and *The Good Peasant's Son* where good and evil spirits operate around the characters' lives.

Traditional folktales: Most cultures in the world have their traditional folktales. Encourage students to research folktales from their own culture and prepare a few things to tell the rest of the class about them.

Discussion activities

Before reading

1 **Pair work:** Ask the students to work in pairs. They read the Introduction on pages v to vii. Ask them to find which places these characters come from.
   (a) a hunter
   (b) a spoiled young woman
   (c) an old wizard
   (d) Juanantes
   (e) Lukas
   (f) Martin
   (g) Thiazi
2 **Discuss:** Discuss with the class what the characteristics of a folktale are. Write students' ideas on the board.
   Ask them now to think of a folktale from their culture. Which of the features mentioned in the introduction does it contain? Write a list.
   Now students compare both lists on the board.

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The Good Peasant´s Son

While reading

3 **Discuss:** As they read, students try to find who does the following things. Then, discuss their ideas in the class. Who …
   (a) asks Martin to build a palace, a bridge and a church?
   (b) steals the ring from the czarevna's finger?
   (c) drops the ring in the ocean?
   (d) cannot stop Martin's beautiful music?

After reading

4 **Discuss:** Martin rescues a dog and a cat and chooses a bag of sand. How do these three actions help him in his life?

5 **Group work:** Tell students that in some versions of this folktale, the czar orders his daughter to be killed at the end of the story. The czarevna is tied to the tail of a wild horse. The horse is set loose and drags her behind it until she dies. Which ending do they prefer? Talk to the members of your group.

The Crocodile and The Hunter

Before reading

6 **Discuss:** Ask students whether hunting is an activity they do, or their family does. Find out whether it is allowed to hunt in their countries/cultures.

While reading

7 **Discuss:** Have a class discussion based on the following question:
Boaji says that the crocodile and the hunter have treated each other in the same way and the argument is over. What is he talking about?

8 **Group work:** Get students to work in a group of three. One of them is the Asubi mat, one is the piece of cloth and the third is the horse. Ask them to introduce themselves to each other and discuss how humans have treated you.

After reading

9 **Write:** Ask students to work in pairs. Get them to describe exactly how Boaji tricks the crocodile. Then they write their description down and volunteers read them aloud to the rest of the class.

10 **Debate:** Divide the class in two. The members of one half are the crocodiles. They think of three reasons why they should eat the hunter. The members of the other half take the part of the hunter. They think of three reasons why the crocodiles should let the hunter go. Each side presents their reasons and the other side answers them. At the end take a vote on whether the hunter gets eaten or not.

Breaking the Chain

Before reading

11 **Predict:** Write the following words on the board: *machete*, *mandate*, *evil*, *fire*, *drink*. Tell students these words appear in the story. Ask them to predict what the story may be about.

While reading

12 **Discuss:** Get students to read up to "This must be the mandate." (page 23) Get them to discuss what the mandate may be about.

After reading

13 **Write, read and do:** Ask each student to secretly write a mandate on a piece of paper and fold it in half. The mandate must be something that can be done in the classroom, for example, *Open the window and wave to an airplane.* Then, collect all the mandates. In turn students choose one at random. They read it silently and then follow the instruction. Other students try to guess what was written on the mandate.

Lukas's Luck

Before reading

14 **Discuss:** Have a class discussion based on what they consider to be a lucky person and whether they have any charms to help them be lucky.

While reading

15 **Discuss:** Ask students to choose an adverb or adjective from the box that they believe best describes each of the following people and situations.
Adjectives: bent, constant, ordinary, sweet-smelling, unkind
Adverbs: anxiously, carefully, desperately, gratefully, warmly
   (a) Lukas and his wife's struggle to eat and keep warm at the beginning of the story.
   (b) how unhappy Lukas's wife feels when the mayor's wife refuses to be their daughter's godmother.
   (c) the legs of the old woman Lukas meets on the way to the church.
   (d) the way the old woman smiles when she holds the tiny baby.
   (e) the reaction of the priest's assistant when he sees Lukas and the old woman approaching the church.
   (f) how the assistant receives the gold ducat.
   (g) the flowers of the rose bush that the old woman makes grow.
   (h) the way Lukas's wife was waiting for his return.
   (i) the type of woman the godmother wasn't.
   (j) the way Lukas promises to manage his land when he gets it back.

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16 **Role play:** After Lukas and his wife buy back their farm, the mayor's wife comes to tea. She wants to know why they are suddenly rich again. She asks Lukas's wife a lot of questions. But Lukas's wife doesn't want to tell her about the magic ducats. Get students to work with another student. One of them is the mayor's wife, the other is Lukas's wife. Have their conversation.

After reading

17 **Write:** Get each student to write two sentences: one about Lukas's family's life before he meets the godmother and the other one about their life after he meets the godmother. They write each sentence on different slips of papers. Put all the sentences together inside a bag. Ask different students to get one sentence out of the bag, read it aloud and decide whether it reflects life before the family meets the godmother or after. Students should explain their ideas.

Wisdom for Sale

Before reading

18 **Discuss:** Get students to discuss who they tend to resort to/consult when they need a piece of advice. Ask them to explain why that is so.

While reading

19 **Discuss:** Have a class discussion based on the following question: How much money does the Brahman boy earn with his wisdom store?

20 **Pair work:** Ask students to work with a partner. They should look at the argument between the maids on page 38. Ask them to take each of these sentences and turn it into a similar argument. Recommend their using short forms like *You have/I haven't* at the end of the argument. e.g. the line at the baker's: *I think I was here before you.*
In a line at the cloth store: *My queen wears finer clothes than yours.*
Now they should use their own ideas.

After reading

21 **Pair work and group work:** Have students work in pairs. One in each pair is the Brahman boy, the other is a customer. The customer thinks of a problem and describes it to the Brahman boy. The Brahman boy then writes down a piece of wisdom in response and gives it to the customer. At the end customers can tell the class what advice they received and if they think it was good or bad.

The Wooden Horse

Before reading

22 **Discuss:** Have a class discussion based on the following questions:
Do you happen to know any story in which a prince and a princess fall in love but cannot be together? What are the difficulties they generally face? How are their problems solved?

While reading

23 **Role play:** (page 48) Get students to work in pairs. One of them will be the king, the other one the prince. Ask them to imagine what they may have talked about after the prince is taken into the King's room so that the princess would be safe.

After reading

24 **Pair work:** The wizard doesn't explain very well to Prince Kamar Al'Akmar how to operate his horse. Get students to work with another student. Each pair chooses a machine, e.g. a camera or a keyboard. Explain simply to each other how to operate your machine.

25 **Discuss:** Ask students to discuss the following question in groups. What do you think happened to the wizard at the end of the story? Ask each group to write down a list with their ideas. They compare ideas with other students.

The Wedding Box

Before reading

26 **Discuss:** Ask students about the wedding traditions in their culture or their family. Get them to tell other students about them.

While reading

27 **Discuss:** Have a class discussion based on the students' opinions on the following:
How do these things change Hsuang-ling's life forever?
(a) a rainstorm
(b) a terrible flood
(c) a bowl of food
(d) a child's ball
(e) a piece of deep green jade

After reading

28 **Write and discuss:** Get students to make a class wedding box. Each student secretly writes on a piece of paper something they would put in their child's wedding box – it could be material gifts, such as silver knives and forks, or spiritual gifts, such as happiness or many children. Put all the folded pieces of paper in a box. Choose items at random and discuss if they are good or bad gifts with the class.

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The Golden Apples

Before reading

29 **Discuss:** Have a class discussion based on the following questions:
What would you do if you had the possibility of being young forever? Would you like that? Why/why not?

While reading

30 **Role play:** Ask students to work in groups of three. One of them is god Odin, the other one is god Honir and the last one is god Bragi, Idun's husband. Ask them to have the conversation students believe the gods may have had when they discover Idun has disappeared.

After reading

31 **Discuss:** All students are the gods of Asgard. Get them to decide what punishment to give Loki.

32 **Pair work:** Ask one member of the pair to choose a god. Ask them to describe their appearance, character and powers to the other student. That student should find out which god his partner is describing.

Happy New Year

Before reading

33 **Discuss:** Tell students that *New Year's Eve* is the most important festival in the Chinese calendar. Ask them to describe the most important festival in their culture

While reading

34 **Discuss:** Ask students to decide which of the following adjectives they may connect to the following characters. Ask them to justify their choices.
Adjectives: kind, loving, considerate, selfish, patient, religious, witty, embarrassed
Characters: Mr. Yeh, Mrs. Yeh, Hsiao-pao

After reading

35 **Debate:** Have a class debate based on the following statement:
"It is wrong to steal in any circumstance."
Students express their ideas and take a class vote. Later, divide the class in two. One half argues that Mr. Yeh is wrong to try to steal the sweet potatoes. The other half argues that he is right. Write the important arguments on the board. Then, take a second class vote. Has anyone changed their mind?

Extra activities

36 **Write:** Divide the class into pairs or threes and give each group a different story – there are nine stories. Each group tries to summarize their story in fifty words or less. Groups read their short versions to the rest of the class.

37 **Write a folktale:** Ask students to write a folktale set in today's world. Get students to either invent their own story or update one of the tales in this collection. Ask them to publish them up around the classroom so that all students can read them.

38 **Discuss:** Have a class competition. Students work in groups. Each group is given a worksheet with the following questions on.

> Write the title of the story that each of these characters appears in.
> (a) A poor farmer who drinks a bottle of whiskey.
> (b) A priest's assistant who gets a ducat.
> (c) A prince who escapes an army of 80,000 soldiers.
> (d) A teacher who steals sweet potatoes.
> (e) A woman who is led to her lost family by a child's ball.
> (f) A young woman who is nearly burned alive.
> (g) An eagle who turns into a giant.
> (h) An old and torn mat, which is thrown into the river.
> (i) Two maids who fight over a melon.

Students get one minute to answer the questions. The group that answers more correct questions in the shortest period of time is the winner.

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