Folklore: Myths, Folktales, Legends, and Fables
Folklore can be defined as all the traditions, customs, and stories that are passed along by word of mouth in a culture.
“Folk” means... ordinary people

and “lore” means...

knowledge.
Folklore not only means the stories of a group of people, but also their arts and crafts, dances, games, superstitions, proverbs, holidays, songs, and so on.
The stories of folklore have their beginnings in spoken language, also called the oral tradition.
Often they were passed along generation to generation by storytellers, and the stories went through changes as they were told, taking on the storytellers’ own personal touches, personality, and exaggerations, etc.
Folklore is collected and written down only after they have been told for many years, perhaps even centuries.
Purpose of the stories:

1. The stories help keep the past alive.
2. Introduce young people to the history, beliefs, and religion of their society.
3. The stories teach moral lessons and illustrate qualities that are valued by the society, such as kindness and courage. They also warn against negative qualities, like greed and foolishness.
Very often the same stories appear in different cultures. **Similarities in these stories point to values that many cultures hold in common.**
Folklore can be grouped into four major categories:

1. folk tales (includes fairy tales as a subcategory)
2. fables
3. legends
4. myths
Myths are stories that answer and explain basic questions about the world, gods, and natural occurrences.
Myth characteristics:

1. Characterization is very important; traits are revealed through appearance, actions, words, and what others think of them.
2. Deal with aspects of human life: jealousy, love, death, ambition.
3. Deal with gods and goddesses, and lesser deities as well as humans.
4. Gods and goddesses have human emotions and extraordinary powers.
5. Themes and symbols are still important in western culture today.
Examples of Myths:

“Echo and Narcissus,“  
“The Origin of the Seasons,”  
“Orpheus, the Great Musician.”
Creation Myths

**Definition:** At the foundation of nearly every culture is a creation myth that explains how the wonders of the earth came to be.

Why are they important?

- These myths have an immense influence on people's frame of reference.
- They influence the way people think about the world and their place in relation to their surroundings.
- Despite geographical differences, all creation myths share some common elements.
Similarities seen in Creation Myths

1. Many creation myths begin with the “birth” of the earth.

2. According to some myths, animals and people lived together peacefully until some “sin” separated them or a “god took that peace away”.

3. A supreme being is usually found in all creation myths; this being(s) trigger a chain of events that create the earth; sometimes there are two ‘beings’.

4. Not all creation myths begin on earth; some cultures believe life started above or below the earth.
As you read each of these Creation Myths, note the common elements shared in all. Most important is the element of **ARCHETYPES**.

• Examples:
  – Japanese Creation Myth
  – Iroquois Creation Myth
  – Aborigine Creation Myth
  – African Bushman Myth
  – Hebrew Creation Myth
Archetypes?

• Archetypes are symbols, images, or patterns that appear in myths, literature, and visual arts throughout all cultures. They have universal meanings and show how all humans, despite our differences, are really very similar.
Common Archetype Characters
Pearson Archetypal System

- Female Archetype: Earth Mother, Old Hag, Great Mother, Temptress, Mother Goddess, Female Hero (princess or maiden), Damsel in distress (passive female hero)
- Ruler/leader: role model/ peacemaker
- Hero: Epic hero
- Antihero: reluctant hero
- Sage: Wise man/ Mentor/ Soothsayer/ Guide
- Trickster
- Villain
- Caregiver: supporter/advisor/ advocate/ nurturer/ altruist
- Innocent: idealist/ traditionalist/ optimist/cheerleader
- Jester: entertainer, wise fool, holy fool, wit
Eight Archetypal storylines

1. Cinderella - Unrecognized virtue at last recognized. It's the same story as the Tortoise and the Hare. Cinderella doesn't have to be a girl, nor does it even have to be a love story. What is essential is that the good is despised, but is recognized in the end, something that we all want to believe.

2. Achilles - The Fatal Flaw, that is the groundwork for practically all classical tragedy, although it can be made comedy too, as in the old standard Aldwych farce. Lennox Robinson's *The Whiteheaded Boy* is the Fatal Flaw In reverse.
3. **Faust** - The Debt that Must be Paid, the fate that catches up with all of us sooner or later. This is found in all its purity as the chase in O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*. And in a completely different mood, what else is the *Cherry Orchard*?

4. **Tristan** - that standard triangular plot of two women and one man, or two men and one woman. *The Constant Nymph*, or almost any French farce.
5. Circe - The Spider and the Fly. *Othello*. *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, if you want to change the sex. And if you don't believe me about *Othello* (the real plot of which is not the triangle and only incidentally jealousy) try casting it with a good Desdemona but a poor Iago.

6. Romeo and Juliet - Boy meets Girl, Boy loses Girl, Boy either finds or does not find Girl: it doesn't matter which.
7. **Orpheus** - The Gift taken Away. This may take two forms: either the tragedy of the loss itself, as in *Juno and the Paycock*, or it may be about the search that follows the loss, as in *Jason and the Golden Fleece*.

8. **The Hero Who Cannot Be Kept Down**. The best example of this is that splendid play *Harvey*, made into a film with James Stewart.

- **These plots can be presented in so many different forms (tragedy, comedy, farce, whodunit) and they can be inverted. but they still form the basis of all good writing. The fault with many contemporary plays is simply that they do not have a plot.**
Archetypal Story Patterns

- Hero overcomes great obstacles and gets home or wins
- A magician who helps make dreams come true
- A jester who brings out the fun in a situation
- The story of good verses evil
- The quest for knowledge of self
- The journey home
- Hero saves damsel in distress
- Star-crossed lovers
Most often traced archetypal pattern:

- is that of the quest (or search) by the protagonist (or hero), who must leave her/his home, travel into unfamiliar territory, meet a guide, endure dangerous situations and adventures, reach the object of her/his quest, gain important new knowledge, and return home with that knowledge to share with others.

- Where have we seen this pattern? Where else have you seen this pattern—think movies, other books, etc?
What do Archetypal patterns do for readers?

• Archetypal patterns and characters help us recognize story lines and character traits faster when we are aware of them.

• These patterns and characters become a way of how we perceive the world around us and the people around us.
Motif

• The literary device ‘motif’ is any element, subject, idea or concept that is constantly present through the entire body of literature—one piece of literature. (like one story)

• Using a motif refers to the repetition of a specific theme dominating a literary work.

• Motifs are very noticeable and play a significant role in defining the nature of the story, the course of events and the very fabric of the literary piece.
Example Motifs

- Clothing
- Seasons
- Colors
- Paradise
- Apparent death
- Supernatural Adversaries
- Supernatural Helpers
- Extraordinary Animals
- Magical Objects
- Magical Powers
- Magical Transformations
- Deep Sleeps
- Witches
- Wishes
- Trickery
- Consequences of Greed
- Beautiful Princess
- Floods
- Importance of Threes
- Illness
- Flowers/plants
- The Beauty and the Beast
- The Temptation
- The Returning Soldier
- The (Victorious) Underdog
- The Bewitching Woman
- The Damsel in Distress
- The Wicked Ogre
- Struggle of the Poor/Rich
- The Journey of Escape
- The Lost
- The Miracle
- Journey from Innocence to Awareness
- Sacrificial Friend/ Savior
- The Inward Struggle
Motifs from Romeo and Juliet

• The lover versus the warrior (romeo/tyb Bolt)
• Comedy vs drama (mercutio/tyb Bolt)

• Dreamer vs realist (Rom. And Jul. Vs both houses)

• Happy and sad (party scene/death scene)
Difference between Motif and Archetype?

• A Motif can be traced throughout one literary work;

• An Archetype can be a pattern or symbol that can be traced beyond one work to a greater body of literature, movies, art, etc.
Folk tales

A short, simple story told for entertainment and to teach values and morals important to the culture it comes from.
Folk tales characteristics:

1. Characters are ordinary humans or animals that act like humans; often the humans are peasants or of the lower class and they have better values than the richer class.

2. Time ordered structure

3. Repetition of words, phrases, themes, or situations

4. Simple grammar

5. Concrete vocabulary
6. Characters embody abstract values: greed, patience, etc.
7. Themes and issues are relevant for all ages
8. Characters have standard physical characteristics (princess—beautiful, etc)
9. Some have magical features (fairy tales are a subcategory of folk tales)
10. Most cultures have trickster tales—a person or animal that outwits the others in the story
Examples of folk tales:

“Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People’s Ears,”

“Lazy Peter and the Three Cornered Hat,”

“Pumpkin Seed and the Snake.”

“The Ten Fingers of Sedna”
Fairy Tales

Fairy tales are a type of folktale; they are simple stories of humans and their dealings with magical beings or objects; they teach a lesson or values important to the culture they originate from.
Elements of Fairy Tales

1. Usually begins with “once upon a time…”

2. Include fantasy and make-believe, supernatural elements.

3. Clearly defined “good” verses “evil” characters

4. Involves “magical” elements—people, things—magic could be positive or negative

5. Includes objects, people, events in series of threes
6. Often have happy endings
7. Teach a lesson or demonstrate values important to the culture
8. Plot focuses on a problem or conflict that needs to be solved
9. Does not have to include “fairies”
10. Usually set in past—long, long ago
Examples of Fairy Tales

• Cinderella
• Snow White
• Beauty and the Beast
• The Goose-Girl
• The Golden Key
• The Peasant and the Devil
Legend

a story about a person, event, or place, that may have some basis in historical fact.
Legend characteristics:

1. Characters are usually “Larger than life”
2. Details tend to become exaggerated over time
3. Character’s qualities are reflective of values, attitudes, and beliefs of the culture
4. Often include elements of magic and the supernatural
Examples of Legends:

“Paul Bunyan,”

“Beowulf”

“King Arthur,”

“Pecos Bill”
Fable

a very short tale that illustrates a clear, often direct moral—a principle of right or wrong behavior.
Fable characteristics:

1. Characters are often animals with human characteristics
2. Moral or lesson follows the story, usually in one sentence or simple summary
Examples of fables:

“The Fox and the Crow,”
“The Lion and the Statue”