Universality of the Folktale
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[Editor’s Note: Stith Thompson (1885-1976) led a distinguished life as an American educator, folklorist, editor and author. Between 1921 and 1955, he was a professor of folklore and English, and later dean of the Graduate School and Distinguished Service Professor at Indiana University, Bloomington. Five institutions have awarded Thompson honorary doctorates for his work in folklore studies. He has published numerous books on the subject, including European Tales Among North American Indians (1919), The Types of the Folktales (1928), and Tales of the North American Indian (1929). He is best known for his six-volume Motif Index of Folk Literature (1932-37; 1955-58, 2nd ed.).]

The teller of stories has everywhere and always found eager listeners. Whether his tale is the mere report of a recent happening, a legend of long ago, or an elaborately contrived fiction, men and women have hung upon his words and satisfied their yearnings for information or amusement, for incitement to heroic deeds, for religious edification, or for release from the overpowering monotony of their lives. In villages of central Africa, in outrigger boats on the Pacific, in the Australian bush, and within the shadow of Hawaiian volcanoes, tales of the present and of the mysterious past, of animals and gods and heroes, and of men and women like themselves, hold listeners in their spell or enrich the conversation of daily life. So it is also in Eskimo igloos under the light of seal-oil lamps, in the tropical jungles of Brazil, and by the totem poles of the British Columbian coast. In Japan too, and China and India, the priest and the scholar, the peasant and the artisan all join in their love of a good story and their honor for the man who tells it well.

When we confine our view to our own occidental world, we see that for at least three or four thousand years, and doubtless for ages before, the art of the story-teller has been cultivated in every rank of society. Odysseus entertains the court of Alcinous with the marvels of his adventures. Centuries later we find the long-haired page reading nightly from interminable chivalric romances to entertain his lady while her lord is absent on his crusade. Medieval priests illustrate sermons by anecdotes old and new, and only sometimes edifying. The old peasant, now as always, whiles away the winter evening with tales of wonder and adventure and the marvelous workings of fate. Nurses tell children of Goldilocks or the House that Jack Built. Poets write epics and novelists novels. Even now the cinemas and theaters bring their stories direct to the ear and eye through the voices and gestures of actors. And in the smoking-rooms of sleeping cars and steamships and at the banquet table the oral anecdote flourishes in a new age.

In the present work we are confining our interest to a relatively narrow scope, the traditional prose tale--the story which has been handed down from generation to generation either in writing or by word of mouth. Such tales are, of course, only one of the many kinds of story material, for, in addition to them, narrative comes to us in verse as ballads and epics, and in prose as histories, novels, dramas, and short stories. We shall have little to do with the songs of bards, with the ballads of the people, or with poetic narrative in general, though stories themselves refuse to be confined exclusively to either prose or verse forms. But even with verse and all other forms of prose narrative put aside, we shall find that in treating the traditional prose tale--the folktale--our quest will be ambitious enough and will take us to all parts of the earth and to the very beginnings of history.

Although the term “folktale” is often used in English to refer to the “household tale” or “fairy
tale” (the German Marchen), such as “Cinderella” or “Snow White,” it is also legitimately employed in a much broader sense to include all forms of prose narrative, written or oral, which have come to be handed down through the years. In this usage the important fact is the traditional nature of the material. In contrast to the modern story writer’s striving after originality of plot and treatment, the teller of a folktale is proud of his ability to hand on that which he has received. He usually desires to impress his readers or hearers with the fact that he is bringing them something that has the stamp of good authority, that the tale was heard from some great story-teller or from some aged person who remembered it from old days.

So it was until at least the end of the Middle Ages with writers like Chaucer, who carefully quoted authorities for their plots--and sometimes even invented originals so as to dispel the suspicion that some new and unwarranted story was being foisted on the public. Though the individual genius of such writers appears clearly enough, they always depended on authority, not only for their basic theological opinions but also for the plots of their stories. A study of the sources of Chaucer or Boccaccio takes one directly into the stream of traditional narrative.

The great written collections of stories characteristic of India, the New East, the classical world, and Medieval Europe are almost entirely traditional. They copy and recopy. A tale which gains favor in one collection is taken over into others, sometimes intact and sometimes with changes of plot or characterization. The history of such a story, passing it may be from India to Persia and Arabia and Italy and France and finally to England, copied and changed from manuscript to manuscript, is often exceedingly complex. For it goes through the hands of both skilled and bungling narrators and improves or deteriorates at nearly every retelling. However well or poorly such a story may be written down, it always attempts to preserve a tradition, an old tale with the authority of antiquity to give it interest and importance.

If use of the term “folktale” to include such literary narratives seems somewhat broad, it can be justified on practical grounds if on no other, for it is impossible to make a complete separation of the written and the oral traditions. Often, indeed, their interrelation is so close and so inextricable as to present one of the most baffling problems the folklore scholar encounters. They differ somewhat in their behavior, it is true, but they are alike in their disregard of originality of plot and pride of authorship.

Nor is complete separation of these two kinds of narrative tradition by any means necessary for their understanding. The study of the oral tale . . . will be valid so long as we realize that stories have frequently been taken down from the lips of unlettered tale-tellers and have entered the great literary traditions. In contrary fashion, fables of Aesop, anecdotes from Homer, and saints’ legends, not to speak of fairy tales read from Perrault or Grimm, have entered the oral stream and all their association with the written or printed page has been forgotten. Frequently a story is taken from the people, recorded in a literary document, carried across continents or preserved through centuries, and then retold to a humble entertainer who adds it to his repertory.

It is clear then that the oral story need not always have been oral. But when it once habituates itself to being passed on by word of mouth it undergoes the same treatment as all other tales at the command of the raconteur. It becomes something to tell to an audience, or at least to a listener, not something to read. Its effects are no longer produced indirectly by association with words written or printed on a page, but directly through facial expression and gesture and repetition and recurrent patterns that generations have tested and found effective.

The oral art of tale-telling is far older than history, and it is not bounded by one continent or
one civilization. Stories may differ in subject from place to place, the conditions and purposes of
tale-telling may change as we move from land to land or from century to century, and yet
everywhere it ministers to the same basic social and individual needs. The call for entertainment to
fill the hours of leisure has found most peoples very limited in their resources, and except where
modern urban civilization has penetrated deeply they have found the telling of stories one of the
most satisfying of pastimes. Curiosity about the past has always brought eager listeners to tales of
the long ago which supply the simple man with all he knows of the history of his folk. Legends
grow with the telling, and often a great heroic past evolves to gratify vanity and tribal pride.
Religion also has played a mighty role everywhere in the encouragement of the narrative art, for
the religious mind has tried to understand beginnings and for ages has told stories of ancient days
and sacred beings. Often whole cosmologies have unfolded themselves in these legends, and
hierarchies of gods and heroes.

World-wide also are many of the structural forms which oral narrative has assumed. The hero
tale, the explanatory legend, the animal anecdote—certainly these at least are present everywhere.
Other fictional patterns are limited to particular areas of culture and act by their presence or
absence as an effective index of the limit of the area concerned. The study of such limitations has
not proceeded far, but it constitutes an interesting problem for the student of these oral narrative
forms.

Even more tangible evidence of the ubiquity and antiquity of the folktale is the great
similarity in the content of stories of the most varied peoples. The same tale types and narrative
motifs are found scattered over the world in most puzzling fashion. A recognition of these
resemblances and an attempt to account for them brings the scholar closer to an understanding of
the nature of human culture. He must continually ask himself, “Why do some peoples borrow tales
and some lend? How does the tale serve the needs of the social group?” When he adds to his task
an appreciation of the aesthetic and practical urge toward story-telling, and some knowledge of the
forms and devices, stylistic and histrionic, that belong to this ancient and more widely practiced
art, he finds that he must bring to his work more talents than one man can easily possess. Literary
critics, anthropologists, historians, psychologists, and aestheticians are all needed if we are to hope
to know why folktales are made, how they are invented, what art is used in their telling, how they
grow and change and occasionally die.