

## **YA Storytelling Programs with Comparative Folklore: Promoting Cross-Cultural Discussion through Parallel Folkloric Themes**

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### **Parallel Themes in World Folklore**

Many storytellers, folklore researchers and readers and writers of speculative fiction have a long-standing fascination with patterns, themes and ideas that tend to recur in the folktales of multiple cultural traditions in diverse, yet thematically recognizable forms. Cross-cultural parallels can take the form of character archetypes, such as the Trickster and the Wise Fool, structural similarities, including similar plots or sets of symbols, and similarities in the ways the stories portray character interaction and relationships and other thematic features.

As an educational programming resource, comparative folklore is valuable to young adults in that it can be used to promote cross-cultural understanding, and to encourage deeper and more empathetic discussions about culture and diversity by drawing connections through stories with mutually familiar themes.

### **Folkloric Connections and Cross-Cultural Programming**

For young adults with an interest in storytelling, history and fantasy, programs that encourage the sharing and discussion of the stories of their families and traditions, and the themed and ideas that they share with others can be an excellent way to encourage intercultural understanding, and to provide a positive context for discussion of the similarities and differences between cultural traditions.

A multicultural storytelling program for teens could be a themed event structured around a common character type or broad, frequently-occurring theme (e.g. “good luck and bad”, “unwise wishes”, “animal transformations”), for which the participants would be encouraged to tell stories that are familiar or culturally significant to them. Alternately, it could be a more open event, allowing storytellers to present folk tales from their own family or cultural tradition on

any topic, with a discussion of the parallel themes in folklore immediately following.

Sample discussion questions might include:

- “Why did you chose/where did you learn your story?”, “What does the story you told today mean to you?”

- “Was the story you told similar to any of the stories you heard today, or similar to a famous folk tale you know?”

- “Did any of today’s stories remind you of a story you know from a book or movie?”

- “In what ways were today’s stories similar to, and different from, the the other stories they reminded you of?”

### **Acknowledging and Respecting Cultural Differences**

When presenting and discussing cross-cultural parallels in folk tales, it is important to remember, and to remind participants, that even stories that share multiple parallel themes and motifs are not necessarily directly related. For example, a story that program participants identify as being very similar to a classic fairy tale may actually have a different meaning in its own cultural context.

When presenting these types of programs, it is important to remember that, while the identification of common motifs and themes in folk traditions can increase empathy between cultures, a young person’s urge to classify a newly-learned story as “another version of Snow White”, or “another werewolf story” can lead them to miss important cultural features. Storytellers and listeners should be reminded that, while international folk tales are awash in parallel elements, each tale, and each teller, is unique, and no story is ever simply an alternate version of another.

### **Some Resources for Finding Cross-Cultural Connections in Folklore and Traditional Storytelling**

Many resources are available for storytellers actively seeking parallel and related versions of specific stories in multiple cultural contexts. Library professionals and youth program participants working on comparative folklore projects may find the following resources helpful:

***The Stith Thompson Motif Index,  
and the Arne Thompson Uther Tale  
Type Index***

Thompson, S.(1958). Motif-index of folk-literature; a classification of narrative elements in folktales, ballads, myths, fables, mediaeval romances, exempla, fabliaux, jest-books, and local legends. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Uther, H. (2004). *The types of international folktales: a classification and bibliography based on the system of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson*. Helsinki : Finnish Academy of Science and Letters.

These classic resources are taxonomic indexes of individual of folktale elements. Both of these indexes, which were developed by and for professional folklorists, are organized in a way that will appeal to information professionals, but will impress young readers and casual browsers with the depth and range of their collections of interrelated themes. The current version of the tale type index was updated and expanded in 2004, incorporating folklorist Hans-Jörg Uther's work on international folktale types, to improve the international scope of its contents. Both of these indexes are available online at:

*The Aarne-Thompson-Uther Classification of Folk Tales*  
<http://www.mftd.org/index.php?action=atu>

and

S. Thompson Motif Index of Folk Literature  
[https://sites.ualberta.ca/~urban/Projects/English/Motif\\_Index.htm](https://sites.ualberta.ca/~urban/Projects/English/Motif_Index.htm)

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***Types of the Folktale in the Arab  
World: A Demographically  
Oriented Tale-Type Index***

El-Shamy, H. (2004). *Types of the folktale in the Arab world : a demographically oriented tale-type index*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

This is a tale type index focused on stories in the Arabic tradition based in Africa and the Middle East. El-Shamy's classification system is highly informed by Aarne and Thompson's earlier classification work, but has been developed from a distinctly non-European perspective. This book's introduction discusses the significance of related and parallel folktales, how stories evolve and change, and the intercultural and interpersonal significance of folk literature.

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***Sur La Lune Fairy Tales***

Heiner, H. (1998-). *Sur La Lune fairy tales: annotated fairy tales, fairy tale books and illustrations* [Electronic Resource]. Retrieved from <http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/>.

This comprehensive website includes extensive annotations and bibliographies of related fiction for 49 classic fairy tales. Sur La Lune's core stories are fairy tales in the European tradition (Primarily by the Grimms, Andersen and Perrault). The bibliographies draw attention to multiple published variants of each story, many of which are interculturally parallel or related stories or cross-genre retellings

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## **TV Tropes**

*TVTropes: the all-devouring pop culture wiki.* Retrieved from TVTropes.org.

Many young adults' first introduction to parallel narrative themes, motifs and structures will have been this extremely popular site. On this expansive wiki, pop culture fans maintain interconnected lists of themes and ideas frequently expressed in popular media. Although this site was not developed for academic purposes, young readers will readily identify the conceptual similarity between wikis of this type and folklorists' resources for classifying story elements.