



Folklore: Some Useful Terminology

The following definitions may also prove useful to teachers interested in applying concepts and genre categories from folklore studies to literature. While not all are explicitly relevant to this lesson, many will prove useful. Cross-referenced terms are in boldface.

The Basics:

CULTURE: Everything that human beings (and possibly some other species) do that isn't motivated solely by natural instinct. Sleeping is natural, not cultural, but sleeping using a pillow is cultural. Eating acorns to stave off starvation is natural; eating acorn bread is cultural. Laughing is natural; laughing at a knock-knock joke is cultural. Culture includes tool-making and -using, creative and artistic expression, language development and use, and formulation of beliefs and values. Culture is also a word used to describe groups of individuals who share common cultural traits but who differ in some way(s) from members of other such groups.

TRADITION: Meaningful **cultural** behavior (or **lore**) that exhibits continuity in time—often over several generations—and continuity in space (or among the **folk**, because by “space” we mean the people within a **folk group**). The adjective traditional is sometimes used synonymously with the adjective **folk**. For example, we can call “Sleeping Beauty” a **traditional narrative** or a **folk narrative** and mean pretty much the same thing.

NARRATIVE: A story of any kind, almost always involving both plot (a sequence of causally and/or logically linked events) and characters (who both enact and react to the plot). Stories usually involve conflict, rising action, a climax, and a resolution of some kind. Different **cultures** have a differing “sense of story” telling them what is and isn't appropriately narrative.

ORALITY: A quality of anything that is spoken, chanted, recited, sung, or read aloud rather than written down or read quietly. Most **folk** or **traditional narrative** is oral in nature, or was once upon a time. See **literature**, below, for a consideration of the differences between oral and written **literature**.

PERFORMANCE: An essential artistic dimension of anything **oral**, performance refers either to an individual rendition of a **traditional narrative** (or song, or dance, or **drama**), which may well also constitute a unique **variant** of the work being performed. Performance also refers more broadly to all those aesthetic features of such a rendition that cannot be fixed in print. These performative features include tone of voice, dynamics, pacing, interaction with an audience, kinesthetic gestures, and costume. For instance, a folklorist might analyze the *performative* dimensions of a *performance* of

“Little Red Riding Hood,” taking note of the storyteller’s adoption of distinct voices and gestures for the different characters, noting the young audience’s gasps of fear at the appropriate moments, and the total length of the telling compared to other performances of the same **narrative**.

VARIANT: Any version of a **folk/traditional narrative** that bears a striking resemblance to another version of the same **narrative**. Variants may result from monogenesis (multiple tellers imitating and/or modifying one initial, original version of a story) or from polygenesis (different tellers independently arriving at the same basic tale type).

ETIOLOGY: Any explanation (**narrative** or not) for the origin of something.

Folklore and its Component Terms:

FOLKLORE: First coined in 1846 by William John Thoms, a British antiquarian. Folklore can be divided into its two component words, folk and lore. Folklore is thus all the **lore** shared by a particular **folk**.

THE FOLK, a.k.a. A FOLK GROUP: Any two or more people who share at least one significant **cultural** thing in common. The things that a folk group shares in common are often **traditions**, which help to create a shared identity for the group and its members and which also help the group endure over time. Everyone belongs to at least a few folk groups; most people belong to many. Some folk groups are very broad and diverse (all Americans, or even all students at the same school), while some are very exclusive and specific (two best friends). The more **cultural** factors a folk group shares, the more **traditions** they are likely to share as well: while we can generalize to a certain extent about Irish Catholics, Irish Catholics who live in the same town, work the same fields, and worship at the same church are far more likely to share **lore** than, say, a Catholic business executive living in Dublin and a Catholic peat farmer in a small rural village.

THE LORE, a.k.a. TRADITIONAL CULTURE: Lore is **traditional** behavior or material shared by members of a **folk group**. Lore includes but is not limited to all of the following:

- Traditional narratives (epics, magic tales, legends, jokes, folk drama)
- Traditional costumes (professional clothing, sports uniforms, hairstyles)
- Traditional beliefs (religions, superstitions, ethical values)
- Traditional non-narrative speech (slang, jargon, nicknames)
- Traditional material culture (architecture, folk art of all kinds)
- Traditional calendar customs (holidays, festivals, birthday parties)
- Traditional music and dance (folksongs, folk dances)

The most important thing to remember is that lore is **traditional**—it has continuity over time and through space. If a hairstyle is in **fashion** for only a short while, it isn’t

traditional. **Tradition** lasts and has meaning for a particular group of people over the long haul.

What Isn't Folklore?

Here are some things that are generally *not* considered to be folklore by folklorists:

FASHIONS and FADS: Cultural objects or practices that are distinct from **tradition** because of their impermanence. **Traditions**, while not eternal, last longer than fashions, which tend to vanish relatively quickly and have only temporary meaning for those who adopt them.

MASS-PRODUCED MATERIALS: These are only **traditional** if they acquire some special meaning to a **folk group** or are used in other **traditional** ways or contexts. A glass pitcher that was manufactured along with thousands of other identical pitchers in a glassworks factory isn't **traditional** unless over time it becomes important to a **folk group**. For example, if a group of siblings develop a **tradition** of using that "lucky pitcher" every summer for their annual lemonade sale because it "magically" increases sales, then the pitcher could be considered **traditional**.

FAKELORE: Folklorist Richard Dorson's term for material that looks like **folklore** but is really invented by persons or groups who want the allure of **tradition** without having to wait. As an example, Paul Bunyan was invented by the advertising department of a logging company. Ironically, over time fakelore can indeed become **folklore**, and Paul Bunyan is again a good example. He wasn't **folklore** back in the early twentieth century, but he certainly is now!

LITERATURE: Unless prefaced with the word "**oral**," literature is understood to be the *written* artistic output of a single individual or small group of individuals, created during a relatively fixed time period and ultimately existing as a "finished," stable or authoritative text. Written literature is often based on **oral** literature, though: Shakespeare borrowed many of his plots from **folk narrative**, and many **epics** that survive in written form were originally performed orally (the *Odyssey*, for instance). Also, writers of literature often use **eye dialect** to simulate traditional patterns of folk speech in their creations. As with **mass-produced materials** above, written literature can acquire **traditional** status if a **folk group** imbues it with special significance, such as when the members of a sorority read the same Emily Dickinson poem every time they induct a new sister.

EYE DIALECT: A technique used by both folklorists and fiction writers to simulate speech as it is actually spoken rather than in its most polished, abstract, "correct" form. Eye dialect seeks to recreate the pronunciation, pacing, and syntax of oral language by deliberately altering "proper" spelling, sentence structure, and rules of grammar. When Janie from Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* says, "Dis sittin' in de rulin' chair is been hard on Jody," the seeming mistakes of spelling and subject-verb

agreement are not mistakes at all. Rather, they are Hurston's attempt to bring across orality in writing.

A Few Genres of Folk Narrative:

EPIC: A long narrative poem, usually of **oral** origin, that recounts the larger-than-life deeds of a great hero, who is often of divine descent. An epic hero embodies the values of a particular society and struggles against terrific odds or adversaries. Epic poetry often employs elevated diction and a host of sophisticated stylistic devices. *Beowulf* is an **oral** epic, as are the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The *Aeneid* and *Paradise Lost* are **literary**, not **oral** or **traditional** epics.

FOLKTALE: A **traditional** prose **narrative**.

MÄRCHEN (MARE-shen) or MAGIC TALE: A **folktale** dealing chiefly with elements of magic, wonder, or the supernatural. Such stories vary widely in length, tone, and message (if any), but often describe a young person's rise to wealth or prominence through cleverness, virtue, and/or the intervention of magical helpers. Also often called fairy tales, though not all feature fairies. "Cinderella" is a well-known Märchen and exists in many **variant** forms across different cultures, such as the Russian "Vasilisa the Bold."

LEGEND: A **folktale** that is told as though the teller believes it to be true. Legends often deal with the origins of things, phenomena, or names (**etiological** legends) or with the actions of real people, past or present (historical legends).

URBAN LEGEND: A **legend** told in and/or about modern industrialized society. Urban legends often express the concerns and anxieties of contemporary existence. The "Kentucky Fried Rat," which suggests that a local fast-food outlet is serving less-than-sanitary food, is a well-known urban legend and has several **variants** that change the location of the restaurant and the deep-fried creature in question.

JOKE: A **traditional narrative**, usually short, designed primarily to elicit a humorous reaction. In the English-language joking **tradition**, jokes usually end with a punchline and contain three episodes, the last of which is the punchline itself. The "Farmer's Daughter" joke cycle, in which a traveling salesman's car breaks down near a farmhouse, where he is warned not to become intimate with the farmer's young daughter, contains dozens of **variant** versions of the same joke.

FOLK DRAMA: **Traditional** drama, often with music or dance and usually performed with less formality than mainstream theatre. Folk drama often involves audience participation and/or improvisation. The Christmas mumming plays popular across Europe for many centuries are folk dramas, as is the live "floor show" in front of the screen at many showings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

BALLAD: Most broadly, any **traditional** song that recounts a **narrative**, typically focusing on a single episode. Ballads are usually structured around repetition, most often with an alternating pattern of verses and a repeated refrain.