

Revisiting Classic Folktales to Learn About Structure and Deeper Meaning in Our Lives

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Overview

Folktales are meant to be experienced. In their purest form they are tales told aloud by a storyteller. In this sense folktales are like jazz music. The tale is never told the same way twice. Although there are specific melodies or themes that are followed, the teller of the tale, much like the jazz musician, improvises upon a melody or theme and breathes fresh new life into an old tale. Yet it is not every day that one has the opportunity to experience the live performance of a storyteller. Thus, these tales have been recorded and written down from the ages in an effort to have a record of what once was. Because the themes and oftentimes messages found in these folktales are universal and timeless, it is of great import that they be recorded for future generations to experience.

One such tale that was a fabric in America for many years is the story of John Henry, the steel driving man. This unit will focus on the tale of this hero by listening to a variety of recordings throughout the twentieth-century. Students will be able to hear how the many tellings of this tale are never exactly told the same way twice, although a structure of a similar melody and theme exists throughout the various renditions.

High school students need structure. They need to be able to identify not only theme as it exists in a story but they also need to be able to break things down into smaller components. Structure, pattern, and formula exist in folktales just as they exist in song. Although many high school students are familiar with classic tales (thanks mainly to Disney) such as *Beauty and the Beast*, etc...they often do not get beyond the literal retelling of a tale. One of my objectives is to have students make symbolic connections between the classic childhood tales and real life. The main objective of this unit, however, is to shed light on the structures and patterns that exist in these stories.

Teaching students to be able to analyze how a folktale is structured, how it follows particular patterns, and how there is a specific formula that is followed by tellers of these tales will give the students a foundation to stand on. They will be able to look for these similarities that exist within the tales and furthermore, they will be able to write their own stories that follow these aforementioned patterns. I will teach my students to look for these patterns when we read other literature in the classroom, specifically the following two plays: *Marty* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

Theme is an important concept for my 10th grade students to be able to grasp. Sometimes folktales, particularly those told by the Brothers Grimm, also contain a message or moral lesson. Many students when asked can identify some of the basic moral lessons found in these classic folktales. However, I find that they are most interested in simply retelling their favorite parts of the story. Therefore, although I am interested in the idea of being able to break down the structure, patterns, and formula that exist in folktales in an effort to give my students a way of breaking down stories and discovering a method to the creation of the tales, I am also interested in examining theme and having students make symbolic connections to their own lives.

I teach the structure and patterns because I want my students to be able to feel that they too can retell or write a story of their own by following these simple guidelines. Showing my students how to look at folktales from the perspective of formula will give them a solid foundation when it comes to creating their own stories. They will be able to follow predetermined patterns that are measurable and yet also rigorous enough to meet their level of writing expectations as dictated by the state standards. Writing folktales can be fun. Having a formula to follow can make it easier and more measurable for peer editing and teacher evaluation. When students understand the rubric and see that they are being asked to complete a writing assignment that contains rigorous yet measurable standards, they will be more comfortable in setting out to complete the task. Understanding these patterns will also give the students a new way of reading the other literature in our classroom.

Rationale

Folktales are from the common folk. They tell about our past. At their best, they touch upon the human condition and give the reader or listener a sense of belonging; a sense of feeling connected to the larger world. Human beings want to feel a sense of belonging. "...storytelling fosters 'compassion and humanness, this marvelous ability of man to be disturbed by another's misfortunes, to feel joy at another being's happiness, to experience another's fate as one's own'" (Yolen 8). Some folktales are told again and again and through the retellings are

somewhat modified. Like a jazz musician who plays a specific and familiar melody but often gives the composition a personal touch, the teller of a tale also improvises on a common theme and thus the tale is never told the same way twice.

One popular tale that has been told and retold throughout the twentieth-century by African Americans and European Americans alike is the tale of John Henry. Although names, places, and other facts may vary from one version of “John Henry” to another, the theme and basic premise of the tale remains the same. People tell these tales for a purpose and they interchange places and facts to fit their particular culture or their individual voice. So the tale of “John Henry” for example can be told from an African American perspective as well as a European American one. And even though a tale like “John Henry” is often filled with hyperbole, it does manage to teach its lesson and remain a part of the fabric of the American culture from a variety of perspectives. Humans need to be able to identify with heroes whom we can look up to and learn from their experiences and mistakes. “If there was no proof that John Henry ever challenged the steam drill with his twenty-pound hammers, he is, nonetheless, immortal for thousands of laborers, black and white, whose dignity has been threatened by machines” (Battle xxi).

The story of “John Henry” tells about a time in America’s past when she was faced with significant change. During the Industrial Revolution, America changed and the people within her bounds, from sea to shining sea, had to also endure the changes and face the consequences of machinery replacing laborers. John Henry is the tale of a giant of a man who stood up for the hard working laborers of this country, those whose blood and sweat helped to build the very railroads that made America stronger during the turn of the century. Human beings need heroes like John Henry to not only help them through troubled times but to keep the past alive.

So “John Henry” remains an American folk hero who challenged the Industrial Revolution and for just one moment he beat it down. Yes, John Henry beat that steel-driving machine but in the end he died from exhaustion. In the end America changed and accepted the machinery of the Industrial Revolution and learned how to make life easier for the workingman.

America is now in the early stages of a new modern revolution with the advent of computers and specifically the Internet. Do we have heroes who represent the hard workingmen and women who sweat to accomplish tasks that prior to the advent of the computer would seem impossible? Can we create a John or Joan Henry who represents the last of the great administrators or

secretaries who had only the typewriter and shorthand to rely on? What about the hero who took notes by shorthand and could pound away at the keys of a typewriter for hours on end? We need to remember our past so that we can fully appreciate our present and also be cautious about our future. John Henry will always live on as a great giant of a man who stood up for what he believed in and faced the challenges of a new era.

In addition to the oral story and written text, many tales were also put into song and sung for others to learn. This is common in America but its origin goes back to ancient times. “The Greek storytellers...perform on the kithera.... The Navajo singer recited creation stories that lasted two or three days.... Medieval troubadours were expected to know the current court and countryside favorite tales....” Likewise, American singers and songwriters began to tell the folktales of America by using stringed instruments as accompaniment. “John Henry” is one such song that has been recorded by many American singers and although the place and facts sometimes differ from singer to singer, the message remains the same.

John Henry was one tough dude who faced the challenges of the machine and beat it down. Although he died in the end, it was the quest for adventure; the process John Henry went through that made him a hero. Students can research the news articles about such horrific events as 9/11 and locate stories of “heroes” as told in the papers and magazines of the day. Students can use these sources as inspiration to write their own tales modeled after the pattern in “John Henry” about heroes who faced challenges during the 9/11 events.

John Henry was a man who had a transformation of consciousness when he realized he was being challenged by a machine. Because John Henry died, some may consider him a tragic hero in the Aristotelian sense. For this to be true, however, one must first prove that John Henry recognizes his flaws. He must realize, as the song says, that “...a man ain’t nothin’ but a man.” Students will be able to read versions of John Henry and hear songs sung about him to determine whether or not he is a hero.

To define hero, we must have a frame of reference. This comes to us from Joseph Campbell. Campbell seems to disregard the categorizing of folktales and fairytales, and instead refers to them as a reflection of the human condition. Wilfred L. Guerin in his book *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* says, “Myths are by nature collective and communal; they bind a tribe or a nation together in common psychological and spiritual activities” (149). In this sense, myth is the same as folktale. Rather than splitting hairs to define the differences between these titles, it is established that these stories are told over and over again

to respond to the human condition. Simply put, people tell tales to feel a sense of belonging.

Good stories will remain forever because they touch a chord within the reader or listener and speak directly about the human condition. "...Myth is ubiquitous in time as well as place. It is a dynamic factor everywhere in human society; it transcends time, uniting the past (traditional modes of belief) with the present (current values) and reaching toward the future (spiritual and cultural aspirations)" (Guerin 149). We allow these stories to continue to exist because we want to share our past and the values that we believe in. We want to find a way to pass on to our children and the next generation the values and mores of our time. Students will be able to complete this activity during one of the writing assignments in this unit.

Just as there are many religions in the world and people tell their stories of their god(s) to keep their faiths alive, there is still one fundamental and universal theme that seems to be grounded in the golden rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Therefore, myths, or folktales, or fairytales, or whatever one would like to refer to are all universal. People seem to have similar universal values, mores, and beliefs for which they live by. "...Similar motifs or themes may be found among many different mythologies, and certain images that recur...tend to have a common meaning....Such motifs and images are called archetypes" (Guerin 149). These archetypes come in many shapes and sizes but there is a similarity. For example, in modern American mythology there is the commonness of the heroes Superman, Spiderman, and Batman. Each of these heroes is a common man who when called to action goes through a metamorphosis and becomes a new super-hero who can take on the evils of the world. Unlike John Henry, these types of heroes never seem to die. Similar to Henry, however, is their willingness to fight the enemy and thus find a place in the hearts of the common man. These heroic archetypes can also be found in the literature that my students will read.

Objectives

The main objective for this unit is to show students some of the consistent patterns that exist in folktales and to teach my students how to see these same patterns when they read other literature in my classroom.

Students will be able to write a hero's ballad modeled after listening to "John Henry." They will choose a modern day hero and follow the patterns and melody of "John Henry" to create a lyric of their own. Since the chord structure and melody to the "John Henry" ballad is a very common motif that was often used for telling tales, there should be no concern for copyright infringement. The

folk song, much like the folktale, is based on a similar melody and theme. As mentioned in the outset of this unit, it is up to the individual to find his or her own voice within this existing pattern.

Students will write persuasively in an effort to convince their audience whether or not a character in a piece of literature can be considered a hero as defined by Joseph Campbell in his books *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. We will examine some together before the students work on their own.

I also want my students to be able to follow Campbell's patterns and create their own folktale based upon these discoveries. Therefore, students will also write their own narrative hero stories. We will focus mainly on the hero and follow the patterns that are outlined by Joseph Campbell.

Students will recognize universal themes that exist in literature. Choose a classic childhood fairytale (or folktale) and trace the "departure", "initiation, and "return" pattern of the protagonist as outlined by Campbell.

Strategies

One of the strategies for this unit is to show the students a simple way to identify patterns in the story. This method comes from Joseph Campbell's book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Joseph Campbell's system is broken into three stages. First there is the departure, followed by the initiation, and finally the return. For the hero to complete the cycle he must return from his journey and bring back the object of his desire. "When the hero-quest has been accomplished...the adventurer still must return with his life-transmuting trophy" (Campbell 193). Even though the hero's return may be without the object he first desired, it is the process of the quest that matters most. The hero must also accept the world around him. He cannot change the beliefs of others but he himself has transformed into a better or different being. "The first problem of the returning hero is to accept as real...the passing joys and sorrows, banalities and noisy obscenities of life" (Campbell 218).

Students will be able to show their understanding of Campbell's idea by identifying these patterns in common folktales and then trying to locate similar patterns in our classroom literature. For example, in the play *Marty* by Paddy Chayevsky, the hero returns and finds that his friends are still the same but he has changed. Marty must learn to accept the way his friends are and understand that he has transformed into a better being. When he accepts these sorrows in his life he can make the choice to be a better person who stands up for what he believes in. In this sense, Marty is a hero whose journey in Chayevsky's play can be traced by following the patterns from Joseph Campbell's book.

In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, however, Romeo can be traced as going through the hero's journey but he stops short of returning with the elixir. Instead, Romeo, as is his downfall, makes the hasty decision to commit suicide because he feels that he cannot live without the love of Juliet. In Aristotle's definition, Romeo is not a tragic hero unless he realizes his flaw. He is not like Lady Macbeth who goes down with the heavy burden of guilt upon her hands. Yet Romeo is swallowed up by the hasty teenage angst that seems to be his fate.

Students will be able to examine Campbell's idea of the hero's journey and Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero to determine if Marty and Romeo fit either of these descriptions. Later, Marty can be thematically connected to such stories as *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Ugly Duckling*. The purpose of comparing thematically is to illustrate the universal themes that exist in these tales.

To achieve these objectives the student must understand Campbell's three stages:

1. **The Departure.** The hero must be cast into a world that is new or alien to his usual place. For example, when Belle goes to the castle in *Beauty and the Beast*, she is immediately immersed into this new and alien world that takes her far from her books and the safety of living with her Papa. Likewise, when Little Red Riding Hood ventures off into the woods she is cast into a new and alien world. Many other tales follow this formula. My strategy is to make my students aware of this occurrence and teach them to revisit a classic tale from their childhood and to look at it in this new light. Later, when they write their own folktales, they will be able to follow these patterns and use them as a model template for their own writing.
2. **The Initiation.** The hero is presented with a challenge that sets the story into its adventure mode. For example, Belle is challenged to deal with the Beast in his castle just as Little Red Riding Hood is challenged to deal with the appearance of the big bad wolf in the woods. Once again, the strategy is to have my students examine these patterns and locate them in a classic tale from their childhood. This will also serve as a template for when my students write their own folktales.
3. **The Return.** The hero often does not wish to recognize his fears and is reluctant to face these challenges. Yet, in spite of these fears, he sets out on the journey, often provoked by a "mentor" or a voice inside his head, and he faces the challenge and ultimately returns with the object of his desire.

Classroom Activities

One of the classroom activities will consist of reading aloud Paddy Chayevsky's *Marty* and demonstrating how the main character is a kind of mythic hero, by using Campbell's strategies as a guide. The following is a breakdown of how Marty arguably fits into Joseph Campbell's stages of the hero's journey:

1. Marty goes to a new and alien world when he enters the Waverly Ballroom.
2. Marty is presented with the problem of trying to meet a girl. Everyone in the play, including his mother, keeps asking, "When are you gonna get married?" Therefore, Marty's adventure is to enter the Waverly Ballroom and search for a girl.
3. While eating dinner alone, Marty's mother tells him to go to the Waverly Ballroom to meet a nice girl. Marty is reluctant. "...Whatever it is that women want, I ain't got it..." He even gets angry and raises his voice. He scoffs at the thought of going on an adventure to meet a girl.
4. Marty is finally encouraged by his mother. He values her opinion and wants to make her happy; therefore, he decides to go to the Waverly Ballroom to meet a girl. His mother encourages Marty to put on his blue suit and accept the challenge.
5. Marty goes to the ballroom and experiences the values and behaviors of his peers. This world is filled with men who are trying to meet women. One man tries to get rid of a blind date by offering to pay Marty five bucks. Marty's best friend, Angie, gets to dance with a girl of his choice but Marty's offer to dance with a girl is refused. The reader sees the deception and the common values of looks over internal beauty. Marty feels like the Ugly Duckling. A man dumps a plain girl, Clara, and Marty finds her alone, crying. This is the girl who becomes the object of his desire. She too has been cast off as a sort of Ugly Duckling and the two find a common bond in one another.
6. Marty, by being thrust into this new and alien world is forced to make friends and enemies among his peers. He finds an enemy in the man who tries to get him to take his girl for five dollars. "You can't just walk out on a girl..." Marty explains. He also finds an enemy in a girl who refuses to dance with him but then accepts the offer from another man moments later. Marty finds a friend in Clara. He is tested to take her for five dollars but his values prove that he has higher standards. Therefore, the reader grows to respect him as a caring hero who has passed a test of temptation.
7. Campbell says that the hero comes to a dangerous place where the object of his quest is hidden. For Marty this dangerous place is the

balcony where Clara hides alone and cries. The balcony is somewhat symbolic of Romeo and Juliet's meeting after their party. Marty must confront his fears of low self-esteem and follow his heart as he enters onto the balcony and into his new world.

8. Campbell says the hero has a moment of touching the bottom. For Marty this occurs when he takes Clara back to his home and attempts to kiss her. When she refuses, Marty's self-esteem plummets again. Marty begins to erupt. This is a moment when our hero is tested. A weaker character might react violently but Marty walks away into his room to deal with his internal dilemma. Again, when his mother appears, he is let down by her disapproval of Clara. The reader identifies with Marty's rejections and feels a sense of empathy as our hero is torn between his feelings and the reaction from Clara and his mother.
9. After Clara finally kisses Marty and explains her situation, Marty is reborn as a new man. It is similar to the moment on the dance floor at the Waverly Ballroom where Marty and Clara speak their innermost feelings to one another. We see Marty come to life as he finds a girl he can talk to and share his feelings with. Campbell says that the hero faces many evil challenges put upon him and finally takes possession of the treasure. For Marty, he finds his treasure in Clara after battling the opinions of his peers who feel she is a "dog" and his mother who thinks she is not good enough for Marty. "...She's not Italian..." The values clash as Marty ultimately prevails as a character that makes his decision based upon his own values. Although at first he values the opinions of his friends and family, by the play's end we see Marty emerge as a hero who can make his own choices in the face of adversity and do what he feels is right for him. Marty comes to a greater understanding of who he is and pulls himself out of self-loathing and doubt to regain his self-esteem.
10. Campbell says that just when we think the story is over, it still contains a few surprises for our hero. For Marty, it is his return to the barroom at the end of the play where he again faces his best friend Angie. It is during this scene that Marty also encounters other bachelors who all seem to think that Marty, "...got stuck on a real dog last night." These characters all represent the opposition. These are the very values and forces that Marty must overcome. He must stand up to his friends and claim his own identity.
11. Campbell says that the hero emerges transformed by his experiences. For Marty this occurs maybe more than once. For example, he emerges from the ballroom transformed into a new man after meeting and talking with Clara. He ultimately emerges from the circle of friends and enters the phone booth to call Clara. This event has the

symbolic gesture not unlike that of Superman or Underdog who enter the phone booth to emerge as a whole different person. For Marty, this metamorphosis takes him from a man with no self-esteem to a hero who has discovered his self-esteem and makes his decisions based upon his newfound understanding of self. In this sense, Marty represents the everyday hero of the common man.

12. The final barroom scene also represents Marty's return home. He has come back to the place where he started. The meeting ground for Angie, Marty and all the other boys who do not know what they want to do on any given night. "What do you wanna do?" "I don't know, what do you wanna do?" On this final return Marty realizes what he wants to do. He reaches his moment of epiphany and proclaims his love for Clara whom his friends refer to as a "dog." According to Campbell, Marty must complete the cycle and return to his ordinary mundane world with his treasure. By admitting his love of Clara in the face of his disapproving friends, Marty is claiming his treasure. The final moment is when he steps into the phone booth to make the call to Clara. Jack Zipes in his book *Happily Ever After*, talks about the tradition of storytelling and explains how the protagonist must "...overcome obstacles to win a bride or groom, obtain wealth, or gain recognition within a tribe or community" (63). It is in this tradition that Paddy Chayevsky's Marty becomes a classic example of a hero.

Joseph Campbell's theory can work in many other stories and it will be fun for students to look at literature from this perspective and make their own choices about whether or not the main characters can be perceived as heroes according to Campbell's outline. After discussing the findings of some of the classic folktales from childhood memories, the students will be able to understand the formula and see how it may apply to other pieces of literature. The aforementioned twelve steps serve as a template in discovering if a character is a hero. Some of the steps may occur in a different order, but this can serve as a guide.

Romeo and Juliet can also be examined up to a point where the hero becomes tragic. Romeo, therefore, becomes a tragic hero that fits the mold developed by Greek philosopher Aristotle. "According to Aristotle, a tragic hero possesses a defect, or tragic flaw, that brings about or contributes to his or her downfall" (1226 McDougal). After identifying how Marty fills Campbell's requirements of a hero, students will be able to make their own choices about Romeo. There are many ways of supporting how Romeo fits into these areas and students will be able to make their own choices by following a chart, developed from the "Marty" example, and plugging in their answers. For example, Campbell's first area states that the hero is in a new world or one that is alien to him. There can be multiple answers to support this concept and it will be up to the student to be able to locate

and convincingly argue his or her choice. With *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, one could jump to act two and cite Romeo at the Capulet ball as an appropriate example of the hero (Romeo) being in a new and alien land. One could also refer, however, to his banishment to Mantua as a starting point. Again, the challenge will be for the student to pick apart the text and try to make the argument for the protagonist as a hero based upon Joseph Campbell's outline that has been used in the above "Marty" example. Yet another choice for claiming that Romeo is in a new and alien land could be what exists in the first act. After the opening street fight, Romeo appears. His opening appearance on the stage, one might argue, shows Romeo out of his element. For example, we first meet him in a state of disillusionment. He is mourning the loss of a love he never really had. In this, one might argue that Romeo is in a new and alien world that is his disillusioned ideal of love. Love can be considered a new and alien land for a teenager. He is like a fish out of water because of his lovesickness over Rosaline. This sickness puts Romeo in another world that keeps him isolated from his friends and family. He even shuts the blinds on his windows during daylight and "makes an artificial darkness...."

Any of the above choices could serve as examples of Romeo being cast into a new and alien world. Therefore, my students will be challenged to come up with answers to Campbell's areas and support their opinions with evidence from the text. Rather than simply retelling the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, they will be able to experiment with Campbell's theory and write persuasively to prove with supporting evidence from the text how Romeo fulfills the requirements of Campbell's definition of a hero. Later, they will be able to justify Romeo's flaws to determine why he is what Aristotle refers to as a tragic hero. Campbell's other eleven steps could go as follows:

1. Romeo is challenged to go to the Capulet party.
2. He is reluctant to go because of "...some consequence hanging in the stars." "I dreamt a dream last night."
3. His friend Mercutio represents the Wiseman who convinces Romeo to forget about his dreams. "They are the children of an idle brain." He, therefore, represents the mentor-like character that convinces Romeo to attend the party.
4. Romeo enters the party during the second act. This represents what Campbell refers to as the special world where Romeo's adventure really begins to take shape.
5. At the party, Romeo – like Marty at the Waverly Ballroom – is forced to make friends and enemies. We see the archetype of evil represented by the fiery Tybalt who wants Romeo to leave the party or face his wrath. Tybalt's character is also balanced by the benevolent Benvolio who originally gave Romeo the idea to attend. "Come see some faces I will show, and I will make thee think thy swan a crow." These archetypes can be examined as symbolic representations of good and evil in the play.

Students can compare and contrast them with other characters in other texts such as *Beauty and the Beast* and *Little Red Riding Hood*. Not only does Romeo encounter enemies at the party he also meets Juliet. Like Marty meeting Clara for the first time, Juliet represents an ally or friend to the hero. They are two teens that find some kind of commonalities in one another, even if it is simply love at first sight.

6. The party also represents what Campbell refers to as the dangerous place for our hero. However, the balcony scene in 2.2 may be a better example because of the words that Juliet uses as she warns Romeo. “...If they do catch thee here...” it will be death. It is also at this balcony where one can focus on the object of Romeo’s quest without the juxtaposing chaos of the ballroom and move onto the balcony to be alone with the object of his desire.
7. In the 3rd act, Romeo meets rock bottom as he faces the possibility of death. During this scene we witness him avenge the death of his friend, Mercutio, by killing the evil Tybalt.
8. Having survived the battle with Tybalt and defeating the archetypical evil foe, Romeo goes back to Juliet’s bedroom to consecrate the marriage and as Campbell says, “...take possession of the treasure he is seeking.” Again, there are other examples that students can refer to, such as climbing the orchard wall, entering the party of his enemy, or fighting County Paris in the tomb. The key to this assignment is to have students show their understanding of Campbell’s theories by explaining them with supporting examples from the text.
9. Campbell’s next idea is that the hero is pursued by vengeful forces. Romeo, on his way back to Juliet’s tomb, is chased by the fate that has been hanging in the stars. “Then I defy you stars,” he states as he goes off to buy poison, kill County Paris (Not part of his plan but he stands in the way of Romeo and the body of Juliet), and ultimately killing himself. This seems to be where Romeo’s heroic story ends and he meets his tragic downfall. He is, as Aristotle identifies, a tragic hero because of this downfall. Aristotle claims that the hero’s downfall is a result of “...poor judgment, pride, weakness, or an excess of an admirable quality. The tragic hero, noted Aristotle, recognizes his or her own flaw and its consequences, but only after it is too late to change the course of events” (1226 McDougal). The task for my students will be to determine how Romeo meets his fate. They will identify his tragic flaw(s) and support their opinions with evidence from the text. This exercise will force students to meet the district standards in reading and writing as they show critical thinking skills and organize their thoughts into a clear focus with supporting details from the text.

Other Activities:

After listening to several recordings of “John Henry,” students will select a favorite version and outline the structure of the song. We will discuss melody, repetition, stanzas, and rhyme scheme. Next, students will brainstorm some modern-day heroes. After discussing the qualifications of these modern heroes, students will select one hero and begin to create stanzas that follow the patterns we outlined in the “John Henry” discussion. Depending on the ability of the class, students will be required to write a specific number of stanzas that follow the melody and rhyme scheme of “John Henry.” Finally, students will be able to sing their songs to the accompaniment of the guitar.

Another writing activity will require the students to brainstorm a list of classic folktales from childhood. Identify and discuss the qualities of the main hero of each tale. Choose one and use Campbell’s formula to focus on identifying the hero’s Departure, Initiation, and Return. Students must write a classic five paragraph persuasive essay that identifies the hero and the tale and convinces the audience that the hero fits into the three aforementioned areas of Joseph Campbell’s theory.

This activity may also be done in groups of three. Pair up students according to their selected areas of interest and have one student from each group become the expert on the departure, the initiation, or the return. The students can present their finding to the class.

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McDougal Littell. Comp. McDougal Littell. Evanston, Illinois: McDougal Littell

Inc., 2002. This anthology gave my insight into Aristotle’s definition of the tragic hero. This is also a primary text in the classroom.

Shakespeare, William. Romeo and Juliet. New York: Bantam Books, 1988.

Song:

Guthrie, Woody. “John Henry,” Worried Man Blues. New Jersey: Special Music Company, 1991.

Appendix – Context Standards

Communication Standards:

- C2. Students read and use a variety of methods to make sense of various kinds of complex texts.
- C3. Students respond orally and in writing to information and ideas gained by reading narrative and informational texts and use the information and ideas to solve problems and make decisions.
- C4. Students write for a variety of purposes, including narrative, informative, and persuasive.
- C6. Students exchange information orally, including understanding and giving spoken instructions, asking and answering questions appropriately, and promoting effective group communications.
- C7. Students listen to and understand complex oral messages and identify their purpose, structure and use.
- C8. Students compose and make oral presentations for each academic area of studies that are designed to persuade, inform or describe.

Arts and Humanities Standards:

- AH 1. Students describe the meanings they find in various works from the visual and performing arts and literature on the basis of aesthetic understanding of the art form.
- AH 2. Students evaluate and respond critically to works from the visual and performing arts and literature of various individuals and cultures, showing that they understand important features of the works.
- AH 3. Students relate various works from the visual and performing arts and literature to the historical and cultural context with which they were created.