

Narrative – Traditional tales – Fairy tales

Specific features and structures of some narrative types

Traditional or 'folk' tales include myths, legends, fables and fairy tales. Often originating in the oral tradition, examples exist in most cultures, providing a rich, culturally diverse resource for children's reading and writing. Many of these stories served an original purpose of passing on traditional knowledge or sharing cultural beliefs.

They tend to have themes that deal with life's important issues and their narrative structures are often based on a quest, a journey or a series of trials and forfeits.

Characters usually represent the archetypal opposites of good and evil, hero and villain, strong and weak or wise and foolish.

The style of traditional stories usually retains links with their origins in oral storytelling: rich, evocative vocabulary, repetition and patterned language, and strong use of imagery. When written in a traditional style, they also use some archaic language forms and vocabulary. Many regional stories include localised vocabulary and dialect forms.

Different types of traditional tales tend to have some narrative features (purpose, characters, language, style, structure) of their own.

Purpose:

Fairy tales were originally intended for adults and children. They were passed down orally to amuse and to convey cultural information that influences behaviour, such as where it is safe to travel and where it is dangerous to go.

Fairy tales are found in most cultures and many derive from the oldest stories ever told. Some modern fairy tales could be included in the more recently categorised genre of 'fantasy'.

Generic structure	Language features	Knowledge for the writer
Setting is nearly always vague. (Once upon a time ... A long, long time ago ...) Structure is most typically a recount in chronological order, where events retell what happened to a main character that came into contact with the 'fairy world'. Often the hero or heroine is searching for something (a home, love, acceptance, wealth, wisdom) and in many tales dreams are fulfilled	Formulaic sentences are used: Once upon a time ... There was once a ... Long ago in the ... And it came to pass ... Language often reflects the settings, in the past, using archaic or regional vocabulary and grammar: Say these words thrice! I shall return and take thy gold. He knew not where he was.	Characters may be fairy folk or even talking animals but make sure they are still interesting, believable characters your reader will care about, e.g. a good-hearted hero, a scheming villain, a wise helper. Decide how the world of people and the world of fairy land will come into contact and how this will cause a

with a little help from magic. 'Fairy tale endings' (where everything turns out for the best) are common but many fairy tales are darker and have a sad ending.		problem. Use numbers and patterns that usually appear in fairy tales: the numbers 3 and 7. Use phrases that have a strong rhyme or rhythm or another kind of pattern: a magic sentence is repeated several times during the story, the hero must say a secret rhyme to escape, a line is used at the beginning of each section or chapter. (On and on walked the little old man.) Use different styles of language for the human beings and the characters from the fairy world when they speak, to make a strong contrast between them: "Eeeek! Who are you, you wrinkly old thing?" asked Tom. "Beware, child and address me with respect. I am not of your world," came the goblin's whispered reply.
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Specific features of fairy tales

Origin, audience and purpose

The oldest forms of fairy tales were originally intended for adults and children. These early folk tales were passed down orally from generation to generation and later became increasingly associated with children as their audience. Their primary purposes are to amuse and to convey cultural information that influences behaviour (mountains can be dangerous places to travel alone, unselfish behaviour benefits the community and is rewarded, do as your parents tell you and all will be well).

3 of 4 **The National Strategies | Primary** **Support for Writing, Fiction – Traditional tales**

Later adaptations, written in a more literary and sophisticated style, are also among the traditional stories known as fairy tales although the often gory and frightening content of the original stories was sometimes sanitised by those who composed new, written adaptations. Fairy tales are found in most cultures and many derive from the oldest stories ever told. New fairy tales are still being written today although some of these texts with fairy-tale elements (such as *The Hobbit*) could be included in the more recently categorised genre of fantasy.

Theme

The familiar themes of many traditional stories are prevalent in fairy tales:

- magic and skill;
- safe and dangerous;
- good and evil;
- weak and strong;
- rich and poor;
- wise and foolish;
- old and young;
- beautiful and ugly;
- mean and generous;
- just and unjust;
- friend and foe;
- family/home and stranger/far away;
- the origins of the Earth, its people and animals;
- the relationship between people and the seen or unseen world around them.

Character

Fairy tales consistently include some of the most familiar and traditional archetypes of all folk tales (hero, villain, mentor, trickster, sage, shape shifter, herald). Human characters are simply the people who lived in the castles, cottages and hovels of the original stories: kings and queens, princes and princesses, knights and ladies, poor farmers, youngest sons, wise old women, beggars, tailors, soldier, a goose-girl. The main character is often humble, melancholy or hard-working and wants to make life better.

Characters also include a wide range of magical folk including animals or creatures who may have mystical powers yet behave with human characteristics. The names given to the inhabitants of the fairy world vary in different cultures but they include the 'little folk' (elves, imps, fairies, leprechauns, pixies/piskies, goblins and dwarfs) as well as the larger and often more sinister trolls, giants, ogres, wizards and witches.

Interestingly, the presence of fairies or talking animals is not necessarily the best way to identify a traditional tale as a fairy story. Many fairy stories do not include fairies as characters and the main characters in fables are often talking animals.

Plot and structure

The setting and details about when events took place are nearly always vague. (Once upon a time ... A long, long time ago ... It happened that ... Once there was a small cottage in the middle of a forest ...)

The stories tell the adventures of people in the land of fairy folk so plots usually include the use of magic, fantastic forces and fanciful creatures. Sometimes the inhabitants of the magical land of 'faerie' venture into the world of humans and this disruption of the status quo triggers a far-fetched sequence of events. Enchantments are common and rule-breaking has consequences.

Often the hero or heroine is searching for something (a home, love, acceptance, wealth, wisdom) and in many tales dreams are fulfilled with a little help from magic. 'Fairy tale endings' (where everything turns out for the best) are common. Heroes overcome their adversaries and girls marry the prince of their dreams but many fairy tales are darker and have a sad ending. The fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen, for example, include many where things go from bad to worse even for 'good' characters or where people's negative characteristics are their downfall at the end. (The little match girl dies tragically in the snow, the fashion-obsessed emperor becomes a laughing stock when he parades through the city wearing nothing at all, the toy soldier melts away to a lump of lead.) This means that careful selection of texts is required to ensure age-appropriateness.

Style

Fairy tales include good examples of the repetitive, rhythmic and patterned language of traditional stories. Phrases or expressions are repeated for emphasis or to create a magical, theatrical effect (so she went over the gate, across the meadow and down to the stream once more ... not once, not twice, but three times ...).

Fairy stories use:

- rich, evocative vocabulary;
- the language of the fairy world (magic spells, incantations, charms);
- the spoken language of the ordinary people (dialogue, regional accent and dialect vocabulary, informal expressions);
- memorable language (rhyme, alliteration, assonance, repetition);
- formulaic openings and endings; imagery: simile, metaphor and symbolism.

Fairy tales are commonly presented as implausible but it is important to remember that in cultures where the inhabitants of the magical world are perceived as real, the stories may be interpreted more as legends, so that storyteller and reader/audience understand them to have some historical, factual basis.