

# Myths, Legends, Epics, and Tales






From ancient Greece to medieval England, every culture has its own stories—myths, legends, epics, and tales that have been handed down from one generation to the next. Part of an oral tradition, these tales continue to entertain and teach us hundreds of years after they were first told.

## Part 1: Characteristics of Traditional Stories

In this unit, you will be reading all types of stories, including the ones shown here.

**COMMON CORE**

Included in this workshop:  
**RL 1** Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly.  
**RL 3** Analyze how particular elements of a story interact.  
**RL 10** Comprehend literature.

TYPE OF TALE	CHARACTERISTICS
<p><b>MYTH</b></p> <p>A traditional story that was created to explain mysteries of the universe</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often explains how something connected with humans or nature came to be</li> <li>• Reveals the consequences of both good and bad behavior</li> <li>• Features gods or other beings who have supernatural powers as well as certain flaws</li> </ul>
<p><b>LEGEND</b></p> <p>A story passed down through many generations that is believed to be based on real people and events</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tells about a hero or heroine who has unusual powers</li> <li>• Focuses on the hero's or heroine's struggle to defeat a powerful force</li> <li>• Highlights a positive quality or way of behaving</li> </ul>
<p><b>EPIC</b></p> <p>A long, narrative poem, often written in formal language, that tells about a series of quests undertaken by a great hero</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follows a quest, or journey, of a hero who has incredible strength and courage</li> <li>• Focuses on the hero's character traits</li> <li>• Features hero's tasks such as battles in which the hero is tested</li> </ul>
<p><b>FABLE</b></p> <p>A brief story that teaches a lesson, or moral, about human nature</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Usually includes animal characters that stand for specific human qualities, such as kindness or dishonesty</li> <li>• Has a moral that is directly stated at the end or indirectly communicated through what happens in the fable</li> </ul>
<p><b>TALL TALE</b></p> <p>A humorously exaggerated story about impossible events</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stars a hero or heroine who is larger than life—that is, bigger, stronger, and even louder than an ordinary person</li> <li>• Uses exaggeration to emphasize the abilities and achievements of the hero or heroine</li> </ul>



### MODEL 1: CHARACTERISTICS OF A FABLE

What human qualities do the fox and the crow display in this fable?

**THE FOX AND THE CROW**

Fable by **Aesop**

A crow was sitting on a branch of a tree with a piece of cheese in her beak when a fox observed her and set his wits to work to discover some way of getting the cheese. Coming and standing under the tree, he looked up and said, “What a noble bird I see above me! Her beauty is without equal, the hue of her plumage exquisite. If only her voice is as sweet as her looks are fair, she ought without doubt to be Queen of the Birds.”

The crow was hugely flattered by this, and, just to show the fox that she could sing, she gave a loud caw. Down came the cheese, of course, and the fox, snatching it up, said, “You have a voice, madam, I see. What you want are wits.”

*Flattery is the best persuasion.*

#### Close Read

1. Reread the boxed details. What human qualities does each animal stand for?
2. The moral is directly stated in line 11. In your own words, restate the moral. How does the interaction between the fox and the crow illustrate the moral?



### MODEL 2: CHARACTERISTICS OF A TALL TALE

Bess Call is the extraordinary heroine of this tall tale. Here, a stranger from England laughs when “big as life” Bess challenges him to a wrestling match. Will the stranger pay the price?

from **Bess Call**

Tall tale retold  
by **Robert D. San Souci**

“Humph!” said Bess. “I’ll show you a ‘real match’—and no waitin’, neither.” She rolled up her sleeves and stomped out into the yard. Back and forth they tussled, making more noise than a boatload of calves on the Hudson. First one, and then the other seemed to get the upper hand, only to find that the edge had slipped over to his or her opponent. The cloud of dust they kicked up covered the sun so that people as far away as Clinton and Cayuga counties reached for their umbrellas thinking unseasonable rain was about to fall.

Their struggles sent them rolling across the yard right up to the fence that separated the farmyard from the road. There Bess took hold of the Englishman one last time and tossed him body, boots, and britches over the fence, where he landed in a muddy ditch.

#### Close Read

1. In what way is Bess larger than life?
2. One example of humorous exaggeration is boxed. Find another example.

## Part 2: Cultural Values in Traditional Stories

One reason for the lasting popularity of many traditional stories is their universal quality. You don't have to be an expert on ancient Greece to understand the moral of an Aesop fable, or know about daily life in 19th-century New York to be amused by "Bess Call."

You can usually appreciate a particular story without knowing much about the culture or society from which it originally came. But by noticing certain details, you can often draw conclusions about the **cultural values**—the ideals and beliefs—that were honored and upheld by that society or culture. For example, does the story stress the importance of obedience, or does it celebrate those who bend the rules?

Consider the legend of John Henry, a railroad worker and "steel drivin' man" whose job was to drill holes using a hammer and a steel spike. His story was popular among men who worked long days building railroad tracks across the United States after the Civil War. By closely examining the excerpt and asking yourself a few questions, you can learn a great deal about those workers and their concerns.

from



# JOHN HENRY

Legend retold by **Mary Pope Osborne**

"I got the best steel driver in the country. His name is John Henry, and he can beat *two* dozen men working together."

"That's impossible," the salesman said. "But if you can prove your hand driller is faster than my steam driller, I'll give you this machine for free."

The boss called to John Henry, "This fellow doubts which of you can drill faster. How about a big contest?"

As John Henry stared at the steam drill, he saw a picture of the future. He saw machines taking over the jobs of the country's finest workers.

10 He saw himself and his friends out of work and begging beside the road. He saw men robbed of their dignity and robbed of their families.

"I'd rather die with my hammer in my hand than let that steam drill run me down," he yelled back. And his boss and friends all cheered.

### QUESTIONS TO ASK

**Who are the heroes and villains in the story?**

The hero is a railroad worker; the villain is a machine.

**What attitudes and behaviors are rewarded and admired?**

John Henry is rewarded with cheers for taking on the machine. Other workers admire his strength and bravery.

**What can you infer about the fears of the country's workers during this time period?**

Workers were worried about losing their jobs to machines.



### MODEL 1: CULTURAL VALUES IN A MYTH

The Mexican myth of Quetzalcoatl explains how unhappiness came into the world. In this excerpt, the people—the Toltecs—are still happy.

from

## Quetzalcoatl

Mexican myth retold by Amy Cruse

But the king-god Quetzalcoatl knew that if his people were to be really happy they must not spend their days in the idle enjoyment of all this loveliness and plenty. They must work, and learn to take a pride in working as well as they possibly could. So he taught them many  
5 useful arts—painting and weaving and carving and working in metals. He taught them how to fashion the gold and silver and precious stones which were found in great abundance throughout the country into beautiful vessels and ornaments, and how to make marvelous many-  
10 tinted garments and hangings from the feathers of birds. Every one was eager to work, and because each man did his share, there was plenty of leisure for all. No one was in want and no one was unhappy. It seemed as if, for these fortunate Toltecs, the Golden Age had really come.

#### Close Read

1. What attitudes toward work do you notice in this excerpt? Find specific details to support your answer.
2. Reread lines 4–9. What kinds of skills and products did the people who created this myth value?



### MODEL 2: CULTURAL VALUES IN A LEGEND

In this legend, a monster bear called Nyagwahe threatens the peace among the five Iroquois nations. Swift Runner, a weak boy and an unlikely hero, kills the bear. Here, he returns to his village, victorious.

from

## Racing the Great Bear

Iroquois legend retold by Joseph Bruchac

Then Swift Runner led his people back to the village. He carried with him the teeth of the Nyagwahe, and those who saw what he carried rejoiced. The trails were safe again, and the Great Peace would not be broken. Swift Runner went to his grandmother's lodge and embraced her.  
5 "Grandson," she said, "you are now the man I knew you would grow up to be. Remember to use your power to help the people."

So it was that Swift Runner ran with the great bear and won the race. Throughout his long life, he used the teeth of the Nyagwahe to heal the sick, and he worked always to keep the Great Peace.

#### Close Read

1. What traits does Swift Runner's grandmother display in the boxed text? Draw a conclusion about the attitude the Iroquois people have toward their elders.
2. Reread lines 6–9. What traits or qualities are admired in the Iroquois culture? Support your answer.

## Part 3: Analyze the Text

The myths of ancient Greece were first told more than 3,000 years ago. Yet people today still enjoy reading about the powers of mighty gods and goddesses and the daring adventures of heroes. Modern readers can even learn something from these characters' costly mistakes.

In this unit, you will read several Greek myths. Get your first taste of Greek mythology by reading this famous story of unrequited love. What characteristics of a myth do you notice in "Echo"? Through this tale, what do you learn about ancient Greek values?

# Echo

Greek myth retold by **Alice Low**

**E**cho, a beautiful mountain nymph,<sup>1</sup> was a great talker and always had to have the last word. She was a favorite of Artemis, goddess of the hunt. Together they hunted in the woods, swam in mountain pools, and caught fish for meals. But Echo's delightful life was destroyed, all because she tried to protect her friends from **Hera's<sup>2</sup> wrath.**

One day Hera came spying on a group of nymphs in the woods. She suspected that her husband, Zeus, was in love with one of them and hoped to find out which one he favored.

Echo did not know which nymph was Zeus's favorite, and so she started a conversation with Hera in order to let all the other nymphs escape. "Isn't it lovely here?" she said.

"Yes, indeed," Hera replied, "but I am very busy right now and have no time for talk."

1. **nymph:** in Greek mythology, a godlike being that appears as a beautiful young woman in a natural setting.

2. **Hera's:** belonging to Hera, the wife of Zeus, the supreme ruler of Mount Olympus and all the gods and goddesses who live there.


### Close Read

1. The ancient Greeks believed that their gods acted like ordinary people and even experienced human emotions. Consider Hera's feelings and actions in the **boxed** lines. In what ways is she like a human being?

“It seems to me you are busy talking,” said Echo, “which is the  
 15 nicest way to be busy, don’t you agree?” She went on and on, and  
 every time Hera tried to get away from her, Echo asked another  
 question. By the time Hera got away and ran to the nymphs’ pool,  
 all the nymphs had fled.

“This is *your* doing,” said Hera to Echo. “*You* kept talking to let them  
 20 escape. And I shall punish you for that. You shall never be able to speak  
 first, but shall only be able to repeat what others say. You shall always  
 have the last word.”

Soon after that, Echo fell in love with a handsome young hunter  
 named Narcissus.<sup>3</sup> She followed him through the woods, hoping to  
 25 make him notice her. But she could not speak first and had to wait for  
 him to speak to her.

 One day her chance came. Narcissus became separated from his  
 friends and called out, “Is anyone here?”

“Here,” called Echo.

30 Narcissus could not see her, for she was behind a bush. He shouted,  
 “Come,” thinking she was one of his companions, and she called back,  
 “Come.”

“Let us be together,” called Narcissus, for he still could not see anybody.

“Let us be together,” called Echo, and she ran up to him with her  
 35 arms open, ready to embrace him. But Narcissus said cruelly, “Do not  
 touch me. I would rather perish than let you have power over me.”

“Have power over me,” said Echo pleadingly, but Narcissus bounded  
 away, leaving Echo alone and ashamed. Afterward she lived in a cave,  
 and finally, because of her great grief, she shrank to nothing. The only  
 40 thing left of her was her voice, which echoed through the mountains,  
 repeating the words of anyone who called.

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3. **Narcissus:** a handsome but vain boy known for his cruel rejection of the many nymphs who fell  
 in love with him.

### Close Read

2. Why does Hera punish Echo?
3. Think about Echo’s behavior and actions, as well as her resulting punishment. What can you infer about the kinds of behavior that the Greeks hoped to discourage by telling this myth?
4. Some myths attempt to explain how something in the world came to be. What natural phenomenon is explained by this myth?