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The following lessons were created by **Jen Parker Haas**, a teacher participating in a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute for Teachers entitled Touch the Past: Archaeology of the Upper Mississippi River Region.

Why Do Humans Write: Myths & Legends in the Context of Culture and Society

Grade Level: High School

Subjects: Language Arts (Grade 12, can be adapted)

Objectives: To understand the importance of oral tradition & written myths/legends in the larger context of culture and anthropology.

Standards:

Writing: The student understands and uses writing process, writes clearly and effectively, and analyzes and evaluates the effectiveness of written work.

Communication: The student uses listening and observation skills and strategies to gain understanding. The student uses communication skills and strategies to interact/work effectively with others. The student uses communication skills and strategies to effectively present ideas and one's self in a variety of situations. The student analyzes and evaluates the effectiveness of communication.

Reading: The student understands and uses different skills and strategies to read. The student understands the meaning of what is read. The student reads different materials for a variety of purposes.

Duration: 3 weeks (including group work days)

Materials/Supplies: Lecture notes, white board, access to computer lab.

Vocabulary: Basic anthropology terms, cultural taxonomies, and components of a culture (see attached).

Background: Information on myths, legends, and basic anthropology terms. (see attached)

Setting the Stage: The first question of the school year is "Why do we write?" We address this question differently for each unit we study in Creative Writing. Placing a great importance on writing, communication, and preserving a culture through writing will already have been presented. Students will already be familiar with the pre-writing, writing, editing, and revision phases of writing. In this unit we will discuss myths, legends, folktales, archetypes, culture, and society and read examples before students write their own stories.

Procedure: Using a variety of instructional methods including lecture, reading examples of myths and legends, handouts, small group work, read aloud, and student presentation.

Closure: The culmination of this unit will be a group designed society and an original myth or legend. The information and skills learned in this unit will carry over into following units throughout the year.

Evaluation: TWS create their own societies in groups and then write an original myth or legend from the context of that society. Assignment is attached.

Links/Extension: The unit immediately prior to this is a reading of the book *Big Fish* by Daniel Wallace. Students will have already discussed the importance of stories and communication in society. The unit immediately following this one is on War/Genocide Literature and Propaganda.

This unit covers the Civil War, Holocaust, Vietnam, Sudan, and Rwanda. The information learned about culture and society will be beneficial as we move to more elaborate expressions of culture through writing – both positive (therapy, sharing information) and negative (propaganda).

References: Information on anthropology and cultural taxonomies provided by Dr. Jim Theler. Information on myths, legends, and folktales created by Kathleen Gurnard and Jennifer Haas. *Scooby Doo* episodes for the discussion and illustration of archetypes in society.

Attachments:

1. Fifteen day overview of unit
2. Lecture notes/first handout on myths and legends
3. Story framing worksheet
4. Basic anthropology terms and information on cultural taxonomies (Theler)
5. Design a culture handout (Theler)
6. Final assignment

English IV/Creative Writing

Mrs. Parker-Haas

Why Humans Write – Myths & Legends in the Context of Culture & Society

Day 1: Discuss *Big Fish* in the context of “what is truth?” and “what defines a culture?”

Day 2: Take information from previous day’s brainstorming on culture and address the question “What is culture?” Give kids a chance to discuss in table groups.

Day 3: Discuss types of societies, different aspects of societies, and identify examples of each one. Give “Create a Society” handout to groups. Allow brainstorming time.

Day 4 & 5: Students work in their groups to create their societies. They may adapt their societies as the unit progresses. Final “society” will be due with original legend.

Day 6 & 7: Review information about Greek mythology, and talk about why humans write and tell stories

Discuss differences between myths/legends/folktales

HW: Students find example of myth/legend/folktale, do worksheet, and bring to class Tuesday

Day 8& 9: Read examples of myth, legend, and discuss as class

Students present their examples from homework

Day 8: Golden Age (Discuss, and then have them work on their own description---see activities sheet)

Day 9: Legend Framework Story – individually based on the society previously created by group (see activities sheet)

Day 10 & 11: Present legend framework in WWS format

Assign final project for unit if haven't already done it

Brainstorm for final project

Work on final project

Day 12: Work on Legend/myth for society with groups, taking individual stories and editing/combining

Day 13: work on legends

Computer lab to work on final project

Day 14: In-class work on legend/myth, including illustration and society information

Day 15: Final project due

Next week: Begin War Literature and Propaganda Unit

Why Humans Write: Myths, Legends, & Folktales in the Context of Culture & Society

English IV/CW

Mrs. PH

Myths and legends are important in every world culture, and, at the most basic level, are simply stories of a culture. They are the world's oldest stories and stories have always been important to people. Ultimately, the universal existence of mythology and legend suggests that humans *need* these stories. They explain the human experience and are therefore worthy of being passed down from generation to generation.

Some reasons stories are important to people:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)
- 5)

CHARACTERISTICS OF MYTHS

- Traditional narrative that explains important events in the birth and growth of a culture by telling about supernatural events that took place before current time (before the world achieved its current form or state)
- Made up stories that attempt to explain how the world works or teach a lesson
- Deep symbolic meaning (events are symbolic rather than just the way it happened)
- Conveys a truth to those who hear and tell it (as opposed to necessarily recording a true event)
- Shared by groups of people, becoming part of their culture
- Deal with gods, goddesses, and other non-human or supernatural creatures (who may interact with humans, though)
- Often about religion/the sacred (gives religious explanation for something)
- For early people, myths were like science (explaining how natural events worked)
- When we call a story a myth, we are not making a judgment on whether it is true or not, but the culture/society who created the myth may have believed it to be true

Origin Stories/Creation Stories

- Probably the first stories ever told
- Most every culture has a creation myth that explains creation of the world
- Stories which explain how or why something exists or why it works the way it does
- Explain how life, the world, civilization, etc. began
- Gave people a sense of their place in the universe

CHARACTERISTICS OF LEGENDS

- Narratives of human actions that are believed to have taken place within human history's actual historic timeline (told as an historical event in a world much like it is today)
- They contain a kernel of truth (based on, but not completely factual)
- Main characters usually larger than life
- Deal with history, but without substantiation
- About people and their actions and deeds (often very smart or strong, but not god-like)
- Helped promote cultural or group cohesiveness and served as cautionary tales to younger generations and a way to teach cultural values
- Usually have a hero at the center of the story, and are set in fantastic places
- None of the actions are outside the realm of possibility (under a set of very flexible parameters)
- Tales that, because they are tied to an actual historical event or place, are believable (but not necessarily believed)
- The element of truth, however, is somewhat irrelevant as legends are useful in providing a commentary on the cultures that produced the legends

CHARACTERISTICS OF FOLKTALES

- Collection of anonymous fictionalized tales about people and/or animals (passed on by word of mouth)
- Probably started out with some truth, but became completely fictionalized after many retellings
- Focus is more on entertainment than explanation
- Describe how main character copes with the events of everyday life
- Tales may involve a crisis
- Superstitions and unfounded beliefs are important in folktales
- Difficult to categorize because they fit into many categories

Fairy Tales

- May involve giants, dragons, fairies, goblins, or other fanciful creatures and include magic
- Traditionally created for children and include a moral lesson
- Sometimes passed down without knowing who author is and there are usually many versions of the tale

Fables

- Teach a lesson about something/provide a moral
- Fictitious stories that feature animals that talk and act like humans, or plants or other forces of nature where the natural force causes something to happen in the story because of its strength (Aesop's fables)

Urban Legends

- Secondhand stories told as if they were true and have elements that make them seem plausible
- Usually a cautionary tale
- Truthfulness is unproven (sometimes, they are, indeed, true)
- Varies in the telling
- Is passed from individual to individual and is often attributed to a "trustworthy" source (like grandma or your doctor or a friend of a friend)

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN

The line between these characterizations is sometimes fuzzy. Myths, legends, and folktales can be hard to classify and their characteristics often overlap. The best way to determine the story type involves assessing how much the story is based on truth.

The following continuum helps to illustrate this.

Factual Historical Account ----- Legendary Event ----- Mythical Event	
<i>Facts most important</i>	<i>Meaning most important</i>

As you move from left to right, from fact to fiction, what the story symbolizes to its audience becomes of greater importance than historical significance or facts.

It is important to know the characteristics of and differences between myths, legends, and folktales, but it is also important to read each with a mind open to understanding **WHY THE STORY WAS TOLD IN THE FIRST PLACE**. The answer to that is often of more importance than the classification of the story.

Mrs. PH

Most traditional legends follow a formula. Use the following outlines to write your own myth or legend, paying attention to how each part fits the characteristics of a myth or legend (or not). You may use this frame for your final myth if you choose.

Example:

Step 1: The Setting

In a village by a river (agricultural – no specific time period, but clearly “long ago”)

Step 2: The Problem

An ogre lives under the bridge on the way into town and tries to kill anyone who crosses

Step 3: The Failure to Solve the Problem

The town “army” tries to warn the ogre to stop, but the ogre kills the army

Step 4: The Hero Comes Along

The wise man/hermit from the hills above the village is summoned and asked to save the village from the ogre

Step 5: The Hero Has a Plan

The wise man/hermit decides that the best way to rid the village of the ogre is to lure him away to someplace “better”

Step 6: The Solution is Found

Wise man/hermit calls upon his hermit friend from a far away village who has the same problem with a female ogre. They trick the ogre into a cage and transport him to the new town, where he is introduced to the female ogre. Of course, they fall in love and the ogre never returns to the village again.

Step 7: The Happy Ending

The wise man/hermit is given a congratulatory feast by the village and then allowed to return to his hillside home in peace. The villagers can cross the bridge without worry. The ogres are happily in love and too busy being happy to terrorize any more people.

ANTHROPOLOGY: The study of human kind

1. Cultural Anthropology: concerned with the study of current or recent societies
 - a. Describes variety
 - b. Compares and analyzes societies
 - c. Attempts to understand and explain the observed human behavior
2. Biological Anthropology: focused on the soft and bony tissues of humans
3. Linguistics: the study of human languages
4. Archaeology: the study of past human societies through their material remains

Ethnography: the written description of one culture

Ethnology: the comparative study of two or more cultures

CULTURE: a structured system that is observed through acts and artifacts and is held together with a shared ideology

1. The dynamic and system of shared meanings learned from a society for interacting with the social and natural environment
2. The learned guidelines for human behavior
3. The uniquely human means of adaptation

Components of Culture:

1. Environment
2. Technology
3. Subsistence pattern
4. Settlement type
5. Social organization
6. Ideology

CULTURAL TAXONOMIES:

BANDS, TRIBES, CHIEFDOMS, AND STATES

1. Band Level Societies

- a. **Hunters and gatherers of wild resources; move on an annual round or cycle to position themselves for optimal resource harvests**
- b. **Non-ranked societies – egalitarian (equal)**
- c. **Typically live in small groups of 15 to 50 people for most of the year, without permanent settlements and without formal leadership**
- d. **Shaman serve a variety of functions including medicine and ceremonial**
- e. **Large annual groupings allow for mate selection, ceremonial activities, and reorganization of smaller bands**

2. Tribal Level Societies

- a. **Often based in agriculture or animal husbandry**
- b. **Tend to have semi-permanent or permanent villages with “facilities” including houses, stores structures, wells, irrigation systems, etc.**
- c. **Have a nominal leader who acts at the request of the tribe**
- d. **Non-ranked societies -- egalitarian**
- e. **More complex ceremonies, often focused on plant or animal fertility**
- f. **Tribal ownership of land and water essential – ancestor worship important to establish/maintain ownership rights**

3. Chiefdom Level Societies

- a. **Typically based on agriculture**
- b. **Hereditary inequality with individuals born into social classes**
- c. **Elite chiefdom leaders (chiefly class) occupy a ritual center (town) with large scale public buildings**
- d. **Leaders considered divine and in contact with the spiritual world**
- e. **Chief’s town typically surrounded by villages that support the ritual center and elite class in exchange for “protection”**

4. State Level Societies

- a. **Complex bureaucracy**
- b. **Based on agriculture or animal husbandry**
- c. **Kinship less/not important**
- d. **Non-egalitarian – ranked society/class system**
- e. **Military and political elites**
- f. **Required work, taxation, and military service**
- g. **Specific codes of law**

A distinct human society is referred to as “a culture” by anthropologists and archaeologists. In general, human culture is structured (a system) that is observed through acts and artifacts and is held together with a shared ideology. Over the long term it is patterned, learned behavior that is adapted to a particular local and natural environment.

Assignment: Using the characteristics and components you have learned, you must design a distinct human culture (society) and eventually write a myth or legend from the perspective of the culture. You must include all of the following components. No space aliens! Due _____ 60 points total.

1. Environment: Cannot be the Pacific Northwest. Anywhere in the world, but decide if it will be arctic, tropic, plains, mountainous, etc. You must describe:
 - a. Rainfall
 - b. Growing season
 - c. Vegetation
 - d. Animal life
 - e. Climate
 2. Technology:
 - a. What type of technology
 - b. How does it relate to the social organization
 - c. How does it relate to the settlement base
 - d. How does it relate to the subsistence base
 - e. Is it advanced or primitive
 3. Subsistence pattern – are these people:
 - a. Hunters/gatherers of wild resources
 - b. Gardeners (horticulture)
 - c. Agriculturalists (have a field system of growing crops)
 - d. Describe the plants harvested and animals raised
 - e. Describe the annual round or cycle of subsistence
 4. Settlement type:
 - a. Sedentary (year round in one spot)
 - b. Semi-sedentary (move once or twice a year)
 - c. Nomadic (move many times a year)
 - d. What type of housing and facilities (storage, wells, etc)
 - e. Is the group involved in conflict such as feuds or war with neighbors
 5. Social organization:
 - a. Egalitarian (are people born equal, but with distinct roles based on age, gender?)
 - b. Ranked (class system)
 6. Ideology: Belief in the spirit world (religion and ritual) and how it relates to subsistence, technology, settlement, and social organization.
- Remember, you will have to create a myth or legend from the perspective of this society!

Over the past couple of weeks we have learned basic information about these kinds of stories, and you have designed your own society based on the anthropological information you received.

Assignment: You will be using what you have learned to create your own *original story that reflects a myth, legend, or folktale of the unique society you created*. Refer to your notes and handouts as you write your story so that you stay true to the characteristics of whichever one you choose.

Your story will be a **minimum of two pages typed (double spaced)** and is due next Friday. You must include character development, setting development, plot development, unique and identifying characteristics of your society, and a moral or lesson. Be creative and have fun with this. Be prepared to share this with the class.

Some reminders:

Myths are traditional stories that explain a belief, a custom, or a mysterious natural phenomenon. Main functions are to explain creation, explain human condition, explain natural phenomenon, explain pre-historical events, and teach moral lessons (and/or warn about a consequence).

Folktales and Legends are based on some element of fact and tend to be embellished over the passage of time. They are told mostly for entertainment, but they can also teach values.

Some hints:

These stories usually begin with “Once upon a time,” “Long, long ago,” or “In the beginning.”

The final paragraph should include some moral or lesson or explanation. In other words, there should be a purpose to the tale.

Setting should be culturally relevant.