

TAKING A STEP BACK: WHY STUDY FOLKLORE AND LITERATURE?

After spending a good part of the semester studying folklore and literature, let's pause and consider what value such readings might have. An immediate answer is that an author using folklore in literature can help readers relate to a literary work. For example, consider two fictional works of Charles Dickens: *Oliver Twist* and *A Christmas Carol*. Which would you say occupies a more prominent place in the minds of Americans? If you have been called a Scrooge for being unenthusiastic about some holiday event or if you have ever made mention of a "ghost of Christmas past," you provide evidence of the extensive allusions to and parodies of the latter Dickens work. Some of *A Christmas Carol*'s popularity may be credited to marketing forces, but it is marketable because of its connection to folklore: the widespread religious festival celebrated by Christians. Literature that uses folklore appeals to readers, and this is one avenue that recommends folklore and literature considerations.

Another quick way to assess the value of a folklore and literature is to simply place such a critical stance among the numerous other ways to approach the study of literature. Formalism, deconstruction, reader-response, Marxist, feminist, and many other types of critical readings all pose sets of questions that yield insights into literary works. In a similar way, using the lens of folklore and literature when reading literature will raise questions about the sources of folklore used, about the ways the author adapts the folklore, about the symbolism, function, and social dynamics of the live folklore performances, and so forth. These questions will lead to greater insights into the meaning(s) of a literary work.

However, beyond these two immediate answers to the question of why study folklore and literature, there are other—and more persuasive—reasons for thinking about folklore and literature. The following pages will discuss how reading literature with a folklore lens allows readers

- to bring greater contextual understanding to the literary text,
- to gain insights into the nature of folklore,
- to see how literary works explore experiences common to all humans,
- conversely, to see how literary works highlight fascinating diversity among cultures.

Reason 1. The first reason is that exploring the folklore represented in a literary work will provide readers greater contextual insight into what the literary text says. Folklore and literature approaches are inherently contextual and allow us to examine how the pages of literary works refer to traditions, behaviors, or texts beyond the story, poem, or play. This is true for all literature, of course. For example, Wilfred Owen's poem "Dulce Et Decorum Est" means a lot more if one understands something about gas attacks in WWI, the source of the sonnet's final lines, and the sonnet structure itself, and some biographical info on Owen.

It is no different when reading with a folklore and literature lens. Using a folklore and literature approach simply means keying into special kinds of references, those that draw on live folklore performances. When a literary work includes folklore, the folklore is often context as well, and it can work in the same way.

Reason 2. Another reason to study folklore and literature is to gain a greater understanding of folklore. As the first third of this book pointed out, folklore is something often misunderstood. The authors' mentor at the University of Missouri told a story in a class once. Her daughter, who was about 12, proclaimed that folklore was simply "stories where animals talk." As funny it is to think of a 12-year-old coming up with a unifying theory for something so complicated as folklore, it is clear that her definition is misleading and limited. However, others—who are older and more educated—have offered conceptions of folklore that are similarly limited, considering folklore to be simply outdated and quaint local color stories or fiddling.

When we find the influence of folklore on literature, it immediately gives relevance to folklore. As a reader sees characters use traditional practices in their fictional lives, she finds a model for folklore's significance in her own life. As a reader sees an author find enough artistic value in folklore to adapt verbal art, he also sees an argument for how folklore expresses the sophisticated artistry of everyday, traditional communication.

Reason 3. The last two reasons are complementary. The third reason is that the study will reveal ways in which people's lived experiences are similar across cultures, languages, lands, etc. Folklorist William A. Wilson has noted that such insights are one of the key benefits of the study of folklore. In the conclusion to an article on the folklore of Mormon missionaries, Wilson reminds us that while the stories and traditions of the missionaries might be unique to that group, the impulses behind the folklore are common to many groups. Wilson writes perceptively, "From studying the folklore of missionaries, or railroaders, or college professors, we will, to be sure, discover what it means to be a missionary, a railroader, or a college professor. But if we learn to look, we will discover also what it means to be human."¹ This common humanity is something folklore shows.

Looking at folklore in the literature also will suggest common human experiences. For examples, human cultures across time and space have customs, beliefs, and traditions associated with funerals. Even though the specific customs vary from group to group, the impulse behind the traditions is often very similar. Coping with and making meaning from our mortality is a human need, and the traditions with funerals are found in many works of literature. Book 23 of the *Iliad* is filled with the funeral games that Achilles organizes in honor of his friend Patroclus. Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* has the title character illustrate his madness by jumping into Ophelia's grave at her funeral. In a more modern example, Leslie Marmon Silko's short story, "The Man to Send Rainclouds" shows the conflict between Catholic and Native American worldviews at the funeral of Teofilo. All of these literary examples depict the funerals as a way to explore literary themes and comment on the human experience. Varying funeral customs are a cross cultural example of folklore, and their use in literature contributes to the meaning of the texts.

However, the literature doesn't simply work well by using funeral scenes. A reader who approaches the funeral scenes as depicting a ritual that develops across cultures from basic human emotional and psychological needs can relate more deeply to the scene. The cross-cultural recognition of similarities shows that X and Y cultures have more in common than one would usually think. Furthermore—and perhaps more powerfully—such a reading shows that in addition to X and Y cultures being similar, X and "my" cultures are also similar. Studying

¹ William A. Wilson, "On Being Human: The Folklore of Mormon Missionaries." *The Marrow of Human Experience: Essays on Folklore*. Ed. Jill Terry Rudy. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006. 220.

folklore—including its appearance in literary works—can, therefore, teach us about our common humanity.

Reason 4. At the same time that a study of folklore and literature will allow readers to explore how literature represents common human experiences, it can also do the opposite. It can help readers resist the too-common assumption that all cultures and all people think and act the same. Reading about varying traditions and ways of viewing the world shows the stark differences in the lived experiences of humans. Folklorist Henry Glassie explained the value of studying folklore generally with the following statement, and it applies equally well to the study of folklore and literature:

The reason to study people, to order experience into ethnography, is not to produce more entries for the central file or more trinkets for milord's cabinet of curiosities. It is to stimulate thought, to assure us there are things we do not know, things we must know, things capable to unsettling the world we inhabit.²

At times, reading literature that represents cultures other than a reader's own will unsettle him or her.

However, folklore and literature not only highlights the remarkable diversity in the world, it can also make it more understandable. It does this by presenting a context that makes the different worldviews logical and useful.

² Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982.12-13.