



## **A Study of Oral Tradition: Storytelling in Ireland, West Africa and Japan**

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### **Introduction**

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Stories can be told in many different ways: acted out on stage, in film, or on television, sung in a musical or an opera, written in a favorite book, or told orally. Some of my favorites are those told on holidays while sitting around the dinner table, or on the front porch on a cool summer evening. For some reason, it does not matter how many times I hear a story about my grandparent's courtship, I still listen as intently as I did the very first time because it connects me to my parents and my extended family. For many cultures, oral tradition is a way of linking the past to the future. Listening to a story being told by an older relative is often intriguing and mysterious; at times it seems as though they are not just telling a story, but revealing secrets that can only be revealed by their generation. My students are so accustomed to picking up a book or newspaper, or finding information on an internet search engine to find out historical information on a particular place or time that interests them. They fail to realize that oral tradition is very much alive in cultures around the world today. Something as simple as citing a source on the bibliography page for this unit made me realize just how powerful the sustainability of oral tradition is in some cultures. I could not cite an author or editor, because there is no one author for a story that was told for hundreds of years before a written language existed in some cultures. With the theme of "Origins" in mind, my goal for this unit is to demonstrate how culturally significant oral tradition is in Ireland, Japan and West Africa by studying the types of storytellers that emerged from all three cultures and reading the ancient epic myths recited by such storytellers today.

### **Background/Rationale**

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I teach eighth grade Language Arts at Northwest School of the Arts, a magnet arts school for grades 6-12. Classes run for 90-minute blocks and I see my students every-other day. I anticipate this unit will last approximately all of Quarter Two (about nine weeks), as it will be my vehicle for teaching the elements of fiction, as well as an in-depth study of legends and epic tales. When I teach fiction I focus on the story elements: Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, Resolution. In this unit I want to move beyond a basic study of character, plot, conflict and theme and study the significance of storytelling within a culture.

Oral storytelling is often omitted from my curriculum because I enjoy reading non-fiction texts, or short stories and novels that fall in the category of realistic fiction. Therefore, I have constructed a unit that will explore legends and epic tales from countries that rely on the oral tradition of such stories to sustain a connection to their culture's past. In many cultures, storytellers exist in a capacity closely compared to a journalist in the United States. The main difference is the way the the *griot* tells the story, "revealing the past not simply through his own eyes but also through those of his predecessors."<sup>1</sup> Oral traditions are not just a retelling of past events, but an account of how a culture interpreted the events.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the goal of a journalist is to gather information and present information with as little bias as possible. In the United States we use these news reports to document historical events. Unlike countries with an ancient history, U.S. history is conveyed through textbooks, newspaper articles, and other forms of text. While the U.S. does have it's own legends, and oral tradition surrounding them, it does not rely on oral tradition as a means of preserving the integrity of the nation's past. Civilizations that have been around for thousands of years were capable of preserving stories of genealogy and ancestry even before a written language was introduced to their society. The profession and skills of oral tradition have been taught in Ireland, Japan, and West Africa for centuries. I think it will be hard for my students to imagine a world in which history was not recorded on paper, but communicated orally because they live in a world full of text. Therefore, I created a unit that will give students the opportunity to explore oral tradition by reading epic tales, reciting excerpts and studying the role of musical instruments in the recitation of these tales. Since I work at a magnet arts school I try my best to infuse art, music and dance (when possible) into my curriculum. This unit will provide me with a great opportunity to allow students to learn about literature in way they are not accustomed to in a regular classroom setting. One of my goals is to have students study one of the epic tales we read, memorize an excerpt, and recite it to the class. This will not only improve their memorization skills, but will give them an understanding of the difficult task the storytellers who passed down epic tales must have endured for centuries.

## Objectives

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This unit fits perfectly into the eighth grade Language Arts curriculum for several reasons. Students have to view various forms of literature, and here they will be focusing on the elements of a legend and an epic. Point of view will be examined by studying the storytellers of the legends and through the study of the *griot*, *filid*, and Biwa recitations - the oral storytellers of West Africa, Ireland and Japan. We will compare and contrast the skills of each type of orator, their cultural significance as well as the content of the stories they relay..

The overarching theme for the unit will be "Origins," beginning with the study of legends, and epics, then moving to the study of storytellers with their relationship to the epic tales. These two types of stories bring us into the world of the "fantastic." The category "fantastic" has several definitions. It can be explained as the moment in a story when one hesitates to consider whether an event happened because of natural causes or supernatural causes. When a character dreams of something un-earthly or feels an overwhelming sense of love or hate, is the state of mind that character reaches a supernatural event, or is it simply explained as something natural? When the line between what one can explain and what one cannot becomes very thin, one finds himself in the category of the fantastic. <sup>3</sup> Then the question arises, who is the "one" who hesitates, the reader or the character? It is implied that the reader must be integrated into the character's world, so the hesitation may stem from inside the integrated world. <sup>4</sup> It is not my intention to have my eighth grade

students draw conclusions about whether or not the hesitation must stem from the character or reader, it is just my goal to introduce to them this concept of not quite knowing whether one is being faced with the natural or supernatural. This is a way for them to think about the classification of stories on a much deeper level. The fantastic can also be interpreted as, "a brutal intrusion of mystery into the context of real life."<sup>5</sup> The definitions of a myth and legend fits well into the category of the fantastic, where the hesitation felt by the character and the reader makes them decide "whether or not what they perceive derives from 'reality' as it exists in the common opinion."<sup>6</sup> The two other categories Todorov analyzes are the uncanny and the marvelous. If the reader or character decide that reality remains intact and a natural explanation can be made, it would be categorized as the "uncanny." In other words, something strange may happen, but a natural solution will happen by the end of the story; legends and myths would not fit well into this classification.<sup>7</sup> If it is decided that the laws of nature cannot provide an explanation for the phenomena, then the story falls into the category of the marvelous, or fairytales.<sup>8</sup> I will use these three classifications when teaching the legends and mythical epics as a way to help students differentiate between the marvelous and the fantastic.

Legends and epics are both tales told in oral tradition and are passed down from generation to generation, sometimes dating back over a thousand years. Both are believed to be true by the storyteller, although not all of the historical data is verifiable. Legends often focus on the landscape of the land and it's connection to those who inhabit it and are popular tales of origin. The similarities of legends and epics really exist in the way the story is told through oral tradition, and not in the way they are structured. Myths originate from the past, a very ancient past, and usually tell the story of supposed historical events which serve to unfold the world view of a culture or to explain traditions, beliefs or natural phenomenon; they focus on genealogy, ancestry and the organization of society.<sup>9</sup> Epics are long poetic composition that are centered around a hero and are narrated around important achievements or events.<sup>10</sup> *Sundiata* is a blend of both the myth and the epic because at the end of the story, the *griot* reveals how the Mali Empire was populated and how jobs were assigned. However, it could also be classified as an epic because it is an example of long standing oral tradition in West Africa. I want my students to be able to understand the differences between a legend, a myth and an epic, while drawing comparisons on the qualities the different types of stories share.

## Legends

In order to demonstrate how a legend is an example of oral tradition, I will show two films, *The Secret of Roan Inish: Island of the Seals* and *Into the West*. Both are Irish legends that reveal the secrets of the land or the mystery surrounding it. In both stories, the family members reveal secrets to children yearning to learn more about their past. These movies can be shown in their entirety or in clips. If I were to show clips from either movie, it would be when each respective main character listens intently to their wise, old grandfather to learn about the mystery surrounding their past. While both films could be described as children's stories, *Into the West* is a lot more layered and would not be a great choice for some of my classes simply because it would take a lot more class time to provide background information and historical data. Since my Language Arts classes are tiered into three categories, Standard, Standard Plus, and Honors I have taken this into consideration. I would show *Roan Inish* in its entirety to my Standard and Standard Plus classes, and possibly clips from *Into the West* to provide a comparison of storytelling techniques. However, I would do the opposite for my Honors class, showing *Into the West* in its entirety and clips of *Roan Inish*. It is quite possible that you could just show clips of the different scenes of oral storytelling in each film if time does not permit a showing of the entire film.

## Storytellers

The storytellers I will introduce in this unit are more than just narrators, novelists, historians, or reporters; they are the "master of the art of eloquence," musicians who speak to their listeners through words and music - leading the reader on a journey to the past and reaffirming to a culture the significance of their ancestors.<sup>11</sup> These storytellers are highly trained and skilled, more than entertainers, they are an integral part of their society. Ireland, Japan and West Africa share the tradition of oral tradition and their storytellers have many similarities - coupling music with the storytelling. All three cultures use similarly plucked instruments in conjunction with the recitation of stories, although modern Irish storytellers have replaced the harp with pipes. These storytellers not only recite the stories of the ancient past, they also create a connection between spiritual beliefs and the modern world.

By studying these three cultures, my students will be able to draw comparisons between the role of the storyteller in oral tradition, and study the literary elements of each epic tale. My overarching goal is for my students to be able to understand the role of the storyteller within the context of the epic tale, but more importantly understand the importance of the storyteller within the context of a culture. In an effort to always make my curriculum more interesting and meaningful to my students, I have looked for recent performances of the three types of storytellers listed below. A five minute search on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) led me to many wonderful and captivating performances that I can show my students throughout the unit. Since we are reading ancient epic tales, I want my students to feel as though the stories are not so far removed and still have relevance and significance in their respective regions today. This is a great way for students to see, listen, and watch performers from across the world practice oral tradition.

### *Griot*

West Africa's storytellers are called *griots*. A *griot* by definition is a musician, an entertainer of West Africa whose performances include tribal histories and genealogies.<sup>12</sup> The *griots* have been a part of African culture for hundreds of years, and their role continues in West Africa today as highly trained, skilled storytellers who use the kora instrument to accompany their epic tales of old Mali.<sup>13</sup> The kora is an instrument similar to the harp, but shaped more like a guitar. It is placed between the legs and plucked.<sup>14</sup> *Griots* dedicate years to studying their craft of storytelling as well as mastering the art of the kora in order to become the orators of epic tales like that of *Sundiata*, founder of the Mali empire. One scholar notes that the oral version of *Sundiata's* journey should not be viewed as history, but as a portrait of how Africans today view their cultural hero.<sup>15</sup> *What role does oral tradition play in West Africa? How does the role of the griot relate to the theme of "Origins" in this unit?*

### *Fili*

The Irish equivalent to West Africa's *griot* is the *fili*. *Fili* is best translated as a professional poet in ancient Ireland who preserved genealogies and tales by through oral tradition; *filid* is the plural form of the word.<sup>16</sup> *Filid*, as the *griots*, were poets by birth rite. Whereas *griots* were advisor to kings, *filid* had a lot more power in their community and they often tried to enforce their power, as they populated a majority of the aristocratic class, in less than moral ways. Fitting perfectly into the study of the "fantastic" category, *filid* possessed the power of the lampoon, a poet's curse they often used to belittle man's reputation, or cause physical or mortal harm.<sup>17</sup> The mystery surrounding the power of the *filid* and the *griot*, who has the ability to transport himself from the past to the present within certain stories, is one that will be studied in this unit. The West African and Irish storytellers not only possess the great task of communicating the great epic tales of their regions, but

also add a fantastic quality to their interpretation.

Generations of Irish studied the skills needed to master the art of memorization and recitation necessary in passing on the oldest Irish tale, *Tain Bo Cualnge*, or *The Cattle-Raid of Cooleyy*.<sup>18</sup> Hundreds of years ago the *filid* communicated the vocal narrative of the epic while incorporating the more lyrical sections of the tale through the use of harps. Something similar is done today in Ireland, although the focus has shifted from the vocal narrative to the sole use of music as the vehicle for expression. Most of these spoken recitations have been replaced by an musician's lament to one of the heros of the epic accompanied by uilleann pipes, "Irish pipes," which do are softer than the Scottish bagpipes so many of us are used to hearing. Although the uilleann pipes are not blown with the mouth, and are just played using one's hands, the musicians are not combining the music of the instruments with the world or lyrics of the epic tale<sup>19</sup> . This is in stark contrast to the oral tradition of West Africa and Japan today, which both speak or chant the words of the epic in accompaniment with a plucked instrument.

### *Biwa Recitation*

Similarly, in Japan, women and men take on the role of oral storytellers by using the Biwa instrument - a pear-shaped plucked instrument made of wood. The Biwa recitations are used to tell the story of one of Japan's oldest epic tales, , *The Heike Monogatari*, and are also an integral part of Japanese cultural performance today. When the Biwa was first created in the Seventh Century, blind monks would use it to accompany their religious and epic tales.<sup>20</sup> It is used today to accompany the vocal recitation of narratives, using the varying sounds to illustrate different scenes in the story.<sup>21</sup> Throughout history, the Biwa has evolved into different variations, all of which accompanied the storytellers who communicate the story of *The Hieke*.

## **Epic Tales**

I want my students to think about the following questions as we begin the discussion of ancient epic tales. *Imagine a world where history is not only taught, but preserved through oral tradition. What kind of skills are needed to recite a story for years and years, without considerably changing the details? What role should that storyteller play in his society? Why do certain cultures rely on mythical tales, not historical data to teach ancestral and geographic history?* Knowing that the inevitable question, "How do you know the story is still correct after being passed down for thousands of years?" will arise, I have done some research into the history of the epic tale. In Ireland, Version I of *Cattle Raid of Cooley* was not recorded until the Twelfth Century. However, recorded episodes of the story were known to exist as early as the Seventh Century, and probably no earlier, because the use of writing did not reach Ireland before the Fifth Century. <sup>22</sup> One scholar has asked the question, "Is it credible that a storytelling tradition could be handed on orally without very great change over such a vast period of time?"<sup>23</sup> I had the same question while researching the history of these epic tales and I am confident my students will too. Every eighth grade student has at one time or another been the audience of an "epic" tale of one of their classmates. Isn't it funny how the story seems to develop extreme variations by the end of the school day? My students will need to learn the about the profession of the *griot*, *filid*, and Biwa recitation in order to comprehend how a story's details can be preserved for centuries without writing a word of it down on paper. This is what the storytellers had to do, and continue to do today.

The following epic tales date back hundreds of years and are often compared to the *Iliad*, a tale some of my students are familiar with. Since each epic tale is very lengthy, I have selected an excerpt (except for *Sundiata* which will be read in its entirety, 84 pages) of each epic to read in class; below is a brief summary of each.

## *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*

I will begin this portion of the unit with the epic tale of *Sundiata*, It will be coupled with clips from the film *Keita* which will be discussed more thoroughly in the **Strategies** section of the unit. The listener travels through Mali and surrounding lands on a journey that ends with the organization of a culture.

The *griot* who tells the epic tale of Sundiata, King of Mali, begins by explaining his role in the story and in turn, explains the significance of *griots* to the West African culture. During the days of the old Mali Empire, their role as storyteller was much more than one who communicates - *griots* were the King's spiritual advisors, and in some ways prophets. D.T. Niane recorded the tale of Sundiata as he listened to KJeli Mamoudou Kouyate, a *griot* from the village of Djeliba Koro in Guinea. He begins by emphasizing the significance of his service, "without us the names of kings would vanish into oblivion, we are the memory of mankind; by the spoken word we bring life the deeds and exploits of kings for younger generations."<sup>24</sup> The idea that the memory of mankind does not rest in the pages of books, but in the minds, bodies, and spirits of these orators is beautiful and almost incomparable to most Western ways of tracking history. My students might have a difficult time imagining the role of a *griot* in a modern society, but the *griot* is very alive in West Africa today, telling the stories of the old Malian Empire and introducing the stories of modern Africa to an audience eager to listen.

A proverb that struck me as I read the Introduction to *Sundiata* is one that I think my students will be able to identify with, "...the world is old, but the future springs from the past."<sup>25</sup> The truth of this proverb is revealed in *Sundiata* when Balla Fasseke reminds Sundiata and his warriors of their place in history and points out that they will be the ones who decide what to tell future generations about their actions.<sup>26</sup> At this point in time, the *griot* acted as the king's advisor and, in turn, made it possible for the story of Sundiata, founder of the Malian empire, to continue on through generations. A class discussion can center around the notion that the past is definitely linked to the future. For example, at the end of *Sundiata*, we learn how the Empire was populated, communities were organized, and how jobs and roles were assigned to the men and women of Mali. The *griot* takes an oath to uphold the integrity of the story, "to teach only what is to be taught and to conceal only what is to be kept concealed."<sup>27</sup> This gives the *griot* some supernatural or spiritual power that is not seen in the narrators of novels or short stories typically read in my class. He serves a more powerful purpose than just a simple storyteller - he brings the story alive and allows the listener to connect to the spirit of his ancestors in an effort to maintain a sense of cultural identity.

*Sundiata* is a lengthy tale of the rise of the Malian empire, broken into six sections: The Buffalo Woman; Sundiata's Childhood; Sundiata in Exile; Soumaoro Kante, the Sorcerer King; The Return of Sundiata; Sundiata the Ruler of Mali. The story begins with what I believe to be the most intriguing part of the story - the story of the *griot*, the storyteller himself. While *griots* today are often musicians who travel and make their money by selling recordings, or simply share the tales of their journeys. But, for hundreds of years, *griots* were the counselors of kings, at the top of the hierarchal society of Africa.<sup>28</sup> The role of the *griots* were coveted so much because they were the archivists who recorded the practices of the kings and committed to memory the tales that are still told in Western Africa today. Niane reports that the *griot* can still be found today living as he did in his ancient setting, on the outskirts of town, in the old villages of Mali.<sup>29</sup> The story begins with Djeli's words, "Listen to my word, you who want to know; by my mouth you will learn the history of Mali."<sup>30</sup> Although the story of Sundiata is significant to my unit because it demonstrates the elements of an epic, I find more importance in the way it is told than what the tale actually holds within itself. The almost magical power of the *griot* works to enchant the listeners to follow a tale of the greatest king of the old Malian Empire. The *griot* in this story actually inserts himself into the story several times, a technique rarely used in the short stories I



read in my class.

This story will be coupled with *Keita: The Heritage of the Griot*, a film in which a present-day *griot* relays the story of Sundiata to a young boy, Mabo, in an effort to educate him about his ancestors. The importance of the *griot* is best summarized in a quote from the film, "What can you teach your children without knowing your origin."<sup>31</sup> Conflicts arise between Mabo's parents, the *griot*, and the school teacher when the French version of life, where the concept of evolution has to compete with the indigenous version of ancestry passed down by the *griots*. The struggle between listening to stories passed down from generation to generation without any written form of documentation versus the more Western practice of looking to written documents as validation of an historical event is going to be an inevitable debate throughout this unit. The above-mentioned proverb so clearly states the importance of the *griot* in the young boy's life. He must blend the stories of his heroic ancestors with the scientific literature of his teacher in order to find a balance between the two worlds. *Can the two coexist? Why or why not? What are the implications if only one version is allowed to be taught?*

*The Exile of the Sons of Unsech and The Exile of Fergus and The Death of the Sons of Unsech and Deidre*

This story is part of an extremely lengthy epic, *Tain Bo Cualange*, or *The Cattle Raid of Cooley*. This tale is broken up into many sections in an effort to aid the memory of professional storytellers in memorizing the chronology of the events; one of the many stories within the epic is "What Caused the Exile of the Sons of Usnech."<sup>32</sup> This epic has been called "the queen of Irish epic tales" with its wild and fascinating sagas.<sup>33</sup> Oral tradition in Ireland was practiced for five hundred years during which *Tain Bo Cualange* was being developed. It is the oldest epic tale of western Europe and its "historical background, social organization, chivalry, mood and thoughts are linked to Celts who battled Caesar."<sup>34</sup> I have chosen this story for class because it is brief, only nineteen pages long, and it has the kind of storyline that will keep my students interested - war, the fight over a female, and revenge. Although the men and women of Ulster lived centuries ago, students will be able to identify with the internal and external conflicts faced by the main characters.

The story begins at the house of Feidlimid Mac Daill, poet and story maker to Conchobor the king. Feidlimid's role reminds me of the role of the *griot* in *Sundiata*, a man close to the king who relays stories of the past and acts as a spiritual guide. His wife falls ill when the child she is carrying in her womb begins to shriek. Cathbad, the druid, could see into the woman's womb and what he saw was troubling - a beautiful woman who would cause the men of Ulster to fight, jealousy amongst the queens, the exile of Conchobor's son; a woman who would plague the kingdom with sly crime and treachery..<sup>35</sup> All of this indicated to him that she was "the seed of evil."<sup>36</sup> Knowing of her ill-fated destiny, many wanted her killed, but Conchobor refused - he wanted her to be raised in solitude until she was ready to become his wife. Deirdre grew into the most beautiful woman Ireland had ever seen. While sequestered, Deirdre had conjured up an alternate plan for her future. While walking one afternoon, she came upon Naisi Mac and instantly fell in love with him. Naisi understood that he could not be with Deirdre because the prophecy stated she would grow to be with king Conchobor. As Deirdre walked past Naisi, she pretended that she did not see him and in the same instance he insulted her. The banter between Deirdre and Naisi is very humorous and is partially why I selected this tale from the long epic. He tells her she is destined for the king, but she reveals she would rather have Naisi. When he rejects her, she clutches her hands around his face and spoke, "Here are shame and mockery on your head if you do not take me with you."<sup>37</sup> Naisi uttered a terrible cry, and leaped with fear to his brothers. They reassured him they would take her to another kingdom, also taking warriors, women and hounds. For many months they traveled through Ireland, being pursued by Conchobor. Then one day the king's steward saw Deirdre in bed lying beside Naisi and the pursuit was finally over. Conchobor killed Naisi and captured Deirdre. She was kept for

one year by Conchobor and during the entire year she did not smile, and hardly slept or ate. She was miserable without Nasai. However, Conchobor was ignorant to Deirdre's sadness. He spoke to Deirdre as though to soothe her, but she replied with a very frank response, "Conchobor, are you foolish, or blind/To this tiredness, to woo and renew/Such hate and sorrows as have found/Biding place between us two?"<sup>38</sup> When Conchobor realized Deirdre's hate for him, he asked her who she hated more than he. She replied with "Eogan Mac Durthacht." So, out of spite, the king sent her to be with Eogan for a year.<sup>39</sup> After realizing that she could not stand to spend her life with two men she hated, she leaned out of the chariot in which she was riding, and purposely smashed her head on a jutting stone and died.<sup>40</sup>

When reading this story we will examine the story elements of character (motivations, internal/external conflicts), plot (events that move the story forward), and how this tale fits in to the category of "fantastic" literature. The main characters in this story are facing imprisonment, (in body and mind), jealousy, war battles, and empowerment. Since this story is much shorter than *Sundiata*, I will use this story to review the five stages of a story: Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, and Resolution. Students will be able to map the five stages of a story using Story Map (see **Strategies** section below). This story also serves as a great opportunity to review with my students the definition of fantastic as a category of literature. When the druid appears to be able to "see into" the womb of the ill woman, the reader hesitates to determine if he possesses supernatural powers, or if he has a sixth sense - students can also debate whether a "sixth sense" is natural or supernatural. Also, the way Deirdre uses some sort of "super" powers to take command of Naisi leads the reader to determine what, if any, supernatural powers she possesses. While the rest of the story seems fairly realistic, the mysterious powers possessed by the druid and Deirdre clearly mark this epic tale of the category fantastic.

### *The Hieke Monogatari*

I selected this section of the Tale of the Heike, because it is short enough to read in one or two class periods and contains a storyline that involves materialism, wealth, jealousy, and humility. While *Sundiata* and *The Exile of the Sons of Usnech* are mostly tales of external conflicts, students will now be introduced a very different kind of epic tale. The Japanese story I selected depicts characters whose internal conflict drive most of the plot events. The study of all three stories will create great activities will allow students to compare and contrast the way different cultures construct their stories. I could not find a word for Japanese oral storytellers comparable to that of the *griot* or the *filid*. However, recitations of the *Tales of the Heike* are still very much a part of Japanese culture today.

This tale begins with a comparison of Prince Taira-no-Ason Kiyomori, the Lay-priest of Rokuhara, to rulers of many other far-off countries - of which none compare. Kiyomori was blessed with the great riches of his life because of an experience he had while on a religious pilgrimage, and the happiness and riches followed his family for generations. Kiyomori overcame a near-death illness and even after his retirement from the world, he did not put an end to the lavish lifestyle to which he was so accustomed. Kiyomori was not a greedy man, and so he shared his prosperity with those around him. He indulged in the entertainment of two Shirabyoshi (the prototype of the modern Geisha). The two sisters, Gio (who danced for and was closest to Kiyomori) and Ginyo were both very skilled at their craft and as a result, were very fortunate enough to build a home for their mother. Three years after Gio started dancing for Kiyomori, another Shirabyoshi, Hotoke Gozen came to his house - uninvited. At first, Kiyomori told her to depart, but Gio asked if she could stay, feeling bad for the girl who was rejected. Gio regrets her decision, because Kiyomori falls for the beauty and dancing of Hotoke and sends Gio away. Gio was so saddened by her time away from Kiyomori and embarrassed by her departure, she refused to answer Kiyomori's several messages. However, after much prodding by her mother,



Gio returns to the palace only to leave in tears again. She was asked to comfort Hotoke and amuse her out of loneliness. Distraught and embarrassed by this second-class treatment by Kiyomori, Gio retreats to her home where she and her sister make a pact to take their lives. When their mother realizes what her daughters have planned, she tells them that sadness on earth is just a temporary condition. Both daughters decide to become nuns and retreat from society, and later their mother follows. One night, Hotoke appears at their house and surprises Gio with remorse. Hotoke feels guilty for showing up uninvited at Kiyomori's palace years ago and as a result, taking Gio's place. Hotoke confesses, "Now in consequence of this I am overwhelmed with shame and conscience stricken. When I saw you go away I felt it to be through my fault and could not feel at all happy." happy."<sup>41</sup> Hotoke shames herself into a life of recluse as a nun with the three other women. Gio is shocked that her rival admitted to feelings of such shame, because when Hotoke first arrived at the palace, she felt shameful for feeling such spite for Hotoke's initial happiness. Gio feels as though she is in a "virtuous state of enlightenment" after she realizes that Hotoke has given up her life to become a nun too. The tale ends with the four women retreating from society together, obtaining their desire for rebirth. In the register of the temple the honorable spirits of the four are found enshrined. <sup>42</sup>

## Strategies

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### Think-Pair-Share

Each epic being read in class will be accompanied by a [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) video that captures all three types of storytellers in a musical performance of the narratives. Students will be able to imagine what it was like to hear the stories in the form in which they were originally created - oral tradition. Although these epics are examples of oral tradition, throughout history they have been recorded and translated into many languages. One might ask how I am going to teach a story that defines the idea of oral tradition when I'm having the students read it on paper? I know they are going to ask me the same question, and the answer is explained more elaborately below. Most importantly, I will need to explain that for centuries it was the role of the oral storyteller to maintain accuracy when communicating the story and that it can still be considered oral tradition (even though they will read it on paper) because the stories are still being passed down from generation to generation by oral storytellers in countries across the world. This point will be emphasized while watching the [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) videos. In another attempt to drive home the notion that just because it is now written, an epic tale can still represent the definition of oral tradition, I will have students watch and listen to the videos of the oral storytellers *before* reading the epics. Hopefully, as students begin to read the lengthy tales, they will begin thinking about the difficult and complex task the oral storyteller has.

At various times throughout the unit, while working with a partner, students will have to select an excerpt from the epic we are reading and think about the tone and mood of the selection. *What words or phrases reveal the tone and mood of the selection?* Students will record their answers individually, then share them with their partner. Next, they will decide how to tell the story orally to their partner, based on the tone and mood they determined previously.

This will give students the opportunity to study the elements of a legend while practicing the techniques of oral tradition.

## Journal Writing

I begin every class with a journal. During this unit I will ask students to write about their favorite family stories. *What is your favorite story? Who told you the story? What effect does the storyteller have on the story? Have the details of the story varied over time?* By the end of the unit students will have compiled quite a repertoire of personal stories to share with each other. At the beginning of class students will share their stories (on a voluntary basis) so they can practice the skills needed to become a great storyteller. By the end of the unit they will need to commit two of their own stories to memory and recite them orally to the class. I will record them on a tape recorder so I can play them back when assessing them for technique.

## Graphic Organizers

Students will compare and contrast the three epic tales so they can identify the hinge functions and free motifs of epic tales. Hinge functions are the events which move the story forward; these would be the functions that all three tales have in common - a hero who uses his or her inner strength or mysterious power to overcome a conflict, for example. When teaching the elements of a story, I tell my students that when plotting the events of the Rising Action, they need to write down events that have a chain reaction, that help in the progression of the story. Free motifs are the differences that are specific to a given culture, or belief system. For example, all three stories have a hero, but Sundiata is the only male character and he is directly involved in the rise of the Malian empire. In the Japanese epic, women are the main characters, but they are at the mercy of the men. However, in the Irish epic, the woman has control over the man in her life. Students could create a graphic organizer in which they draw a three circle Venn Diagram. The overlapping circles would have hinge functions recorded in them and the outer circles would contain the free motifs. It is important to point out that free motifs are not just the differences in setting, clothing, or traditions within a particular story, but include any actions in the story that do not move the plot forward. For example, if a character takes a vacation, but nothing critical stems from the trip - it was just a point in the story where the character left and returned, it would be considered a free motif.<sup>43</sup> As we read a story I would have students draw something similar to a timeline where a horizontal line across the paper guides their notes. Above the line they would record the hinge functions and below the line the free motifs would be recorded. This would guide them help guide them in completing the above-mentioned Venn Diagram..

## Classroom Activities

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### Flower Power

This activity will take place after students have viewed either *The Secret of Roan Inish* or *Into the West*, and will enable students to analyze a legend on a deeper level. I will create a large flower out of construction paper. The center of the flower will have the word legend written in it, with five large petals surrounding it (you may draw a stem, but that would just be for aesthetics). Each petal will have one phrase written on it: purpose of, details about, function of, value of, condition of. I will model how to answer each "petal" by using a simpler concept in the center - for example, fashion. Students will help me determine responses to write on each petal as a warm-up for their independent work. Next, students will work in five groups where they will be assigned one of the five petals. Students are required to draw the flower into their notebooks and as each group shares their answers, I will write them on the flower in front of the class and they will record them in

their notes. This purpose of this activity is to have students analyze a legend beyond just the dictionary definition they already have. After the flower is filled with their answers, I will ask them to make generalizations, or statements about a legend based on what they have recorded on the petals. My goal is for the students to make the connection between legends and the theme "Origins" we will be studying throughout this unit. If they do not come up with that connection on their own I can lead them there with probing questions. After they complete this activity we will begin to examine the three types of storytellers and their respective epic tales, focusing our discussion on the theme of "Origins." This flower will remain posted near the front of the room for the duration of the unit so we can refer back to it during discussions.s.

## Story Board

This activity will be created in conjunction with the Graphic Aids described in the **Strategies** section above. After reading *Sundiata*, the longest epic we will read, students will work in pairs to create a storyboard of the hinge functions. They will be able to use the graphic organizer they created to help them determine which events they will draw. Each story board must contain eight illustrations; two sheets of white paper per pair folded into quadrants. They will not be allowed to write any words on the story boards and when they present them to the class they provide an oral summary of their story board. These will be displayed throughout the classroom so we can reference them when discussing *Sundiata*, reviewing hinge functions, or examining similarities in the Irish and Japanese epics.

## "I Am" Poem

This is a poem you could easily find on the internet. I did not include it here because there are many variations of it. The "I Am" poem is a great tool for teaching perspective. This poem provides a skeletal format for all students to follow. For example, the first line reads, "I Am (two characteristics), and each subsequent line asks students to list things like "I feel, I wonder." Students become the character, setting, or object they have been studying and have historically created really powerful poems. For this unit, I would ask students to write from the point of view of either the *griot*, *fili*, or a person performing a Biwa recitation. They would be able to choose the storyteller for whom they would write, but all students would have to follow the skeletal format of the poem. In keeping with the focus of the unit, oral storytelling, students will have to memorize their poems and present them to the class. This will be completed before the above-mentioned journal activity where students have to commit to memory two stories about themselves. I will have the skeletal frame on a large poster in the back of the room so students can reference it if they get stuck on a line of their poem during the presentation. This will be one way of helping them on their journey as oral storytellers later in the unit (see **Strategies** above).

## Notes

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1. Thomas A. Hale, *Scribe, Griot and Novelist Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire*. (Gainesville: University of Florida Press/Center for African Studies, 1990), 161.

2. *Ibid.*, 162.

3. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1975), 27.

4. Ibid., 31.
5. Ibid., 26.
6. Ibid., 41.
7. Ibid, 41.
8. Ibid., 41.
9. Miriam Webster Online [www.miriamwebster.com](http://www.miriamwebster.com)
10. Ibid., [www.miriamwebster.com](http://www.miriamwebster.com)
11. D. T. Niane, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (London: Longman Group Limited ,1977), 1.
12. Miriam Webster Online [www.miriamwebster.com](http://www.miriamwebster.com)
13. Juan R. Yriart, *Mory Kanté*, <http://www.morykante.com/biog/instruments.htm>
14. Ibid., <http://www.morykante.com/biog/instruments.html>
15. Hale, *Scribe, Griot and Novelist Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire.*, 21.
16. Encyclopedia Briatannica Online. [www.encyclopediabritannica.com](http://www.encyclopediabritannica.com)
17. Ibid., [www.encyclopediabritannicaonline.com](http://www.encyclopediabritannicaonline.com)
18. Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, *The Oldest Irish Traditions* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 53.
19. "Irish Pipes," [www.harpanndragon.com/uilleann.htm](http://www.harpanndragon.com/uilleann.htm)
20. *The Satsuma Biwa: A Radio 3 Interview with Ueda Junks transcribed, translated and summarized by E. Steenput*, <http://www.kampaibudokai.org/Biwa.htm>
21. Ibid., <http://www.kampaibudokai.org/Biwa.htm>
22. Jackson, *The Oldest Irish Traditions*, 52.
23. Ibid., 53.
24. Niane, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*,1.
25. Ibid., 1.
26. Hale, *Scribe, Griot and Novelist Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire*, 37.
27. Naine, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*, 84.
28. Ibid., vii.
29. Ibid., vii.

30. Ibid., 1.
31. *Keita: The Heritage of the Griot* video
32. Joseph Dunn (**trans.**), *The Ancient Epic Tale Tain Bo Cualange, The Cualnge Cattle-Raid*, (London: David Nutt, 1914), xi.
33. Ibid., xi.
34. Ibid., xvii, xviii.
35. Thomas Kinchella (**translated by**), *The Sons of Unsech*, (Chester Springs: Dufour Editions, 1960), 4-5..
36. Ibid., 3-4..
37. Ibid., 9.
38. Ibid., 19.
39. Ibid., 21.
40. Ibid., 21.
41. A.L. Sadler (**translated by**), *The Ten Foot Hut and Tales of the Heike*, (Sydney: Angus & Robertson Limited, 1928), 39.
42. Ibid., 41.
43. Dudley Andrew, Seminar Notes, 2009.

## Bibliography

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### Teacher Resources

Andrew, Dudley. *Storytelling Around the Globe*, "Seminar Notes," (Yale National Initiative),

July 2009. Dudley Andrew is a Professor of Film and of Comparative Literature at Yale University and led the *Storytelling Around the Globe* seminar. The information I included on hinge functions and free motifs in literature and film was gleaned from my notes taken during one of our seminar meetings.

Dunn, Joseph (trans). *The Ancient Epic Tale Tain Bo Cualange, The Cualnge Cattle-Raid*

London: David Nutt, 1914. This book contains an English translation of the Irish epic tale. The "Preface" contains a lot of historical and background information on oral tradition in Ireland and of the events in the story. I recommend teachers read the "Preface" before reading any of the stories to get a better understanding of the significance of oral tradition in this culture.

Encyclopedia Britannica. "Fili," Encyclopedia Britannica Online, 2009. 26 July 2009.

Hale, Thomas A. *Scribe, Griot and Novelist Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay*

Empire. Gainesville: University of Florida Press/Center for African Studies, 1990. An indepth comparison of those who record stories in writing, the *griots* who continues oral tradition, and the authors of fictional books. Be sure to dedicate a lot of time to this book because it explains the complex differences between each. You will find great research that could be supplemented to any unit that focuses on fiction or oral tradition.

"Irish Pipes," [www.harpanndragon.com/uilleann.htm](http://www.harpanndragon.com/uilleann.htm). 26 July 2009.

Jackson, Kenneth Hurlstone. *The Oldest Irish Traditions*. London: Cambridge University

Press, 1964. Professor K.H. Jackson delivered this lecture in May 1964 at University of Cambridge. I found it to help a lot with the discussion of the validity of oral tradition versus the transcribed version of history the West is so accustomed to viewing.

"Language Arts Grade 8 Goals and Objectives," *Public School of North Carolina Standard Course of Study*, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2009. <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/curriculum/languagearts/scos/2004/25grade8>. 26 July 2009.

Steenput, E. "Satsuma Biwa." Kampa Budokai. [www.kampaibudokai.org/Biwa.html](http://www.kampaibudokai.org/Biwa.html)

(accessed July 14, 2009). This website is a great resource for information on the Biwa instrument and it's prevalence in Japan today. There are several different popular Biwa players profiled here - and their recitation of *The Heike Tales*.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Ithica: Cornell

University Press, 1975. This book is easily accessible and is a great source for research into the literary genre described here as "fantastic." This is a great reference book any English teacher should have on his/her desk. It will allow you to probe the minds of your students on a deeper level.

Yriat, Juan R. "The kora." Mory Kanté. [www.morykante.com/biog/instruments.html](http://www.morykante.com/biog/instruments.html)

(accessed July 13, 2009). This website provides a brief synopsis of the kora, the guitar-like instrument used by *griots* in West Africa. Music teachers might be interested at some of the links offered on this website.

## Student Resources

Kinchella, Thomas (trans). *Sons of Usnech*. Chester Springs: Dufour Editions, 1964. The entire story summarized above is contained in this book. It was translated by Thomas Kinchella. The publisher states that the translation is not literal, but reassures the reader that the deviations are generally slight. This story was not contained in *The Ancient Epic Tale Tain Bo Cualange, The Cualnge Cattle-Raid*, but is part of the larger epic.

Niane, D.T. (trans). *Sundiata: An Epic Tale of Old Mali*. London: Longman Group Limited,

1977. This contains the translation by G.D. Pickett and contains a great map of Old Mali that would assist students while reading the story. The "Preface" contains a lot of important information about the role of the *griot*. I think this is a great addition to any English teacher's bookcase.

Sadler, A.L. (trans). *The Ten Foot Hut and Tales of the Heike*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson

Limited, 1928. This book is translated by A.L. Sadler, Professor of Oriental Studies in the University of Sydney. There are great illustrations throughout the book as well as a web that explains the hierarchy of the court, government and military officials. The "Introduction" provides a lot of historical and background information on the Japanese epic. Teachers can read the entire epic and decide which story would best suit their students.



## Filmography

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Into the West

Keita: Heritage of the Griot

The Secret of Roan Inish Island of the Seals

## Appendix I

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North Carolina Standard Course of Study - 8th Grade Language Arts

Below is a list of the Language Arts objectives that will be met throughout this unit.

*Competency Goal 1* The learner will use language to express individual perspectives through analysis of personal, social, cultural, and historical issues.

**1.01** Narrate a personal account which:

- creates a coherent, organizing structure appropriate to purpose, audience, and context.
- establishes a point of view and sharpens focus.
- uses remembered feelings.
- selects details that best illuminate the topic.
- connects events to self/society.

1.02 Analyze expressive materials that are read, heard, and/or viewed by:

- monitoring comprehension for understanding of what is read, heard and/or viewed.
- reviewing the characteristics of expressive works.
- determining the importance of literary effects on the reader/viewer/listener.
- making connections between works, self and related topics
- drawing inferences.
- generating a learning log or journal.
- maintaining an annotated list of works that are read or viewed, including personal reactions.
- taking an active role in and/or leading formal/informal book/media talks.

1.03 Interact in group activities and/or seminars in which the student:

- shares personal reactions to questions raised.
- gives reasons and cites examples from text in support of expressed opinions.
- clarifies, illustrates, or expands on a response when asked to do so, and asks classmates for similar expansion.

1.04 Reflect on learning experiences by:

- evaluating how personal perspectives are influenced by society, cultural differences, and historical issues.
- appraising changes in self throughout the learning process.
- evaluating personal circumstances and background that shape interaction
- Competency Goal 2 The learner will use and evaluate information from a variety of resources.

2.01 Analyze and evaluate informational materials that are read, heard, and/or viewed by:

- monitoring comprehension for understanding of what is read, heard and/or viewed.
- recognizing the characteristics of informational materials.
- summarizing information.
- determining the importance and accuracy of information.
- making connections to related topics/information.
- drawing inferences and/or conclusions.
- generating questions.
- extending ideas.

2.02 Use multiple sources of print and non-print information to explore and create research products in both written and presentational forms by:

- determining purpose, audience, and context.
- understanding the focus.
- recognizing and/or choosing a relevant topic.
- Recognizing and/or selecting presentational format (e.g., video, essay, interactive technology) appropriate to audience.
- evaluating information for extraneous detail, inconsistencies, relevant facts, and organization.
- researching and organizing information to achieve purpose.
- using notes and/or memory aids to structure information.
- supporting ideas with examples, definitions, analogies, and direct references to primary and secondary sources.
- noting and/or citing sources used.
- recognizing the use of and/or employing graphics such as charts, diagrams, and graphs to enhance the communication of information.
- Competency Goal 5 The learner will respond to various literary genres using interpretive and evaluative processes.

5.01 Increase fluency, comprehension, and insight through a meaningful and comprehensive literacy program by:

- using effective reading strategies to match type of text.
- reading self-selected literature and other materials of interest to the individual.
- reading literature and other materials selected by the teacher.
- assuming a leadership role in student-teacher reading conferences.
- leading small group discussions.
- taking an active role in whole class seminars.
- analyzing the effects of elements such as plot, theme, characterization, style, mood, and tone.
- discussing the effects of such literary devices as figurative language, dialogue, flashback, allusion, irony, and symbolism.

- analyzing and evaluating themes and central ideas in literature and other texts in relation to personal and societal issues.
- extending understanding by creating products for different purposes, different audiences, and within various contexts.
- analyzing and evaluating the relationships between and among characters, ideas, concepts, and/or experiences.

5.02 Study the characteristics of literary genres (fiction, nonfiction, drama, and poetry) through:

- reading a variety of literature and other text (e.g., young adult novels, short stories, biographies, plays, free verse, narrative poems).
- evaluating what impact genre-specific characteristics have on the meaning of the text.
- evaluating how the author's choice and use of a genre shapes the meaning of the literary work.
- evaluating what impact literary elements have on the meaning of the text.

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