Once Upon A Time...

Module 5 - Tricksters & Fables
Module 5 Objectives

- Identify performances of folklore.
- Name and describe the dimensions of performance.
- Identify ways people respond aesthetically to folklore.
- Examine proverbs and their connection to folklore and culture.
- Identify the characteristics of fables.
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<th>Module 5 Terms</th>
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<td>• Performance Text</td>
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<td>• Social Context</td>
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<td>• Trickster</td>
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<td>• Personal Narrative</td>
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Hex Signs & Distelfinks

Have you ever driven through Pennsylvania? If so, you may have noticed some interesting folk art along the way.

For example, you may have seen barns in the countryside decorated with a circular design at their peak.

This type of barn art, or hex sign, can be very simple in its design or much more elaborate and colorful.

You also may have noticed lots of artwork containing birds. This bird motif is known as distelfink. This comes from the German term dischdelfink which translates into “thistle” or gold finch (www.dictionary.com).

Both of these carry with them a great deal of symbolism based on the colors used and artistic design.
Have you ever been to Martha’s Vineyard or Key West? If so, you may have also noticed some very elaborate and decorative woodwork designs on many of the houses and buildings there.

This type of design is known as gingerbread. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, this fanciful, hand-carved wooden latticework can be added to any external vertical or oblique surface, including arches.
More Examples

Of course there are other design features for the inside of homes that you may have encountered before. One such practice is the hanging of a horseshoe for good luck. The horseshoe must be hung like the letter “U” so the luck won’t run out.

Another example is the arrangement of furniture and belongings based on the science of feng shui in the hopes of achieving balance in one’s life and possibly good luck.
Putting It All Together

- Woodwork, horseshoes, and feng shui, and then add some of those everyday conversations you have with family, friends, and co-workers, as well as the jokes and songs you sing, and you now have what folklorists consider as performance.

- This concept of performance is probably drastically different from what you first thought of when you looked at the title of the chapter for this module’s reading.

- According to Sims and Stephens, “people communicate within specific situations and settings, and these communications are performed for certain reasons and in certain ways that have meaning to the members of folk groups and communities” (136) and that “even objects and their creators can be thought of as a kind of performance” (137).
Proverbs

Exchanging proverbs with a friend is considered a performance. Proverbs can pop up in any situation as part of a conversation.

In order for it to work, both participants must understand why it is being used in that particular situation.

Proverbs are typically brief statements, phrases, or sayings that carry some enlightened or wise observation about a situation or human nature in general.
Proverbs by Culture

Proverbs are also culture-specific and tend to express the traditional ideas and knowledge valued by their communities. While many are statements of common sense and experience, some can promote negative connotations that can be stereotypical in nature.

Here are some examples from different cultures:

- A dog is wiser than a woman; it does not bark at its master. – Russian
- It is better to be a man for one day than a woman for ten days. – Kurdish
- If you want to be criticized, marry. – Irish
- A single Russian hair outweighs half a Pole. – Russian
- After shaking hands with a Greek, count your fingers. – Albanian
- An Englishman will burn his bed to catch a flea. – Turkish
Test Yourself

A stitch in time... A good husband ...
Necessity is the ... A rumor goes in one ear
A woman’s work... Gray hairs are...
A drink... Nothing is certain...
If you believe everything you read...
Nothing is as burdensome as...
As with our previous discussion on rituals and “framing,” performances also have a distinct opening and closing that we label here as “markers” – the word, gesture, or special signal that lets everyone know that a performance is about to take place.

This can be as simple as “Did you hear the one about…?” when telling a joke, to “Did I tell you about what happened to me yesterday?” when sharing a personal experience.

When examining performances, we must pay special attention to three things: Texts, Texture, Context.
## Examples of Performance Dimensions

<table>
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<th>Texts</th>
<th>Texture</th>
<th>Context</th>
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| • Hillbilly jokes  
• Quilts    
• Songs     
• Hex signs | • Figurative devices such as alliteration, metaphors, rhymes  
• Performers’ gestures  
• The feel of a cornhusk doll  
• The Star Spangled Banner sung before a football game | • Time period of performance  
• Geographical location  
• Online  
• Belief systems  
• Family  
• Religious affiliations |
As with any performance, there is the chance that something new may come from it. It is also true that every performance differs, even if the same people are involved in the situation.

This is how groups form and evolve over time. The Internet itself has seen an explosive emergence of new genres, such as emoticons to label expressions and user profiles as texts, to present ourselves to others.

Chain letters promising good fortune to those who pass them on now take place via email and have changed considerably.
Memes

- Memes are another Internet phenomenon that has emerged.
- Memes are those texts and images that are passed around the Internet at lightning speed that help us communicate and comment on a global scale.
Performers and performances can also allow us to push boundaries we otherwise would not do on our own by “allowing us to play, creatively and safely, with what is permissible or acceptable within our group’s social and cultural contexts” (Sims and Stephens 153).

Parody songs of a religious or political stance are one example, as well as YouTube videos criticizing or commenting on almost every aspect of today’s society.

It is important to note here that sometimes pushing boundaries is not always a positive thing.
One way folklore has helped push boundaries and transcend group dynamics is by the introduction of the trickster. The trickster is a character that defies boundaries by helping to overturn existing social systems in an entertaining way by tricking or outwitting others.

Trickster tales can be found in most cultures, and many may be familiar to you from the stories read to you as a child. The most well-known tricksters are Brer Rabbit and Anansi the spider. Coyotes also play the role of the trickster in many Native American stories.
Recall when you identified the three broad categories of folklore: verbal, material, and customary. Now we want to look at how we respond to the creative or aesthetic qualities of these elements.

So how do we respond or evaluate these? Quite simply, it is evaluated by community consensus.

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<th>Aesthetic Element</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tr>
<td>Traditionality</td>
<td>Needs to successfully express the traditions and values of the group.</td>
<td>Traditional family recipes.</td>
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<td>Skill</td>
<td>How well did the artist include expressive details? How complicated is the work and how difficult was it to create?</td>
<td>Skilled storyteller with a large repertoire; lyrics of the song are well-written; expressive qualities of the performer.</td>
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<td>Practicality</td>
<td>Does it have a practical role in the community? (Not a necessary or applicable aspect for all types of folklore.)</td>
<td>Quilts; bowls; baskets.</td>
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A final aspect of performance is personal narrative. It is this type of everyday story that truly reflects our beliefs, values, and attitudes – the epitome of folklore.

They can pop up in any conversation and are very dependent on the context of the situation.

Whether sharing a story about a date over the weekend, or telling a story from your childhood, these narratives are a part of group traditions and express traditional attitudes (Sims and Stephens 174).
In continuing our study of the various genres under folklore, let us now discuss fables, whose origins can be traced to Greece and India. What makes fables unique is that a clear moral is understood by the end of the story.

This use of allegory, in which the intended meaning of the characters and plot are used to symbolize a deeper meaning, have been read to children for years.

While the simple language, animal characters, and shortness of these stories seem appropriate for the very young, their understanding of allegory and morals prove difficult to comprehend (Galda and Cullinan 142).

Some examples of fables are: 
The Hare and the Tortoise  
Town Mouse, Country Mouse  
The Lion and the Rat  
The Wind and the Sun
You may also associate fables to Aesop. Allegedly, Aesop was a slave in Greece who wrote these stories for political purposes. While many doubt he ever existed, his name has been associated with them since ancient times.

Fables also contain many sayings that we frequently use today, such as:

“Slow and steady wins the race”
from *The Hare and the Tortoise*

More sayings:

- A bird in the hand is better than two in the bush.
- A man is known by the company he keeps
- Do not count your chickens before they hatch
- A liar will not be believed, even when he speaks the truth.
Plato’s
“Allegory of the Cave”