Teacher Resource Information:
Tall Tales

Tall tales are folktales that contain exaggerations about characters and events are known, and they were made popular primarily in the United States. Early American settlers faced tremendous challenges such taming a huge and wild land. The settlers had two choices—either give up or find ways to cope. One way of coping was by telling humorous stories about heroes and heroines. Pecos Bill, they said, could squeeze rain out of a cyclone. Flatboat Annie or "Big Annie" could tug a boatload of cargo all by herself.

Most heroes and heroines of tall tales have unknown origins. Often there was a real person who was known for unusual strength or courage. Stories were told about these people and their deeds. As stories were told again and again, they were exaggerated. Eventually, the heroes and heroines became larger-than-life characters. In other cases, some of the tall tale characters never lived at all. They are fictional characters who became more fantastic with each retelling of their stories.

There are three main elements of tall tales: character, setting, and hyperbole.

Character
Characters in tall tales differ from characters in other types of literature because their traits and feats are more exaggerated. These characters in tall tales often personify the traits most admired by the people who helped create the stories. Lumberjacks, for example, created the character of Paul Bunyan. Railroad laborers told the story of John Henry. These types of heroes and heroines were courageous, strong, honorable, thoughtful, and intelligent. For example, Flatboat Annie hauled a cargo of toys upriver so that little children would be happy.

Setting
Setting is the time and place of the action of the story. Setting is more crucial in tall tales and folktales than it is in most fables. The setting in tall tales emerges from the specific experiences of people who lived in a particular time and place. For example, Paul Bunyan, a giant lumberjack, did great deeds in the huge forest of a new land. The story of John Henry (a heroic railroad worker) takes place during the rapid growth of the railroad network.

Hyperbole
American tall tales use hyperbole, an extreme exaggeration for emphasis. Generally, the exaggeration creates a picture that is impossible and funny. Here is an example: One time snowflakes fell so large in Oregon that the ladies put handles on them and used them for umbrellas.

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(http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/content/2216/)