

Why Do We Tell Stories?

Aimed at children in Years 6 and above but suitable for anyone who wants to try.

In this comprehension and creative writing class, we're going to think a bit about where stories come from; you're going to look at two different versions of a famous story; then you're going to adapt a fairy story into something new and entirely your own.

We begin by thinking about what stories are.

1) Where do stories come from and why do we tell them?

When we think of stories we tend to think of books. But stories are a huge part of human society and they stretch far beyond the books we read. One of the key things which makes humans different from other animals is that **we** tell stories, other animals don't. Think about when you gossip in the playground or try to make your friends laugh – you're using stories to communicate. Most of our entertainment is based around stories – most computer games have a story or narrative, television and films are all based on telling stories. All the major world religions rely on stories to communicate their message (for instance, Jonah and the Whale in the Bible or Torah, Prince Arjuna's dilemma in the Bhagavad Gita). Stories are like a kind of currency – far older than money and more easily shared. Stories help us to bond with each other and they help us to understand ourselves and the world.

2) All stories are about the same two things

We think of stories as being very different from each other, and the details of stories can differ a lot, but actually pretty much every story in the world is about the same two things:

a) What does it mean to be human?

Let me explain this a little bit. When J. K. Rowling shows us Harry Potter in the cupboard under the stairs she wants us to think about how scary it is to be lonely and unloved when you're a child. She's showing us something universal about being human. We all want to be liked and loved. We all want somewhere safe to live. She is asking us to think about being human and also to empathise with Harry: poor Harry, he's having a really awful time. In Cinderella, we are shown – in a very similar fashion – a girl having an awful childhood. She's lost her mum, her dad's away and she is exhausted from work. She just wants something nice to happen to her. Again, Cinderella is a famous fairy tale because we can all understand why Cinderella's life is bad and we can all understand why she might want one lovely night to escape and enjoy herself.

When you tell your friends a funny story in the playground, you are bonding with them by sharing a human experience (messing up on the pitch, getting told off, whatever it is). You probably don't ever think about it at the time, but you are all sharing in the fact that humans are very similar: they mess up, they get told off, they laugh it off with their friends. Stories help us to recognise what it's like to be human and also to understand all of the

things we have in common. We all want to be loved; we're all scared of people being mean to us; we all need somewhere safe to live; and we all mess up sometimes.

b) What should we do to be good? (or, perhaps, What's the right thing to do?)

So, we've seen that the first thing that we learn from stories is something about being human. But the second thing that stories ask is: what should we do? They're asking us to think about what's good and what's bad, what's kind and what's cruel. J. K. Rowling wants us to think about the bad way in which Harry's aunt and uncle treat him and why that's wrong. Then Harry had to go to school and think about how he needs to act to be 'good' in the world. How can he make friends? What does it take to be loyal? Must he fight Voldemort to protect other people? Over and over again we're being asked as readers: what does it mean to be good? What should Harry do and what would I have done?

When you tell your funny story to your friends in the playground you are telling them how you responded to something going wrong. It may also be an opportunity for them to share what they would have done. You may think you dealt with it well or badly. You may be aware that you have done something 'wrong' and want to get out of your system that feeling of being 'wrong'. You are working through ideas about bad and good, right and wrong.

Harry Potter and Cinderella and The Bible and Murder Most Unladylike are all about the same things. They talk about hopes and fears, love and cruelty. And then they put people in difficult situations and ask them to act. Should Harry avenge his parents' deaths? Should Cinderella forgive her stepsisters once she is married to the prince? Should Abraham kill his only son Isaac just because God asks him to? If you know a murder has been committed at your school – but no-one else seems to realise – is it your duty to solve the crime?

What does it mean to be human and what does it mean to be good – these questions are key to every story ever told....

Task 1 – comprehension exercise

Like many fairy stories, Cinderella is thousands of years old. This fairy story has been spreading along trade routes through Asia, the Middle East and Europe for the past 1 – 2,000 years. There are versions of Cinderella told all over the world. You are probably familiar with the English/American version found in modern story books and Disney films. But I would like you to go and read a different version of the story. The one which is told in China. Using the internet, go to Wikipedia and search for Ye Xian (the tale has its own page). On the relevant page, read the plot of China's version of Cinderella, including the alternate endings.

On a separate piece of paper (or the back of these worksheets) answer the following questions.

- i) What differences are there between the Western and the Chinese version of this tale? Try to list at least four.

- ii) What do the tales share? Try to think about what universal ideas they both have... For instance, why is Cinderella/Ye Xian sad at the start of the story?
- iii) Think about the alternate ending for the step-mother and step-sister in the tale of Ye Xian... One version is about people being punished for doing wrong but the other version (in which they become goddesses) includes the idea of forgiveness. Which version do you prefer?

Task 2 – creative writing

I want you to take a fairy tale and re-imagine it – (in a modern setting if you like) and in a time of crisis. You don't have to write about the current crisis if you don't want to! You could rewrite Cinderella in modern Wales, stuck in her house in a snowstorm which won't end. How will she get to the ball? Will the Fairy Godmother get lost on her way to help? You could rewrite Sleeping Beauty but the crisis is that everyone is invisible between sunrise and sunset. You could rewrite Aladdin in modern Saudi Arabia where a sandstorm has blocked off all the ways in and out of the city. How else might Aladdin get the lamp? What will the genie do about the sandstorm? You could rewrite Jack and the Beanstalk but the magic beanstalk is computer generated and it keeps glitching, meaning that it can disappear and re-appear at any moment. You could rewrite Beauty and the Beast, except Beauty cannot leave the Beast's castle because the woods have completely swamped the castle and no-one can get out.

You can put two fairy tales together. What if Prince Charming and Aladdin are both in love with Jasmine? What if Cinderella finally makes it to the ball at the prince's Castle and the prince is actually a beast? Change the baddie! What if Jasmine is secretly plotting to overthrow her father and kill Jafar so she can seize power? What will she do to poor Aladdin? What if the Beast is actually really kind but Beauty is mean? Can he teach her to be nicer?

Task 3 – what does your story mean?

When you have finished writing your story (you can take as long as you like, you don't have to do it in one day) read it over and try to answer some of the following questions. Don't worry if you find this hard. These tasks are designed to stretch you.

- i) What does your story say about what it means to be human? Does it talk about being scared? Does it show people being kind in a crisis? Does it show people messing up?
- ii) What does your story say about what it means to be good? Are there examples of cruelty in your story? Are there examples of kindness? Did people have to make hard choices?