

African Folk Tales: Resistance, Hope and Freedom

“They say the people could fly, black folks. From slave narratives to folklore, they would lift right off the ground and fly back to Africa. They possessed a magic so rich, so deep, that it had been forcibly buried, wings clipped. But these stories are birthing their way to the surface, fiercely erupting the soil around them.” Sophia Nahli Allison

Overview

In this lesson, students will explore the African American folktale “The People Who Could Fly,” discovering the messages of resistance, hope and freedom both within the story and the black individuals who passed it down through generations.

Grades

5-8

Essential Questions

- What can a people’s myths, legends, and stories teach us about their history, culture, values, and aspirations?
- How can stories function as resistance and as sources of hope in difficult times and situations?
- In the absence of written records, what can stories from oral traditions teach us about a group of people, their experiences, and their history?

Materials

- “The People Who Could Fly” (6-minute clip) from Morehead Planetarium’s “Tales from the American South” full dome film: <https://youtu.be/niyILZ5Majk>
- Story Analysis Handout (optional), attached
- Optional: Art materials for extension activity

Duration

45-60 minutes

Preparation

Students should already have begun their study of American slavery before completing this lesson. While this history brings up sensitive topics such as white supremacy, racism and violence, students must gain of comprehensive understanding of our past and its impact on the present. To ensure students are able to respectfully and empathetically discuss such topics, teachers must ensure a foundation of respect, considerate dialogue and tolerance is present in the classroom. For techniques on building such a classroom community, see Carolina K-12’s classroom management activities in the Database of K-12 Resources under the “[Activities](#)” section and our [Tips for Tackling Sensitive History & Controversial Current Events in the Classroom](#).

Procedure

Introduction to Folk Tales

1. As a warm up, ask students to brainstorm a list of folk tales, fairy tales, myths, and legends that they are familiar with from different cultural contexts. You might mention some examples (fairy tales like Snow White or Cinderella; tall tales like Paul Bunyan; trickster stories like the Anansi tales; Aesop’s fables; or stories from Greek and Roman myths). Write student responses in a collective list up front. Discuss:
 - Where do folktales come from? (Folktales are stories passed down through generations, mainly by telling. This includes fairytales, tall tales, trickster tales, myths, and legends.)
 - What is the purpose of folktales?

- As an **optional extension**, teachers can group students up and have them pick one particular folktale to analyze together. (Teachers can have books or copies of folktales for students to review, or if computers with internet are available, most folktales can be found via a quick search.) Have groups use the attached Story Analysis Handout to summarize the story they chose and answer questions about its message and why they think people might have told it. Give students about 15 minutes to complete this activity then have groups report back to the entire class. Afterwards discuss:
 - Were there common themes between these various stories? (Students might notice that often folktales have a message or a lesson for the reader/listener to help them understand their world better, be a better person, or live a better life.) What were the commonalities?

The People Could Fly

2. Explain that in today's lesson, students will be exploring the role of folktales in the experience of Africans who were enslaved in America, particularly folktales about black people flying. As an introduction, play the 6-minute clip "The People Who Could Fly" from Morehead Planetarium's "Tales from the American South" full dome film: <https://youtu.be/niyILZ5Majk>. (Note that since the original film is a full dome production, portions of the clip may seem slightly distorted. Teachers should also prepare students that the clip involves the whipping of an enslaved woman. While the violence is artistically portrayed, it may still be triggering for students.) Discuss:
 - What struck you most from this clip? (Was there a particular image or part of the story that most stays with you and why?)
 - Who are the Gullah people and how did they persevere and form their own culture? In what way do the Gullah today serve as a physical embodiment of resistance and survival?
 - Why do you think the Gullah passed this story down through generations?
 - The mother in the story says, "If I stay, I'm going to forget who I am." What do you think she means?
 - The elder responds to her, "If you can't stay here then go" and proceeds to whisper "words that remind her of who she was." What does he mean when he tells her to go? What was his goal in sharing the words he whispered? How do his words impact her?
 - What does flying symbolize in this tale?
 - What was the purpose of this folktale? What message do you think it was meant to convey? What do you think this story meant to enslaved people when hearing it? Why might it have been meaningful to them?
 - In what ways can enslaved people passing around and passing down stories about people flying be considered a form of resistance?

3. Discuss with students how this is a fantasy tale about enslaved people who possessed ancient magic words that enabled them to "fly away" to physical freedom, as well as those who remained enslaved, but still activated their imaginations, strength, and perseverance to set their minds and spirits "free." To delve into these themes more, provide students with the attached worksheet, "Tales of Resistance, Hope & Freedom." With this sheet as a guide, students will:
 - Read the article by Sophia Nahli Allison, "Revisiting the Legend of Flying Africans," and watch her 6-minute creative documentary, *Dreaming Gave Us Wings*. Both are available at <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/revisiting-the-legend-of-flying-africans>.
 - Examine the paintings by artist Constanza Knight has done a series of based on the story "The People Could Fly" at <https://www.costanzaknight.com/the-people-could-fly-african-american-folt-tale>.
 - Answer the corresponding questions.

- Optional: A potential third source for students is the NPR interview "'Annotated African American Folktales' Reclaims Stories Passed Down From Slavery, Maria Tatar and Henry Louis Gates, Jr"): <https://www.npr.org/2017/11/10/563110377/annotated-african-american-folktales-reclaims-stories-passed-down-from-slavery> (7 min) Potential discussion questions include:
 - Why do Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Maria Tatar think African American folktales are important?

- What was the relationship between flying, freedom and death to enslaved people? What does this tell us about the realities of enslavement?
 - What is the debate regarding Uncle Remus stories? How do the two scholars interviewed differ in their opinions?
 - Maria Tatar says that these stories were “subversive and perilous, dangerous — stories that could be told only at nighttime when the masters were not listening.” Why does she characterize African folktales in this way?
 - Why are folktales like “listening to the ancestry”?
 - Henry Louis Gates, Jr. says that ballads and folktales are “like links in a chain, and these chains go back hundreds of years from, starting today, back through the written tradition, crossing over to the oral tradition. And our job, people like us, people like Maria and me, our job is to put them in a form in which they can be consumed by a whole new generation.” What does he mean?
 - How do these stories connect to “defiance”?
4. After students have finished their work, discuss their findings as a class. Explain to students that this is just one of many stories that were told in communities of enslaved people. Due to legislation that prohibited teaching enslaved people to read or write, the literacy rate among enslaved people was quite low. Even though some resisted and figured out ways to become literate, many enslaved people could not read or write down their own stories, and so relied on oral tradition to pass down stories that were culturally important to them. Further discuss:
- For historians, how does the literacy rate of enslaved people affect our ability to understand their experiences and culture?
 - Few people could write down their experiences in diaries, letters, books, etc. about what life was like as an enslaved person in the American South, so we don’t have as many written records. Much of what we do have was often written by white people, which would be prone to bias.
 - What can stories from an oral tradition teach us about a people and their history and culture? What are the limitations of those stories as historical sources?
 - Students might appreciate that these stories can show us the values, hopes, and concerns of the people who told them. They may note that oral traditions can change over time and stories could be misheard, reimagined, or changed by different tellers. It may be worth exploring the idea that this could be a really interesting and useful thing about these stories, as different versions of the same story over time or in different places might give us windows into specific times and places. Be sure that students don’t write oral accounts off as unreliable - it’s important for them to remember that written documents are also vulnerable to biases, being changed/destroyed over time, etc. Students should understand that historians have to be creative when studying people who did not leave written records, but that sources like folktales can be tremendously valuable for understanding histories that are otherwise hard to document.
 - What do you see as the moral/message of this particular story, or its importance for the people who told and heard it? What message does this story ultimately send and why would that message have been important?
 - What feelings do you think this story might have evoked?
 - How does it connect to themes of resistance, defiance, hope, freedom, etc.? Why are these critically important themes to recognize in the study of America’s history of slavery?

Optional Extensions

- Students can create a mural depicting people flying away from slavery, inspired by this story. They could also create a shadow puppet show or other visual retelling of the story.
- Students can explore other African American folktales using one of the books listed below or in other anthologies of African American folktales, searching for connections between the stories and resistance. In groups, students create visualizations (such as that described in the above bullet)

retelling those stories. Classes could also to share their work with an elementary school that feeds into their school or with the local public library, perhaps in a story time event for young readers.

Name: _____

Name of story:

Origin of story (if known):

Brief summary of the plot:

Lessons or morals of the story:

Why do you think people told this story?

Name: _____

I. Read the article by Sophia Nahli Allison, “Revisiting the Legend of Flying Africans,” and watch her 6-minute creative documentary, *Dreaming Gave Us Wings*. Both are available at <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/revisiting-the-legend-of-flying-africans>.

Answer:

1. In what ways is there “truth in a myth?”
2. What does flight represent to the enslaved people who passed this story around and down? What might it mean to descendants of enslaved people today?
3. In the short film, Sophia Nahli Allison says: “They say the people could fly, black folks. From slave narratives to folklore, they would lift right of the ground and fly back to Africa. They possessed a magic so rich, so deep, that it had been forcibly buried, wings clipped. But these stories are birthing their way to the surface, fiercely erupting the soil around them.” What does this mean? How does this connect to current events?
4. How does Allison’s work highlight the themes of resilience and resistance? Why is it so important to acknowledge these themes when studying the history of slavery?

II. The artist Constanza Knight has done a series of paintings based on the story “The People Could Fly.” Review the paintings at <https://www.costanzaknight.com/the-people-could-fly-african-american-folt-tale>.

5. Which image strikes you the most and why?
6. Why do you think the artist chose to represent the story in this particular way (consider medium, artistic choices, colors, etc.)?
7. What themes do you see represented in this art work, and which particular parts of which particular images evidence this?
8. What do you think the artist wants us to take away from this story?

III. Based on the work you just reviewed, what are some of the roles that stories can play in people’s lives, and particularly what roles might this story have played in the lives of enslaved African Americans? What is the importance of these stories today?