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**“AUNT SUE’S STORIES”: THE USE OF FOLKLORE
IN THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE**

*Daryl C. Dance**

Aunt Sue has a head full of stories
Aunt Sue has a whole heart full of stories
Summer nights on the front porch
Aunt Sue cuddles a brown-faced child to her bosom
And tells him stories.

Black slaves
Working in the hot sun,
And black slaves
Walking in the dewy night,
And black slaves
Singing sorrow songs on the banks of a mighty river
Mingle themselves softly
In the flow of old Aunt Sue’s voice,

Mingle themselves softly
In the dark shadows that cross and recross
Aunt Sue’s stories.

And the dark-faced child, listening,
Knows that Aunt Sue’s stories are real stories.
He knows that Aunt Sue never got her stories
Out of any book at all,
But that they came
Right out of her own life.

The dark-faced child is quiet
Of a summer night
Listening to Aunt Sue’s stories.¹

This poem by Langston Hughes, one of America’s most prolific poets, suggests the appeal of folklore to the young. Aunt Sue’s stories inspire the response that every teacher of literature aspires to elicit from his students. I would like to suggest that the most natural thing in the world for the teacher is to capitalize on this appeal of folklore to help develop an interest in and an appreciation for recorded literature. Folklore can do much to help the student bridge the gap between his own world and what seems to many to be the alien world of Shakespeare. Our task will be much simpler when the student realizes that although Aunt Sue indeed “never got her stories out of any book at all,” the books often got their stories from Aunt Sue. And these stories may be just as real; they may stem just as much from the heart; and they may have the same kind of immediacy and appeal as Aunt Sue’s stories.

One of the first things that strikes the student of folklore is that in reading the folk narratives of any culture, he feels a sense of recognition, a sense of familiarity. The reason for this, of course, is the commonality of folk themes appearing in all cultures — which may be explained by the theory that primitive man possessed a common intellectual character or that indeed all men are heir to that Jungian collective unconscious. Though scholars may debate the explanations for this phenomenon, there is no debate over the fact that we consistently find similar themes in myths and other items of folklore as we study the cultures of diverse geographical, racial, and religious groups. Over and over again we find such universal themes as the quest for the father, the slaying of the father, the destruction of the world by flood and other catastrophes, the poor girl marrying the prince, the animal tales in which the animals are used to represent human beings, etc., etc., etc. Nothing quite so much as folklore reinforces the basic kinship of mankind, since indeed as psychoanalysts have made quite clear to us, these tales which man creates, not only serve to amuse and to transmit culture, but they also serve to reveal to us a great deal about the soul of the people — their hopes and fears, their values and innermost concerns, their strengths and weaknesses. And whatever variations folklore may take on, reflecting the specific culture of each individual group, the basic themes remain the same and reinforce the common spirit which we all share. When students are led to recognize this fact, they may well have learned one of their most valuable lessons in human relationships.

The teacher who knows enough about folklore to begin his introduction to recorded literature by helping the student to relate to it on the basis of his own knowledge of folklore can help that student see literature as a more natural outgrowth of the familiar rather than some isolated esoteric creation that has nothing to do with him or his experience. And indeed this is the most legitimate of all possible approaches since our

*This speech was delivered at the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English when the author was doing research in Kingston, Jamaica, under a Fulbright Research Grant.

¹“Aunt Sue’s Stories” © 1926 Alfred A. Knoph, Inc. © renewed 1954 Langston Hughes from *Selected Poems* reprinted by permission of publisher.

literature had its beginnings with the folk – oral legends, traditions, myths, etc. And our first poets were simply those men who could best recite the old stories. As Wallace Stevens so accurately phrased it:

There was a muddy center before we breathed.
There was a myth before the myth began,
Venerable and articulate and complete.
From this the poem springs . . .²

Our earliest recorded works are but literary treatments of the oral traditions. The Bible is indeed a treasury of folklore – legends, myths, and the like – as is the *Tao-De-Ching*. Early Greek literature – the Homeric Epics, the dramas of Sophocles and Euripides – are reworkings of Greek mythology. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* may be viewed as a collection of medieval folklore which Chaucer has merely framed – as is Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Shakespeare's works offer a store of folk sayings, proverbs, beliefs, customs, superstitions, etc. Joyce's *Ulysses* contains a wealth of folk materials. Ralph Ellison is indeed quite accurate when, speaking of folklore, he asserts, "It's no accident that great literature, the product of individual artists, is erected upon this humble base."³

Certainly within these many folk items, a student can be led to *something* familiar from his own background (whether it be a familiar theme, symbol, gesture, riddle, or proverb) that can help him to begin to relate to the work. And as when two strangers meet and find they have something in common – a mutual friend, a common homeland, even a shared problem – they have the basis for seeking a further acquaintance, so the student who once begins to *relate* to literature can more easily be motivated to pursue his studies. The student may not always be trusted to discover these relationships himself, but must be led to such discoveries by the resourceful teacher. Why not direct your students to find out from their Aunt Sue's if they know any stories about a man climbing up in a tree because he thought the end of the world was coming – and some may thereby discover that Chaucer's tale and your own Jamaican tale of the Prophet Bedward have a lot in common. Students may as a result learn more about their own legends and develop more of an appreciation of their Aunt Sue's while growing in their understanding of Chaucer. Why not introduce a Shakespeare play by having the students collect proverbs; or if the play is *Hamlet*, have them solicit all the beliefs about ghosts that they can? Shock them by telling them that they are forbidden to open a book in completing the assignment, but they must go to Mama, Daddy, Sister, Brother, Grandmother. You may be surprised at the wealth of material they bring in; the pleasure some Grandmother may derive from a new sense of her helpfulness in her grandchild's education; the new awareness some children may develop of the wealth of knowledge of their Aunt Sue's; and most importantly how much more comfortable they may feel reading *Hamlet* when they view the old King as a familiar Duppy very much like one their Aunt Sue met at one time.

Indeed as one begins to study literature he must recognize that a knowledge of folklore may be as necessary to him for a full understanding of and appreciation for many literary works as is a knowledge of other disciplines such as history or psychology. The student without a background in folklore may find himself severely handicapped when he attempts to interpret any number of literary works. Let me attempt to illustrate this through the use of one very popular Black American folktale. Here is a version which I collected in Richmond, Virginia, and which I'll read to you exactly as it was related to me.

This guy died and went to heaven, and when he got up there, say, all the angels were 'round at the table, you know, and he wanted to show off. So he ran around. He did the left-wing dive and the right-wing dive – all kinds o' stunts. So some of 'em had told 'im, you know, to stop because if he didn't he was gon' turn the table over. So finally he kep' on and kep' on until the table went over, and when the table went over, then they put him out of heaven. So after they put him out of heaven, they say he said, "Well, they put me out," he says, "but, HEY! HEY! I raised hell while I was there."⁴

²Wallace Stevens, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), p. 383.

³Ralph Ellison, "The Art of Fiction: An Interview," *Shadow and Act* (New York, 1964) p. 171.

⁴Collected in Richmond, Virginia, on January 31, 1978. Reprinted from Daryl Dance, *Shuckin' and Jivin': Folklore from Contemporary Black Americans*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 13.

Some versions of the tale are more elaborate, but that version offers the basic skeleton. Three other versions which I have end with the lines, "Well, I had a flying good time while I had 'em [the wings] though"; "One thing about it; I had a heck of a good time while I was up there"; and "While I was flying, I was a flying fool." It is important to realize that this is a tale of revolt, but it is a revolt which the Black man cannot win. God's power, like the power of the overwhelming American system which represses the Black man, is too indomitable to consider an actual victory over him. Thus the subject receives his satisfaction from the momentary pleasure of rebellion.

Now Richard Wright, one of America's best known novelists whom you may know as the author of *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, wrote a novel called *Lawd Today*. The novel deals with one day in the life of a Black American male, Jake, and his doomed efforts to use a couple hundred dollars which he has borrowed to escape the repressive conditions that envelope his life. His hopeless and desperate efforts seem morbid to the reader, but Jake does enjoy some momentary escape in loud banter with friends, drink, and loose women. As he returns home broke, beaten, and drunk, he exclaims, "But when I was flying I was a flying fool!"⁵ One critic, attempting to deal with this line in the novel, offers a pedantic interpretation which becomes quite laughable to one who immediately recognizes that Richard Wright was simply alluding to that old folktale, thereby forcing us to view Jake as that Negro in heaven who for a short while attained the wherewithal to momentarily escape the restrictions under which he suffered.

Ralph Ellison, author of the novel that many critics consider one of the most important American novels of the century, *Invisible Man*, wrote a magnificent short story called "Flying Home." It is the story of Todd, a young American Negro — one of the first accepted as an army pilot, but at a time when Black pilots were not allowed to fly in combat. Nonetheless proud to have attained the then-unusual position of a pilot, despite his restrictions, the young man is so exhilarated while flying over a field in the deep South that he flies too high and too fast and the plane goes into a spin, hits a buzzard, and crashes. The story is ingeniously done and the many symbols of the story can hardly be dealt with sufficiently here, but Ellison's clear juxtaposition of Todd's adventures with that same old folk tale of the Black man in heaven makes that old folk tale necessary to a full appreciation of this story and of Todd's dilemma.

Numerous other Black American tales make use of flying as a symbol of escape and freedom in the same way that that old folk tale and these two stories do. I've stressed this one tale simply to suggest the significance of understanding folk references, allusions, parallels, etc., in developing a full appreciation of certain literary works. Numerous illustrations could be cited from Jamaican literature. It seems to be quite clear that in order to teach Vic Reid's *New Day* or *Peter of Mount Ephraim* one must emphasize the folk elements — oral history, proverbs, speech, customs, beliefs, etc. The same thing is true of a host of other novels including particularly Andrew Salkey's *A Quality of Violence* and Sylvia Wynter's *The Hills of Hebron*, the latter of which seems to be based upon the Bedward legend. Many of the works of your contemporary poets, such as Louise Bennett, Andrew Salkey and Basil Lopez seem to me to require some consideration of folk music, speech, proverbs, characters, tales, religion, and other elements of folklore. Several West Indian poets seem to be quite consciously embracing and making use of their folk heritage.

This use of their folk heritage is nothing new for Black American writers. In many of the slave narratives you will find a true delight in the old slave folk songs and tales. A biographer of one of the early popular Black American writers, Paul Laurence Dunbar, noted that every time Dunbar would write a new story, his mother would say to him, "I didn't know you still remembered that old tale." Almost subconsciously Dunbar was transforming the old folktales she had told him into literature. W.E.B. DuBois, great American sociologist, historian and literary man, was not exposed to his folk culture until later in his life, but he remained a student and devotee of Black American folklore. Charles Chesnutt, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, Zora Neale Hurston, and Arna Bontemps, some of America's most important Black writers, were all great students and perpetuators of Black folklore, which influenced and contributed to both the content and style of a major portion of their literary productions. (Zora Neale Hurston, incidentally, did some research into Jamaican folklore as well.) Ralph Ellison, one of the most important of our contemporary writers, speaks frequently of the influence of folklore on his life and his writing, and his classic novel *Invisible Man* is full of folk situations, folk characters, folk speech, and folk symbols. Black folk music and religion have shaped the work of another of our important contemporary writers, James Baldwin. Leroi Jones' play "The Flying Dutchman" is full of mythological references. The list could go on and on.

⁵Richard Wright, *Lawd Today* (New York: Avon Books, 1969), p. 219.

Folklore can be used, not only as a background for the study of recorded literature, but also as an important part of any course in literature in its own right. The folk tale can be used as an interesting and entertaining piece of oral literature and as an example which the teacher may use to examine some of the items he would stress in teaching any literary work – form, structure, narrative development, characterization, symbolism, the historical and sociological context. The possible choices among Jamaican folklore are limitless, but let me read just one rather short and apparently very popular tale – since I believe I have collected as many versions of this as of any other folk tale:

A man was friendly with a girl one day. And he always visit the girl home. And the girl did have a sick bradder; him didn' want the man to see him, so everytime as this man visit this home, she always send the bradder into a out-room to hide. And the bwoy have a window looking thro' all di time, and *dis* bwoy was a sort of old witch, you know. And everytime he go to the window and he see this man come out, for the man always want to tek fresh air from the house. And he have a cane, a stick, we call a 'cane' in his hand, he come out wid him likkle stick. And him *walk* around and anywhere him see a lizard him strike the lizard with dat stick *and he tek it up and eat it!* Several time the boy have seen that. When it come final for weddin', the bwoy one day sit down and say, "You know Mumma, I don't tink you should mek my sister marry dat man." And the moder say: "Go away, why?" "He's a snake," the boy said to his mother. And the mother say, "Oh, go away, you sick bwoy, what you know about snake?" And he said, "Mumma I am telling you, if you 'low my sister to marry *dat* man, you are going to *regret*." And they wouldn' hear what him say. Finally, marry and chariot drive out with the girl the day. But the bwoy was a ole witch. And no sooner deh drive out, little after dat, when the snake reach to the hole where he is living, he shed off *everything*, and the girl find that it was a snake, and him drew down the girl into the hole, where he is living, and him start to lick him, lick him you know, to bring him where dat he could swallow her. And when him start to lick, the poor girl choose a song which say – the father name was Cawley and the moder name is Levy, and the poor little girl say: [Sings nasally]: "Cawley, come away, Cawley come 'ome, Levy, Come, come today for the s-na-ke is going to kill me."

And the snake now, to answer again, he stop 'pon lick di spot, and him answer say: [singing] "If him don't come you goin' see a bit of you *bone* today." And him have to go back and lick the same place, so the girl find out that him have to lick one place over and over, so to get his whole body weight, she will continue the singing: And so she continue, so him lick: "Cawley come away, Levy come, oh, Levy, come, come, come, for the snake is going to kill me today." The snake say: [singing] "If him doan come him never see a bit of you bone today." And he gone back and lick the place, and the poor bwoy *feel* it because he is a witch he know that him work is true.

So di moder den, sorta feel some funniness about dem body, dat something mus' wrong, and the sick bwoy step out, and as dem see him step out, deh went after him. And when dem *reach* to di spot where di snake was with the girl, and look in the hole, di girl is there, and he is here, and licking, and dem just turn him oneside, and *shot* him with a gun, and they *killed* him and draw out dem dawter.⁶

Folk items might also be used among younger children as mnemonic devices. I have found that practically every Jamaican child knows at least one Big Boy tale that might be used to teach spelling to little ones. Let me read two of the tales which I have collected here in Kingston to you:

One day Big Boy go a school, so Big Boy stay in a school, so Teacher say, "Which of you can spell EGG?" Big Boy start look pon 'im book dem, 'im come back, 'im go straight over . . . Big Bwoy caan' spell it; Big Bwoy a look now, so di teacher say "Which one of you can spell EGG?" Big Boy stay

⁶Collected in Mandeville, Jamaica, on September 16, 1978.

so-“Uhhmm.” So Big Boy donkey did name E-G-G. Big Bwoy donkey name E-G-G now. So Big Boy donkey have to run now, so Big Boy say, “E-G-G, E-G-G-G!” So Teacher say “Oh, oh, spell it again.” And him spell it again and him get the prize.⁷

One time Big Boy go to school and Big Boy teacher say: “Who can spell INK” and Big Boy say, well, “I caan’ spell INK.” Everybody in a di class caan’ spell INK, so a man say, “Big Boy wha’appen, spell INK nuh.” Him say: “I Ain’ Kare.” Teacher say, “What you say?” Him say, “I Ain’ Kare.” “Yes, Big Boy Spell it, him say I-N-K.”⁸

The animal tales, among the largest group of folklore in most cultures, may be used in any number of ways. The popular Anansi tales in Jamaica and the Brer Rabbit tales in the United States can be used on almost any grade level. First of all, they are entertaining tales whose protagonist remains appealing to the young and old. I have found informants in Jamaica from eight to eighty who delight in the antics of Anansi. As students become more sophisticated they might be led to consider some of the symbolism in these tales and to consider the role the tales played in the lives of the people and the degree to which they reflect the fears and frustrations as well as the joys and desires of their creators. In the American Brer Rabbit tales, for example, students might well deal with the reasons we sympathize with the weaker animals, why the weaker animals always defeat the stronger animals, the blood-thirsty aggression suggested in some of the tales, and the reason Brer Rabbit so frequently competes for women, food, and a higher position. A study of the Brer Rabbit tales can in other words become a historical, sociological, and psychological study in American slavery.

The study of mythology might well begin with some of your own mythological tales. I have found here quite a few of the etiological myths, the tales which explain how things came about, how animals and people came to be as they are. To introduce a discussion of the myths of the creation in Genesis, one might start with this rather lighthearted anecdote which I collected in Kingston:

“Well when Adam and Eve and deh were in di garden, they name up all di fruits. Two fruit leave that didn’t get any name, which is mango and orange. So ’im go to Christ and ask ’im, “What dese fruits name? What des fruits lef’ that don’ get any name?” ’Im say, “Man, go and arrange.” So dat’s di reason why dem call di fruit mango and orange.”⁹

Well, from this lighthearted account, which is really more a joke than a mythological tale, you might well get into myths about the naming of things, and if you go back to Genesis and talk about the explanation of other acts of creation and the role of the snake there, you might well come back again to that tale I previously related about the girl who married the snake – which may turn out to be a week’s discussion on the symbolism of the snake in folklore and literature. A consideration of the Biblical mythological explanation of why man has to work hard might be considered along with some folk tales from the Black Jamaican and American repertoire that deal with similar themes but reflect the economic situation in these countries and its racial actions.

Let me read to you one popular American tale which appears in Hurston’s *Mules and Men* and in Cecil Brown’s *The Life and Loves of Mr. Jiveass Nigger*. I collected this version in Richmond, Virginia, where it is still a popular tale:

On the side of a mountain once, the Lord summoned three people to help Him with a project, one being a Black man, one being an Italian, and the other Jewish. And the Lord said, “I am simply looking for people to follow simple directions.” And He said, “I simply want the three of you to go out and bring me back a stone, or as much stone as you’d like.” And so the Black man, thinking that it was a timed thing, rushed right back with a pebble. The Italian took a couple of hours, and finally he came back with a wheelbarrow piled with crushed stone. And they waited until midnight. Finally they heard a rumbling. And the Jew was shoving a mountain. So the Lord in His

⁷Collected in Kingston, Jamaica, on October 6, 1978.

⁸Collected in Kingston, Jamaica, on October 6, 1978.

⁹Collected in Kingston, Jamaica, on October 6, 1978.

patience blessed the stones and said, "These stones I will now turn into bread." Well, the Black man had a biscuit. The Italian had a wheelbarrow filled with loaves of bread. And the Jew had a *bakery*, of course.

So the next day, the Lord said, "Same gentlemen, same assignment. Go out and fetch stones." Well, the Black man was extremely happy for a second chance. So sometime later that evening, the Italian was the first one back, with his same wheelbarrow filled with stones. And the Jew took very long to come, but here he is with his mountain. And they waited until midnight. The Black man didn't show . . . Two A.M. . . . Three A.M. . . . Four A.M. . . . Well, just about dawn they heard a rumbling sound. And a whole avalanche of mountains and boulders – just everything – was being hurled at the Lord. And finally the Lord said, "Upon *these* rocks I'll build my church."

And the Black man said, "I be *darned* if you will. You gon' make *bread* today!"¹⁰

This tale is an eloquent commentary on the injustices of the American economic system. If the Black man rushes, cognizant of how often he is punished in these tales for being late, he ends up with a biscuit while the Italian and Jew get several loaves and a bakery, respectively. If he struggles as they did to earn the rewards they received, the rules of the game are changed again; and he still gets nothing. Inevitably when this joke is recounted the audience does not laugh as much at the laziness or the industriousness of the Negro as they react to the hypocrisy of the Lord (who here represents the American economic system) because they know that the Lord will inevitably modify the rules so that whatever that Negro does, he is never going to get more than a biscuit.

Well I could go on and on about methods of using folk proverbs, superstitions, riddles, games, etc., in teaching literature, but once one begins to discover the possibilities of folklore, all sorts of innovations suggest themselves. You might wish to begin by making use of some of the many excellent collections of Jamaican folklore, such as the numerous collections of Anansi stories, Black's *Tales of Old Jamaica*, Salkey's *Anancy's Score*, Burke's *Water in the Gourd and Other Jamaican Folk Stories*, etc., etc. You should be sure to distinguish between those collections which present the folk tales directly from the folk and these latter which are folktales retold and at times reshaped – which is to say that they are no longer literally folktales but rather stories based on folktales. Actually, however, using these collections is something like sending to the United States for a filmstrip on Kingston. All you have to do is open your eyes and look around you. Many of the students can bring their Aunt Sue's to class for a much more exciting session of folkstories. And as I have suggested, many of the students themselves have important contributions to make to such a study.

Well, I certainly cannot end this discussion without warning of some of the possible pitfalls in the use of folklore materials in the classroom. The study of folklore requires careful selectivity on the part of the teacher, particularly the teacher of younger students, since the greatest amount of folklore can hardly be considered the cute, quaint, lovely material that some people think of when they think of folklore. The material *is* vibrant, it *is* alive, it *is* meaningful, it *is* interesting, but it is also most often coarse and obscene. The action is frequently violent and barbarous. Its most popular subject is sex, and it delights in those themes dealing with those "vile desires" that must be repressed in society. Many scholars suggest that even the "nice" little tales contain sexual elements. The sexual suggestiveness in such children's tales as "The Frog Prince," "Jack and the Bean Stalk," "Aladdin and His Wonderful Lamp," and "Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf" may not all be in the dirty minds of scholars either. That some children are aware of the sexual implications in some of their literature is strongly supported by the number of obscene parodies of nursery rhymes, etc., which have been collected from children – the most popular one for such parodies in the United States being "Mary Had a Little Lamb." Thus you must not be caught unawares if some student insists upon questioning you about all of the violence and the inverted values in the Anansi tales. And you might as well be prepared for the eager beaver who will after that "nice" little Big Boy story about E-G-G, want to offer the tale about Big Boy and the ackee, or Big Boy wanting to park his car in his daddy's garage, or Big Boy spending the night with his teacher. And those tales, if you don't know them, are not, it will suffice to say, particularly appropriate for the classroom. And then of course there will be that precocious

¹⁰Collected in Richmond, Virginia, on March 7, 1975. Reprinted from *Shuckin' and Jivin'*, p. 9.

brat who has absorbed so much of what you've told him about folk symbols, that he'll want to destroy that nice little fantasy I related to you about the groom who turned into a snake by asking some embarrassing questions about the possible symbolic significance of the cave and the snake and the girl's reactions.

Now if you want to know what to do when you run into these problems, particularly with your younger students, don't ask me. I'm not a specialist in the teaching of children, and I don't have any expert advice to offer you. But I can tell you what I personally would do. Now if that precocious brat kept questioning ME about such "embarrassing" matters in those folk tales, well, what I'd do is . . . I'd tell him to ask his Aunt Sue.