Mr. Jonas teaches second grade. This week he is teaching a unit on famous fairy tales. His children love to draw and do art projects, so he has decided to add an art activity to this unit.

“Today we are going to read aloud another fairy tale,” he announces to the class. “This one is called Sleeping Beauty. How many of you have heard of it?” Many hands go up, waving back and forth. “Okay, that’s great,” continues Mr. Jonas. “I will start reading aloud, and then I will call on you to help me read the story. Are you ready?”
Introduction

As far back as recorded human history, people have told stories. Oral storytelling, long before the invention of radio, television, or the Internet, was a primary form of entertainment. Families and entire communities would gather around campfires at night and listen to stories told by elder members of the group. Sometimes the stories were true: accounts of past events in the lives of families or village members. Other times the stories were made up to entertain or explain some natural phenomenon. Our modern literary labels apply to these ancient tales: the former can be seen as nonfiction, and the latter, fiction.

Fantasy, imaginative stories that conjure up unrealistic happenings such as magic spells, flying witches, and invisible elves, is a subcategory of fiction. Traditional fantasy refers to stories that are very old and have been handed down orally over generations, usually without an identifiable author. Modern fantasy, as the term implies, also involves the fantastic but has been written in more recent times and has an identifiable author (Jacobs & Tunnell, 2004). We begin our discussion with traditional fantasy.

Traditional Fantasy

Traditional fantasy includes the fairy tales and folktales that most Americans grow up with: Cinderella, Rumpelstiltskin, Goldilocks and the Three Bears, Paul Bunyan and Babe the blue ox. These and other sto-
ries have been passed down from generation to generation. They have also been
the subject of scholarly research, as they provide a window into various culture
traditions of the past. James Frazier, author of *The Golden Bough* (1915), stud-
ied the symbolic meaning of ancient myths, the rituals of ancient tribes, and the
particular taboos within various cultures. Frazier took an anthropological view
of traditional literature, using it to theorize about past cultures and to help us
better understand present cultural practices. Kornei Chukovsky, in *From Two
to Five* (1963), argued that for healthy development young children should hear
fairy tales read aloud by their parents; in this way they begin to understand
the conflicts between characters in stories and to recognize central themes in
literature such as the battle between good and evil forces in the world. Today,
psychologists agree that there is much value for children in listening to and read-
ing classic fairy tales (Dundee, 1985; Haase, 2005).

In his great work, *The Uses of Enchantment* (1989), Bruno Bettelheim ar-
gued that traditional fairy tales provide children with the best opportunity to
confront their innermost fears and unvoiced anxieties. Fairy tales allow young-
sters to encounter characters who strive for seemingly unattainable goals yet
still succeed. Good and evil, in the form of characters like a good princess and
an evil witch, are clearly delineated. There are few ambiguities in fairy tales, a
characteristic that initially strengthens the child’s intellectual growth and under-
standing for later life, when ambiguities and uncertainties are commonplace.

Bettelheim’s early work with psychologically and emotionally disturbed
children led him to conclude that at the core of their problems was a belief that
life was meaningless, that the world was unsafe and should be feared. In fairy
tales, heroes are sent out into the world alone to accomplish nearly impossible
tasks, to overcome great dangers, to confront primitive fears, and to encounter
the unknown. The fairy tale hero’s success gives hope to the child that the world
can be explored and understood, that the future is not bleak, that life is worth
living, and that existence is meaningful.

Of the many valuable uses of traditional fantasy, two stand out for teachers
and caregivers. First, the old stories of giants, goblins, magic potions, princes,
and dragons stimulate young children’s imagination. These stories paint a pic-
ture in children’s minds that stays with them for years and supports their own
storytelling. Second, the classic themes described in traditional literature prepare
children for reading and understanding other literature. For example, a major
theme in traditional fairytales that also appears in other literature is the triumph
of good over evil. The loyal prince saves his father from the deadly dragon. Hon-
est, hardworking Cinderella overcomes the plotting of her wicked stepsisters. In
many fairy tales courage and goodness is rewarded in the end.

In addition to theme, traditional folktales and fairy tales have other com-
mon characteristics. The plot is generally straightforward, chronological, and
linear. One action leads to another, which eventually leads to a resolution. Little
time is spent on such things as flashbacks, parallel plots, or multiple narrators.
The characters in traditional literature are generally flat. That is, they have spe-
cific, obvious traits that make them good or evil, courageous or cowardly, clever
or foolhardy. The setting and time of traditional fantasy is vaguely described as
“once upon a time,” or “long, long ago,” in a “faraway land,” rather than a par-
ticular, identifiable place. Finally, there are familiar patterns or small parts of the

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Story called motifs that appear and reappear in story after story; some examples are tests of courage, mistaken identities, magical objects that grant the finder three wishes, or wicked stepmothers ill-disposed toward their stepchildren. Figure 6.1 identifies five motifs in picture book fantasy stories that are common to many fairy tales. Recognizing these motifs from story to story is one way young children increase their powers of listening and reading comprehension.

Folktales often have animal characters and usually teach a lesson. Fairy tales place a greater emphasis on magic: magical objects and magical spells (Trousdale, 1989). Teachers should always remember that traditional fairy tales and folktales were originally told aloud. Even when they were written down, the intent was that they be read aloud to young children. The appeal of traditional literature, at least in part, is its beautiful language, best delivered by a skillful reader. Teachers and caregivers who read fairy tales and folktales aloud to young children provide the foundation upon which all later literature will be understood.

### Traditional Fantasy for Young Children

Classic fairy tales have withstood the test of time and are read over and over again by succeeding generations because they are succinctly written with an engaging storyline in language that stimulates the imagination. Quality fantasy books should have many of the characteristics of quality picture books discussed in Chapter 5 and restated below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motifs</th>
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<td>Wishes</td>
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<td>Example: <em>The Three Wishes: An Old Story</em> by Margot Zemach (1986). Magic wishes appear over and over again in fairy tales. The number three is also a common motif, as wishes, pigs, blind mice, and more come in trios.</td>
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<td>Spells</td>
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<td>Example: <em>Sleepless Beauty</em> by Frances Minters (1996), a modern day twist on a classic tale complete with a rock star prince. Spells usually come from evil witches, and they are often the catalyst for the story.</td>
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<td>Heroic children</td>
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<td>Example: <em>Hansel and Gretel</em> by James Marshall (1994). Marshall takes this classic Brothers Grimm tale and adds his own comic flare to it. Children abandoned in the woods and forced to rely on their own wits is a common motif in both traditional and modern tales.</td>
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<td>Enchanted animals</td>
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<td>Example: <em>The Frog Prince Continued</em> by Jon Scieszka (1991). What happened after the princess kissed the frog and he turned into a prince? Scieszka continues the story in a comic treatment that reveals they did not live happily ever after. Many tales have stories of humans who have been turned into animals, or who turn into animals at certain times. Other stories center around the adventures of anthropomorphic, or personified, animals.</td>
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<td>Good versus evil</td>
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<td>Example: <em>The Witch’s Child</em> by Arthur Yorinks (2007). An evil witch has all the power she can wish for except one thing, a real live child. So she creates a child from straw and leaves. But it takes real love for a child to truly come alive. Love is a powerful motif; it may be the most prevalent one in all fairy tales. Nearly every story tells of good conquering evil.</td>
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![Common fairy tale motifs.](http://www.hh-pub.com/productdetails.cfm?PC=146)