

## Topic Page: [Folklore](#)

Definition: **folklore** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Traditions, customs and beliefs of people. The most prevalent form of folklore is the **folk tale**. In contrast to literature, which is transmitted through written texts, the folk tale has an oral basis and is transmitted mainly through memory and tradition. Often the tales take the form of myths, fables and fairy tales. The best-known study of folklore is Sir James Frazer's anthropological study *The Golden Bough* (1890).

### Summary Article: **Folklore**

From *Chambers Dictionary of the Unexplained*

Although most of us can easily name several stories, customs, songs or superstitions that we would describe as items of folklore, it is a term that is notoriously difficult to pin down to a definition that would be accepted by all the people with an interest in the field. Folklore is generally considered to consist mainly of oral tradition (at least historically) and to be characterized by repetition leading to a constant, dynamic variation. This could be further developed by recognizing that in pre-literate societies and groups, folk tales, rhymes, songs, superstitions and sayings were (and still are) used as a way to pass on customs, skills, knowledge and warnings from one generation to the next, helping to underpin and preserve value systems and a sense of identity. However, to restrict a definition to this would ignore the fact that in all of these forms there is also an element of pure entertainment.

The boundaries between the figurative narratives that form much of what would be described as folklore and those that might be described as myths or legends are, at the very least, blurred. In general terms, 'folklore' is usually reserved for those that do not form part of a religious belief system (as is usually the case with mythology) or that are not intended (at least partly) to describe real historical events or characters (as with legend). However, in practice, it is extremely difficult to separate the three, and 'folklore' is often used as a catch-all term. Within the academic study of folklore, the working definitions employed have tended to become very wide in recent years – for example, after tackling the question, the US folklorist Dan Ben-Amos settled on 'artistic communication in small groups'.

In 1812, the first volume of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* by the German philologist brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm was published, a work which drew heavily on the folklore and traditional tales of central Europe. The work of the Grimms inspired many other collectors to write down vast quantities of folklore, preserving it before it was lost through the industrialization and urbanization of Western society – although, ironically, some might say that in doing so they fixed stories in one particular form, containing much of their own interpretation, so that they effectively ceased to be folklore.

The word 'folklore' was coined by the English antiquary W J Thoms in 1846, as an alternative name for what had generally been described until then as 'popular antiquities'. The dramatic rise in academic interest in folklore during the 19th century was due in part to the rise of romantic nationalism throughout Europe, which encouraged interest in popular stories and traditions as a means to establish or reinforce national identities. This was paralleled within the Romantic literary movement, which drew on folklore, particularly fairy tales, as one of its sources of inspiration – as can be seen in poems such as Shelley's 'Queen Mab' (1813) or Keats' 'Eve of St Agnes' (1820). Much of the poetry of Sir Walter Scott grew out of his extensive knowledge of traditional ballads and stories, and the same source informed many of his novels.

It has been observed that the words 'folklore' and 'folk' (in a similar way to 'mythology') are often used in a dismissive, or even pejorative, sense. The use of the word 'folklore' can sometimes imply that something represents a childish or inferior mode of belief, because it does not correspond with the current mainstream view – for example, much of what is now described as folklore in the West may stem from, or contain remnants of, pre-Christian religious belief. Similar examples can be found where 'folk' is applied to practices, remedies and stories that do not correspond with the current mainstream views in science, medicine and the study of history. Before the arrival of widespread literacy, everyday knowledge was often transmitted and preserved through such media as nursery rhymes, proverbs and other sayings. These could cover a wide range of topics including, amongst other things, food and drink, travel, work, relationships and the art of weather forecasting.

However, many traditional stories are clearly fictional and employ characters that are archetypal. Stories about wicked step-parents, mysterious strangers or witches were wholly fictional, but may have acted as cautionary tales, giving warnings against the many types of folly to which human beings are prone, or containing other kinds of life lessons. Others gave homely explanations for seemingly mysterious phenomena in everyday life, such as the man in the moon.

A common characteristic of many strains of folklore is the suggestion (possibly sometimes believed, possibly sometimes only figurative) that there are other worlds that exist in parallel to our own and occasionally interact with it – whether at certain 'magical' times of the year or at the behest of their strange inhabitants. All around the world, everyday events that seem to be unexplained have been attributed to the activities of mysterious non-human (but often human-like) creatures. These beings are often described as being of smaller than human stature but endowed with magical powers, and are known by a variety of names, including brownies, elves, djinn, fairies, little people and leprechauns. They may be helpful or troublesome, kindly or malevolent, but generally tend to treat human beings as an inferior race to be instructed like children or made the subject of cruel tricks – such as the secret replacement of human babies with feeble fairy changelings. These other-worldly beings may also be of a more directly terrifying aspect, and take the form of ghosts or spirits – such as the banshee, black dogs or the wild huntsman known in parts of England as herne the hunter.

Many people tend to think of folklore as something that belongs to the distant past, which has decreasing relevance to the world of today and is the province of historians, anthropologists and storytellers. However, folklore is still very much alive in the modern world. Indeed, new folk tales and beliefs are being created and spread far more quickly than ever before – oral repetition having been joined by the mass media, the photocopier and the Internet. In the modern world, cunning or foolish peasants, vain or cruel kings and wicked stepmothers have given way to alien abductions, web wizards, phantom hitch-hikers and disappearing mothers-in-law.

Perhaps the best-known current form of folklore is the genre usually described as urban legends. Like traditional stories, these contemporary folk tales were largely spread by word of mouth until the arrival of the Internet allowed them to be disseminated worldwide with extreme rapidity. Such stories exhibit an important feature of folk tales in that they mutate and grow in the telling, allowing the narrator to add or subtract details according to their local relevance or the expectations of the audience.

Similar to these are the conspiracy theories and other stories that spring up alongside the 'accepted' versions of events – such as the supposed non-accidental death of Diana, Princess of Wales or the belief that man has never really landed on the moon. In the popular imagination, certain real people have

undergone a transformation into larger-than-life, almost mythical, figures, not so very long after their (real or assumed) deaths. Examples include elvis presley, who continues to be sighted by the faithful in the most unlikely of places despite having died in 1977, the famously elusive lord lucan or the tragically romantic Russian Grand Duchess anastasia. Places and inanimate objects have also undergone a similar process – such as the famous bermuda triangle, hanging rock in Australia, the hope diamond with its legendary curse and the ill-fated titanic.

It could be argued that folklore is still as important as it ever was, reflecting the real hopes, fears, interests, prejudices and beliefs of the population – as contrasted with the ‘official’ wisdom of policymakers and academics. Perhaps what the stories of modern folklore have in common with their historical counterparts is that they stem from a desire for the romantic rather than the prosaic. They can be seen, in an increasingly secular society, as fulfilling a deep-seated need to believe in something that transcends the banality of everyday life.

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Hill, S., & Munro, M. (2007). Folklore. In U. McGovern (Ed.), *Chambers Dictionary of the unexplained*. London, UK: Chambers Harrap. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/folklore>

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## Chicago

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## Harvard

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## MLA

Hill, Simon, and Michael Munro. "Folklore." *Chambers Dictionary of the Unexplained*, edited by Una McGovern, Chambers Harrap, 1st edition, 2007. *Credo Reference*, <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/folklore>. Accessed 21 Nov. 2019.