

The charming world of tall tales

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Abstract

The study of American tall tales of the Wild West gives a thorough understanding of the social and psychological structure of a whole nation. These legends, where exaggeration and humour are central to the story, help forge the character of a nation and explain the origin of landmarks in American history. Human beings have always felt the need to make sense of the world around them and tall tales have helped to entertain those men and women who tried to build a better future crossing a hostile land in search of the American dream.

Keywords: Tall tales, hyperbole, American frontier, Wild West, Paul Bunyan, John Henry, Calamity Jane, Pecos Bill

Título: Leyendas americanas.

Resumen

El estudio de las leyendas americanas del lejano oeste promueve una comprensión clara y profunda de la estructura psicológica y social de toda una nación. Estas narraciones de carácter fantástico, en las que la exageración y el humor constituyen el eje central de la historia, permiten forjar el carácter de un pueblo y explicar el origen de lugares emblemáticos de la geografía americana. El ser humano ha tenido siempre la necesidad de dar sentido al mundo que le rodeaba. Las leyendas americanas han servido de entretenimiento a hombres y mujeres que intentaron labrarse un futuro en busca del sueño americano.

Palabras clave: Leyendas americanas, hipérbole, la frontera americana, el Lejano Oeste, Paul Bunyan, John Henry, Calamity Jane, Pecos Bill.

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I. Introduction

Since the beginning of the world people tell stories about their own lives or those of others as a form of entertainment or to make sense of the world around them, or they simply tell stories to confront the hardships and dilemmas of their difficult lives. Stories in general and tall tales in particular are simple representations of the psychology of humanity and are commonly used to depict the archeological foundations of the American background and culture.

A tall tale, an unbelievable story that is wildly exaggerated, is part of the cultural tradition of folk American literature. Tall tales were an oral form of entertainment and were told for the amusement of listeners. These vivid stories may be the result of the bragging competitions of the roughest and toughest men in the American frontier. Davy Crockett (a pioneer and congressman from Tennessee), Johnny Appleseed (a good-natured folk hero on a mission to plant apple trees throughout America), John Henry (a powerful steel-driving African-American man), Calamity Jane (the bravest woman in the Wild West), Paul Bunyan (America's most famous lumberjack who could cut a giant tree with a single swing of his axe) or Pecos Bill (who tamed cyclones and rode a mountain lion), are all examples of tall tales. In tall tales exaggeration takes over the whole of the story, as opposed to legends where the focus is on the exploits of their heroes. Some tall tales are based on real events whereas others are just imaginary stories.

Tall tales originated in the early 1800s, with the westward expansion following the adventures of men travelling to the Wild West. They are probably called "*tall tales*" because their characters are larger than life, although the origin of the term is uncertain. The term "*tall*" probably refers to something that is hard to achieve, although its real sense is difficult to track down. Tall tales were told to explain the origins of landmarks in American history. Lakes, rivers, deserts, mountains or canyons may have originated as a result of the exploits of these boastful folk heroes. Rio Grande was dug by Western cowboy Pecos Bill, dismayed by thirst before he could reach the Mexican border. The Grand Canyon originated when Paul Bunyan and his friend Babe, the Blue Ox, were play-fighting. The Missouri River was also formed by Paul Bunyan's numerous tears after the death of his life time friend Babe. The Finger Lakes were carved by Bunyan's big hand when he tried to break his fall after tripping in New York City.

II. Lesson plan

Title: *Tales of the American frontier.*

Objectives:

- Developing language awareness
- Writing for a particular purpose
- Describing imaginatively
- Reading aloud
- Drafting and redrafting
- Sharing information and ideas
- Telling a story

Competences to be developed: linguistic, sociocultural and digital competence.

Year group: 2nd year of E.S.O.

Time allotted: five fifty-minute sessions.

Tall tales to be studied: John Henry, Paul Bunyan, Pecos Bill and Calamity Jane.

Assessment: portfolio of activities.

Students will probably know most of the tall tales that they are going to study in this unit. They may have heard about these stories or they may have seen versions of them in children’s films and TV series, comic books, songs or even paintings. In this lesson students are going to plan a tall tale and read it to the class. They will be provided with the route that they need to follow through a carefully structured framework that will serve as a springboard for production and experimentation. We need to provide students with stimulus material for pair work and group work activities.

A. The tall tale of *Paul Bunyan*

Task 1. Brainstorming. To begin this session, as a way of introduction, students will be asked to come up with as many words as possible associated with the Wild West.

Ex. *Cowboy, saddle, horse, desert, pioneer, gold rush, wagon, Indians, sheriff, rope, outlaw, saloon, lasso, ranch, cactus, coyote, whisky...*

In pairs, they will be given five minutes to use these words to describe, depict or narrate what they think life was like in the American frontier.

Task 2. Students are going to watch the short Disney movie about the American hero, Paul Bunyan (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8igQwfe5r5U>). With the words given, they try to complete a summary of the story.

Fill in the text with words from the box.

<i>River</i>	<i>Lakes</i>	<i>biggest</i>	<i>tall</i>	<i>ox</i>	<i>Bunyan</i>	<i>USA</i>	<i>brave</i>	<i>landmarks</i>	<i>falls</i>
			<i>lumberjack</i>	<i>baby</i>	<i>trees</i>	<i>West</i>			

Paul (1) _____ was one of the most famous characters in folk American literature. He was the legendary hero of a number of popular (2) _____ tales. Paul was a huge (3) _____ who had a giant pet ox, whose name was Babe “*The Blue Ox*”. Paul Bunyan, in addition to his incredible size, was extremely strong, clever, and (4) _____. He was born in Maine and was the (5) _____ baby boy ever seen in America. As a young man, Paul became a (6) _____ and travelled (7) _____ with his friend Babe cutting (8) _____ across the (9) _____.

Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue (10) _____ are believed to have been responsible for the creation of many of the most incredible (11) _____ in the United States, including the Great (12) _____, the Missouri (13) _____ or the Niagara (14) _____.

Task 3. Could you imagine a baby like Paul Bunyan? Ask students to think about what it would have been like to live in a world with no stories, a world without heroes. Encourage them to use their imagination to create their own sentences to give a physical description of what they think Paul Bunyan looked like.

Input sentences:

He was as big as ... (*a buffalo/ ...*)

He was as strong as ... (*a hundred men/...*)

He had the strength of ... (*a lion/...*)

He could eat ... (*a wagon full of apples/...*)

Task 4. The story of Paul Bunyan will give us the opportunity to introduce the general characteristics of American tall tales through the elicitation technique (ET) by asking students a battery of questions like:

1. What did you find striking about this story?
2. Is Paul Bunyan a common man? What is special about him (physical and psychological traits)?
3. What sort of job did he have? Was this the typical job of American men at the time? Why do you think he was a "lumberjack" and not a doctor or a businessman?
4. Does Paul Bunyan remind you of any American hero as a baby? (*Superman?*).
5. Did he have any help (friend) throughout the story? What is exceptional about his friend? Is Babe human? Is he a common ox?
6. Is the description of this hero realistic? Is it exaggerated? Is it humorous?
7. What does this tale tell us about America? What do we learn about landmarks in American history?
8. Is Paul Bunyan in trouble at some point in the story? What/who does he have problems with?
9. Is there a contrast between nature and progress (technology) in the story?
10. What happens to the hero at the end of the story?

The answers to these questions will help students to come up with the most common features of American tall tales as presented below:

1. The hero achieves great things using his good heart, strength and courage.
2. The main character is accompanied by an uncommon object or animal (Bunyan has a **blue** ox).
3. The tale begins when the hero is a child (e.g., Pecos Bill falls off a wagon and is adopted by a pack of wolves; Paul Bunyan starts cutting trees when he is just three weeks old).
4. The author uses hyperboles (exaggeration and humor). The hero brags about himself.
5. The story explains the creation of landmarks in America (e.g., Bunyan created the Niagara Falls; Pecos Bill created the Grand Canyon).
6. The hero is in trouble with nature and is against the breakthroughs of technology and progress.
7. At the end of the story the hero either dies or disappears.

B. The ballad of Pecos Bill

Pecos Bill was quite a _____ down in Texas
And the western superman to say the least
He was the roughest, _____ critter
Never known to be a quitter
Cause he never had no _____ of man or beast

So yippee-aye-a-aye-a
Yippee-aye-o
For the toughest critter west of the Alamo

Once he roped a raging _____ out of nowhere
Then he straddled it and settled down with ease
And while that cyclone bucked and flitted
Pecos rolled a smoke and _____ it
And he _____ that ornery wind down to a breeze
From: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHC8o9GNI8k>

Rope: amarrar

Raging: embravecido, furioso

Straddle: montar a horcajadas

Buck: rebelarse

Flit: ir de un lado a otro rápidamente

Ornery: irascible

Corny: cursi

Rustler: ladrón de ganado

Crooked: deshonesto

Critter: bicho/crío (informal)

Fillings: empastes

Gag: chiste

Task 5. Students listen to the ballad of Pecos Bill and fill in the gaps with the words they hear. Once finished, they answer some questions about this story in order to reinforce some common features of tall tales: exaggeration, hyperbole, landmarks...

1. Where did the tale of Pecos Bill happen? (*In Texas*)
2. How could you describe the land where he lived? (*Like a desert, uninhabited*)
3. Who did Pecos Bill grow up with? (*Coyotes*)
4. Why was Pecos Bill like a western Superman? (*Brave and strong*)
5. Explain how Pecos Bill solved the problem of the drought in Texas. (*He brought rain from California, lassoing a storm*)
6. How did Pecos Bill manage to create the Rio Grande? (*He dug it when he was thirsty*)
7. What happened to cause gold in the hills? (*He knocked out the rustlers' gold teeth*)
8. How did Pecos Bill get credit for creating the Lone Star emblem for Texas? (*Shooting away all the stars except one*)
9. Mention some of the landmarks Pecos Bill helped to create. (*The Painted Desert, Rio Grande, the Gulf of Mexico*)
10. Instead of a horse, Pecos Bill rides a(*Mountain lion*)
11. Instead of a whip, he uses a(*Rattlesnake*)

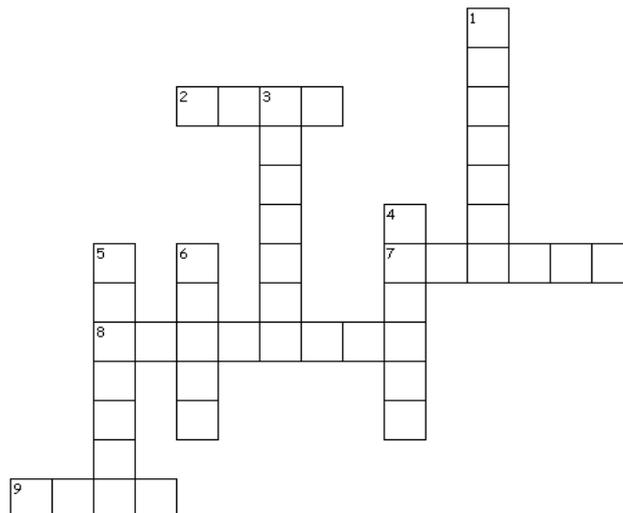
12. This exaggerated form of story-telling began in the(1800s). This was the time period of the American(Westward expansion).

13. Why do you think this exaggerated form of story-telling began? (As a way to face the dangers and uncertainties of life in the Wild West and also as a form of entertainment)

Task 6. Vocabulary development. Students use the words from the song to fill in the gaps in the sentences below.

- a. They decided to take security measures to protect themselves against cattle, thieves and bandits. **(Rustlers)**
- b. Years ago, breeding was drastically affected by the lack of water and pastureland. **(Cattle)**
- c. Mrs. Wykes opened the window and saw a of cows. **(Herd)**
- d. Every night he patrols the crime-ridden streets of drug dealers, murderers, and cops. **(Crooked)**
- e. He tried to calm down the man after their heated argument. **(Raging)**
- f. In the land surrounding the building, pigeons, hummingbirds and parrots from one branch to another. **(Flit)**
- g. He put on his helmet, the bicycle and pedalled as fast as he could. **(Straddled)**
- h. The wild horse Johnny when he tried to mount it. **(Bucked)**
- i. Daisy does not get on well with her boss. **(Ornery)**

Task 7. Crossword.



Across

- 2. Vertical jump performed by a horse
- 7. Violent and angry
- 8. Sit with the legs wide apart
- 9. A large group of animals kept together

Down

- 1. Something used to fill a cavity in a tooth
- 3. Dishonest, illegal

4. Bad-tempered, difficult to deal with
5. Cattle thief
6. Cheesy, sentimental

Task 8. Working with hyperbole. Hyperbole is a figure of speech that uses exaggeration to achieve a strong effect or to create humor. The word *hyperbole*, which derives from Greek, is a literary device that involves the use of exaggeration for emphatic purposes. This figure of speech is so commonly used in everyday language that very often it has become a cliché and lost its dramatic effect. In some cases hyperboles may have a humorous effect as in tall tales in order to attract the readers' attention and make common statements remarkable.

"I was dying to go to the party". Were you really dying?

"I was so tired after a long day work that I couldn't move". Were you actually paralyzed?

Students underline and explain the hyperboles in the following extract from Paul Bunyan's tall tale.

It took five giant storks to take Paul Bunyan to the town that adopted him. His bed was a huge cradle, made from a lumber wagon. As a newborn baby, Paul Bunyan yelled so loud that he scared all the fish out of the oceans and rivers. All the town folks had to milk a dozen cows every day to fill his feeding bottle.

Task 9. Hyperboles. Extra practice. Students identify the hyperboles in each case and explain their meaning. Some of these are clichés.

- a. He is as good as gold. (**Explanation:** *He is always on his best behavior*)
- b. She cried a river of tears.
- c. I was so hungry I could eat a horse.
- d. He is turning 90 next month. He is as old as the hills.
- e. Last night he could not stand on his own feet. He was as drunk as a lord.
- f. He is as deaf as a post.

C. John Henry. The legend of the steel-driving man.

Task 10. Students read the legend of John Henry and try to identify the characteristics of tall tales.

The tall tale of John Henry came about in the 1800s during the railroad boom period. According to legend, John Henry (a baby born full-sized) started to hammer railroad spikes at a young age, when he was just three weeks old. Later in life he accepts the challenge to measure his power against a steel-driving machine, to prove who is better, man or machine. Even though he works faster than anyone else and eventually wins the competition, he collapses dead as he reaches the finish line.

1. The story begins with our hero as a baby. (baby born full size)
2. The hero shows special qualities at a young age. (*three weeks old*)
3. Exaggeration: He possesses extraordinary physical qualities: he is strong and fast.
4. His job is the same as that of American men.
5. He is against progress and tries to prove himself better than technological advances.
6. He dies in the end.

D. The legend of Calamity Jane

When it comes to famous women of the Wild West, two names immediately come to mind: Annie Oakley and Calamity Jane.

Like men on the American frontier, females travelled west to gain the freedom men had always enjoyed. Some of them were simply trying to escape their past. Unfortunately that meant that they were regarded as women of “easy virtue”. A Forty-Niner’s poem describes the lives of these women like this:

The miners came in ‘49,
The wh*** in ‘51,
And when they got together
They produced the native son.

*The **forty-niners** were men that rushed to California in 1848-49 in search of gold.

***Women of “easy virtue”**: women that were almost the equivalent to prostitutes.

Task 11. Students watch a documentary about Calamity Jane. They read a brief summary and correct the mistakes they hear.

“Martha Canary, born on the first of May 1852, died on the 1st of August 1903. Better known as Calamity Jane, Martha was the eldest of Robert and Charlotte Canary’s six children. Her father had a gambling problem and her mother had previously been a prostitute. In 1865 her family moved by wagon train from their home in Missouri to Virginia City Montana. During the journey, when the family had reached Blackfoot, Martha’s mother died of pneumonia. In the spring of 1866 after arriving in Virginia City her father decided to travel on to Salt Lake City Utah”. (Taken from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFzCDHX-WJs>)

“Martha Canary, born on the **third** of May 1852, died on the 1st of August **1907**. Better known as Calamity Jane, Martha was the **youngest** of Robert and Charlotte Canary’s **ten** children. Her father had a **drinking** problem and her mother had previously been a **servant**. In 1865 her family moved by wagon train from their home in Missouri to Virginia City Montana. During the journey, when the family had reached Blackfoot, Martha’s mother died of **cancer**. In the **summer** of 1866 after arriving in Virginia City her father decided to travel on to Salt Lake City Utah”.

Task 12. Final task (Writing project). Students can use video, power point presentations, books to produce their own tall tales using the writing guide below. They need to provide a detailed description of their hero and choose a landmark in American history whose origin needs to be explained with the help of exaggeration and humour, as in the example:

Mount Lassen

Paul's giant cousin, “Big Joe,” was a cook that one day decided to transform a mountain into an oven large enough to feed his whole family. The result was Mount Lassen, an active volcano in the state of California.

Writing guide

	Common features	Exaggeration
Characters	What special qualities/skills does the hero possess?	
Setting	What does the place look like?	
Time period	19 th century	
Hazards/obstacles	Progress and technological advance	
Landmarks and their creation	Mountains, rivers, lakes...	
Plot	The story	
Companion	A pet	A blue Ox
Symbol	A whip	A rattlesnake

III. Conclusion

A big country needed big heroes. The heroes of tall tales, with their strengths and weaknesses, with their fearlessness and good nature, encouraged the American nation to face the hazards of their daily lives. In a land known as the Old West

or the Wild West, a territory of anarchy and romance, chaos and violence gradually witnessed the breakthroughs of technology and progress. Tall tales are stories of competition, conflict and survival. People needed to make sense of the world around them and tall tales gave Western men and women the opportunity to build the American frontier, to give birth to landmarks in American history and to structure the creation of a whole nation. Tall tales give students a wider perspective about American culture and history. In the American frontier, no matter how wild, stories of the Old West are stories of a hero's accomplishment and failure. These representations of American folklore embody the triumph and defeat of those that travelled west in search of the American dream. Tall tales are the legends of common men and women that became leaders despite every known obstacle.

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