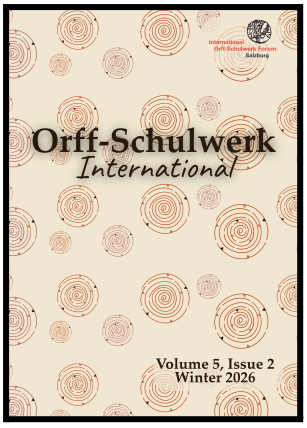
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Stories through Space and Time. The Hero's Journey from Rhapsodies and Folktales to Storytelling in Art and Education

Angeliki Agalianou & Eleana Chatzaki

This article presents an exploration of the hero's journey across cultures, centuries and traditions, and through myths, folktales and storytelling practices from around the world, shedding light on the applications this exploration can have in Art and Education. The article further discusses how Homer's traces can be found within contemporary oral traditions. From Homeric episodes included within folktales from the Arab world to Homeric images and metaphors traced within Greek folk songs, oral traditions constitute evidence of the common and nuclear properties of human existence. Therefore, the purpose of the present essay is to illustrate the surprising connections that unite human stories across time and space, allowing epics and folktales to be relevant in any cultural context and used as an essential part of cross-cultural education.

Introduction

"Sometimes words, too, grow roots". So says one Greek folktale (Megas, 2014). Words grow roots: they sink their roots deep into the earth, spread them across the land for miles, raise trunks, branch out, blossom, and bear fruit. These are the words of oral tradition. Words whose roots are buried deep within the inner realm—the collective soul, the collective unconscious. Roots that stretch across the outer world, across places extending from one's homeland to lands miles away, to the ends of the earth. Words with trunks, branches, flowers and fruits that ripen over time, forming the great tree of folk oral tradition. A tree whose fruits sometimes speak in the voice of folktales, sometimes sing like traditional songs do, and sometimes whisper like a lullaby does.

One of the common roots of humankind is our impulse to create and tell stories. Stories that draw from the shared core of human experience, from common archetypes, from the common substance of dreams. Even peoples who have never come into contact with one another give birth to remarkably similar stories. The following sections explore these similarities in further detail, drawing from examples from the oral traditions of the world.

Common themes, episodes and motifs in stories from around the world

One of the most widely told stories from ancient Greek mythology is the story of Orpheus, who descended into the Underworld in search of Eurydice and lost her forever when he turned his gaze backward. Moving many miles away to Japan, the exact same motif of descending to the underworld and losing the beloved forever due to a forbidden gaze backwards can be found in the story of Izanagi and Izanami (Hearn, 1904).

Likewise, common themes and episodes can be found not only within mythological traditions but also within folktales from around the world. An indicative example is the tale of Cinderella, which appears in hundreds of variants throughout the Greek-speaking tradition and can be found in almost every storytelling tradition in the world. Each people dress the story in its own imagery and symbols. In Greek variants, Cinderella loses her golden slipper or golden shoe, which often sticks to the church steps that are smeared with honey (Angelopoulou, Kaplanoglou, Katrinaki, 2004). The Egyptian Cinderella loses her

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golden sandal while in France she loses her glass—or, in some versions, fur-lined—shoe (Ntoulia, 2010).

An indicative example of a story the traits of which can be found in oral traditions worldwide is the Odyssey, the epic traditionally attributed to Homer in the eighth century BCE. Yet we know that it was probably not the creation of a single individual. Rather, it might have been a synthesis of even older stories that had long been performed orally by rhapsodists in multiple variations. For at least two centuries before they were written down—and quite possibly for much longer—the Homeric epics traveled from mouth to mouth without ever being committed to paper. The Homeric epics had grown deep roots indeed. And like roots, they knew no borders, neither in time nor in space. They spread from one literary genre to another, from language to language, from country to country, from culture to culture.
It is no wonder then how the famous episode of Polyphemus, the one-eyed Cyclops, can be found within a folktale from Palestine. In this tale, a Bedouin of the desert battles the one-eyed Ghoul, the man-eating monster that imprisons him in its cave. The hero blinds the monster and later escapes hidden beneath its sheep, just as Odysseus did in the Homeric episode (Prousalis, 2013).

But let us not travel too far. A folktale recorded on the Greek island of Crete, tells the story of a miller who managed to outwit a *kallikantzaros*, a Greek Christmas elf, in a way that resembles the previously mentioned Homeric episode. Just before the miller could strike the elf on the head, he introduced himself as "myself," concealing his real name. In this tale, the *kallikantzaros* ends up calling upon his brothers for help crying, "I've been struck by myself". Reading this tale, one cannot help but think of the Cyclops calling for aid, shouting: "Nobody has blinded me".

Another instance of a Homeric motif that has travelled through space and time can be found in an Egyptian papyrus dating to around 2000 BCE. In this ancient story, the protagonist, considered by some researchers as a predecessor of Odysseus, is a shipwrecked sailor, who is far from his homeland, struggling against the waves as he longs to return home, driven by the pain of homecoming and the yearning of nostalgia (Maragkos, 1983). He is cast ashore on a distant island, where he receives hospitality from its inhabitants, recounts his story to them, and, after some time, bids them farewell, confident that he will soon return safely and surely to his native land (ibid.). Reading this ancient papyrus, one cannot help but draw a parallel with the final stage of Odysseus' journey on the island of the Phaeacians, where the hospitable King Alcinous welcomes him warmly and sends him on his way laden with gifts, honoring him as a sacred guest.

Homeric traits can therefore be found across cultures, across stories, across different time periods but also across different genres. In a traditional Greek folk song we encounter motifs that strongly evoke the Homeric tradition. In a song recounting the return of an expatriate or long-absent husband, the returning man finds his wife weaving at a golden loom (Petropoulos, Spyridakis & Megas, 1962). When he finally reveals his identity, she tests him, just as Penelope tests the long-awaited Odysseus. In the Homeric Odyssey, the final proof of recognition is the olive tree around which Odysseus had built their marriage bed. Over the centuries, the rhapsodist became the folk poet, Homeric meter transformed into the fifteen-syllable iambic verse of Greek folk poetry, and the olive tree of Homer's episode

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became a mole upon the woman's back—a secret known only to the two lovers and the ultimate proof of the stranger's identity. The striking detail here - one that only Greek speakers can discover - is the fact that the Greek word for both the olive tree and the mole on the body is *ελιά* (elia). It is thus almost unbelievable and difficult to conceive how the symbol managed to travel through time, secretly encoded within a single word.

These are just a few examples found in our research within the folk oral traditions of the world, pointing to the common nucleus of human stories. Folktales are made from the psychic material of humanity itself. Every story is, in essence, the story of an individual's journey through life: the journey toward maturity and autonomy. It is the journey of the hero or heroine.

The hero's journey and the functions of the folktale

This section briefly discusses two of the most widely accepted and studied analyses of the narrative mechanisms found within folktales. Despite the thousands of variations that appear across different places and eras, the journey of the hero or heroine generally follows a fairly recognizable pattern. Vladimir Propp and Joseph Campbell analysed this narrative trajectory, identifying and classifying its various stages and milestones in an effort to decode the underlying structure that guides the hero's journey.

Joseph Campbell (2004) discusses the following stages in the hero's journey:

1. Start: the hero's or the heroine's journey usually starts with a call to adventure. Accordingly, they usually meet a mentor who encourages them, shows the way forward and helps them start their journey from the normal world to the unknown.
2. Crossing the threshold: as the hero or the heroine transcend to the unknown, several trials and failures start equipping them with the skills needed to continue their journey. An essential part of their adventures is the helper they find on the way.
3. Death and rebirth: the hero or the heroine arrive at the death of their old self, often depicted in folktales as descending to the underworld. This leads to a revelation of their new autonomous identity, followed by final changes and leading to the final gifts they get.
4. Return and end: the hero or the heroine return to the normal world, having changed through their adventures.

Vladimir Propp (1991) presented another formalist account of the structure of folktales, focusing on and trying to retrieve what he defined as the functions of the folktale and the dramatic roles of the tale's characters. In his analysis, he presents 31 functions and 7 roles, but for the scope of this article we chose to focus only on a few of them, namely hero, interdiction and violation, villain and false hero, struggle, magical agent, solution. The table below illustrates those six functions/roles through the example of a story almost any reader is familiar with: the Odyssey.

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Propp's functions	Odyssey
Hero	Odysseus
Interdiction and violation	Blinding of Polyphemus/revealing his name
Villain and False Hero	Poseidon/ the suitors
Struggle	The journey home is delayed through a series of challenges (Laestrygonians, Circe, Calypso, etc.)
Magical Agent	Athena/Hermes (Circe, Calypso, Tiresias, Phaeacians)
Solution	Getting back to Ithaca

Using Propp's functions in educational settings

Propp's analysis of the structure of folktales presented above cannot cover the full complexity of the oral literature of the world. But in oral literature —which includes both folktales and epic poetry— these narrative functions appear with particular clarity. For this reason, oral tradition lends itself especially well to educational applications.

Using these six structural "bones", one can construct a story with remarkable ease. This is precisely what the teenage students who participated in our creative writing workshop during the "Young Homeridae" Festival on the island of Chios in September 2025 were invited to do.

During the first part of the workshop, the students listened to three stories. The first was the Odyssey, presented in a condensed form. The second was a story drawn from Greek mythology, the story of Prometheus, and the third was a Greek folktale. We then identified the six narrative functions within each story and discussed both their differences and, more importantly, their shared narrative elements. Although these stories originated in different periods and contexts, they all rested upon the same fundamental narrative framework.

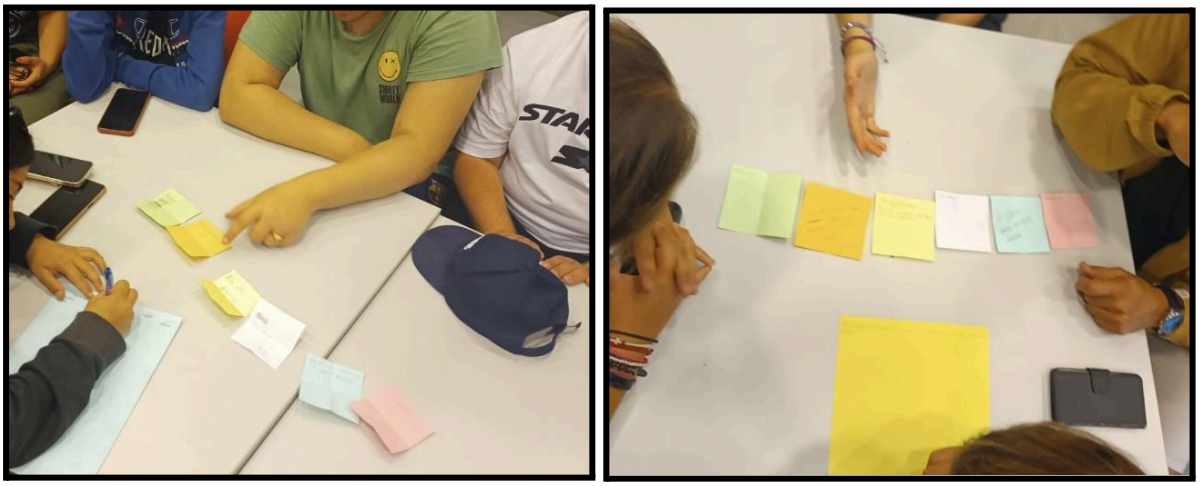
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The "input" phase: listening to the stories of Odysseus, Prometheus and Aslantentes.

The third part of the workshop was the creative phase. The students were invited to create stories of their own through a playful process. Each group imagined one element corresponding to each of the six narrative functions and wrote these elements on separate slips of paper of six different colors, each corresponding to a different function/role. All the slips from every group were then collected together. Each group randomly drew six slips corresponding to the six narrative functions. Using these randomly assigned elements, the groups were asked to create a complete story within a very short period of time. At the end of the activity, each group shared their story with the rest of the workshop by reading it aloud.

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Creating a story out of six randomly selected functions/roles

The students managed to become skilled storytellers within the space of a few hours. Some even composed their stories in verse, perhaps inspired by Homeric meter. At the same time, they experienced firsthand the process of weaving seemingly unrelated pieces of information into a coherent narrative, discovering solutions that often approached the realm of magical realism. In essence, they were doing exactly what the rhapsodists and folk storytellers once did: drawing inspiration from scattered "words with wings" that reached their ears through sailors arriving from distant lands, travelers, merchants crossing borders, and the stories heard between waking and sleeping from grandmothers and neighbours. One particularly significant outcome of the workshop was that many students chose to incorporate elements from their own lived experience into their stories. They transformed aspects of everyday life into narratives filled with humour, unexpected twists, satire, and, above all, a clear structure: a beginning, a middle, and a happy ending.

Another striking example of how oral tradition can provide a language through which contemporary and controversial issues may be expressed is found in a drawing created by a student who participated in the festival mentioned earlier. The drawing depicts Odysseus standing before two burning trains. He holds a placard bearing the inscription:

28/02/2023
23:18
57 victims

Above him appears a speech bubble that reads: "*I do not forget.*"

The image is a clear reference to the Tempi railway crime—the train crash that shocked Greece more than three years ago, for which justice has not yet come and left a profound collective wound, a trauma that remains unresolved in the public consciousness. This student placed the most recognizable hero of Greek mythology —the hero who embodies the longing for return and the hope of a successful homecoming— at the center of a contemporary and still-unfolding story, one that continues to seek justice and collective vindication.

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Odysseus and the Tempi railway crime.

It becomes evident, then, that the oral literature of the world can acquire powerful educational dimensions. It provides students with a framework upon which they can stand as they attempt to tame the chaos of information that surrounds them daily. It enables them to organize that information into meaningful narratives and, in doing so, to imagine the possibility of a positive resolution.

Conclusion

This article attempted to indicate how stories created thousands of years ago and thousands of miles away continue to exert a powerful influence upon the present. They help us interpret contemporary reality and endow it with meaning. Certain themes possess a timeless quality that is continually renewed in each historical moment. The longing of the immigrant or the exiled to return home, and the anxiety of whether the loved ones will still welcome them, remains fundamentally the same from the tenth century BCE, to our own time, and in the centuries to come. Folktales are fictional stories that speak of real-life truths and realities. In other words, they are lies that tell the truth**.** The hero of the folktale is every one of us, each person who must travel alone through the adventure of life. Like the heroes of folktales, we encounter enemies and obstacles. We face trials and hardships. Yet, if our hearts remain true, we always find magical helpers who guide us toward a happy ending. And if the hero of the folktale lived happily ever after, then may we live even better.

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