

# Oral Folklore Presentations: Storytelling or Media ?

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Oral storytelling has long been upheld by children's librarians as an ageless art enjoyed by youthful audiences. Master storyteller and noted authority in the field, Ruth Sawyer once wrote, "I believe storytelling to be not only a folk-art but a living art; and by that I mean much. . . True, child or adult can sometimes go to a book and read the story again for himself; a good and an abiding thing to do, but not the same."<sup>1</sup> Modern authorities have continued to support this philosophy in their writings. In the fifth edition of *Children and Books* it is stated that:

Children are a natural audience for folk material as is shown in the way they use rhymes in their play. . . Children's calm acceptance of magical events and talking in folk tales is not far removed from their own invention of imaginary companions.<sup>2</sup>

Augusta Baker and Ellin Greene tell their readers that, "In the United States there has been a revival of the art of storytelling, a great oral tradition that needs neither gadgets, activities, nor the support of visual aids."<sup>3</sup> The story hour has never been doubted by children's librarians. And whenever they have been questioned concerning the qualities of the individual teller in comparison to a media rendition, they have responded that media is not as compelling. The true art of storytelling is best captured, according to traditionalists in the field of children's librarianship, when the storyteller is sharing a tale with a small group of children without the aid of devices or the use of media. These materials, they maintain, actually decrease the quality of the story hour experience.

While most library directors have accepted this argument, teachers within the elementary schools have not. Forced to daily work with the same group of children, to plan activities with learning and literary values, they have little time to carefully learn a particular story for a special program. Most have been told about the need for quality literature experiences. Many decide that they haven't time to integrate folktales into their routine. Some educational critics have voiced the opinion that the librarians' emphasis is no longer valid. Furthermore, educators have long been aware of the difference between supposition and proven theory. Thus, in 1977 Patrick Goff correctly observed that, "the repeated denunciation over the years of all forms of dramatization in storytelling as stilted, artificial, destructive, tortured, distracting, unnatural, unartistic, and so on, is clearly a matter of opinion."<sup>4</sup>

This study was designed as an initial analysis of the theory that children enjoy the real storyteller trained in traditional storytelling techniques more than media experiences. With this in mind, the story hour experience was chosen, and the guidelines for the study determined. The questions which this initial research concerned were:

How much impact does the storyteller have upon the child's emotional response to a tale?

Is it possible for children to enjoy a media production as much as an oral rendition of a folktale?

Do children like moving visuals more than still ones?

Can children understand a folktale better if it is visually represented?

Do the tales seem more realistic in oral or in visual form?

In Caroline Feller Bauer's *Handbook for Storytellers* she states, "Children in the primary grades, the five-to eight-year-olds, are also active listeners. The classroom is a perfect place to hold storyhours for these children."<sup>5</sup> This study was conducted within a second grade classroom during the second half of the school year. Although gifted children were not exclusively used in the study, the majority of the children were bright. They had little difficulty filling out the study questionnaire, and asked for an explanation when they were uncertain about a question.

Four traditional folktales, *Snow White* (German), *A Story-A Story* (African), *Hansel and Gretel* (Appalachian version), and *Mr. Miacca* (English), were used. The first exposure to each tale was traditional; the investigator, who has been involved in public, school and festival storytelling for several years, told the story to the children using no devices. The atmosphere of a traditional story hour was maintained, and the story was casually introduced by the storyteller, explaining which country the tale originated from, and fa-

miliarizing the children with a picture book version which they might wish to look at later. One week later these children saw a visual interpretation of the same story. This time, the investigator discussed the audiovisual techniques used (i.e., slide show, animation, live action drama), but did not discuss the story. Students then compared the two in term of characters (which seemed more realistic; more interesting), plot (which was easier to follow; more frightening), and appeal (which was easier to understand; the best). At the final session the children were asked to list their favorite storytelling experience and their favorite visual experience.

After gathering the data, the following conclusions concerning the theoretical hypothesis that folklore is a living art best maintained through traditional retellings can be drawn.

The first story shared was the African tale *A Story-A Story*. This tale was relatively unheard of until 1970 when Atheneum released Gail Haley's picture book version, a book which won the Caldecott award for its illustrations. It has several strengths as an oral tale, however, and can be enjoyed without the illustrations. The story's controlled cadence, use of foreign names, and of the African "spider man" as the central character could most easily create an aura between the listener and the storyteller—if such an aura is a real element found in the storytelling experience. Furthermore, the animated film version released by Weston Woods closely maintains the storytelling atmosphere; the story is read by a black male with a sense of drama, and the music used in the background is created with African instruments. The largest difference between the media and the storytelling experience is in the visual interpretation.

This first story was shared to a sparsely represented class—only eleven children were present both weeks—but the results are important because this film was selected as the favorite visual experience by more children than any other presentation. In fact, eleven children chose the film as their favorite media, while nine chose *A Story-A Story* as their favorite storytelling experience. This is especially significant since these children voted for their first experience, and were able to recall their reactions over a period of eight weeks.

In their initial responses to the story students responded that the characters did not seem to be as real or as interesting in the oral rendition as in the film, but that the hero seemed smarter in the oral version. In both cases, most felt that the story was easy to understand, and that it was the right length. In addition, more students rated the oral version as scary, few felt the story was either sad or funny in either version. Overall, five students liked the oral version more than the film, three preferred the film, and three liked them both equally.

The second experience, *Mr. Miacca*, was chosen so that children would be exposed to the visual story through a slide/tape presentation. Although this story could arbitrarily be judged more frightening since it involves an old man who eats little boys for supper, only four of the twelve children who were present for the storytelling experience felt the story was scary, and four others rated the story as funny. As was true with *A Story-A Story*, less were frightened by the visual experience than by the oral version.

*Mr. Miacca's* slide presentation was based upon the 1967 picture book version illustrated by Evaline Ness (Holt). The music chosen for the tape was purposely modern—in this case computer music was used—so that the audio presentation could be discussed and explained. As is true in the film *A Story-A Story*, the narrator had a strong male voice.

In neither version did the characters seem real to the children. But the hero, whom we decided as a group was the little boy who escaped from Mr. Miacca, was usually considered to be intelligent in both versions. To these children the oral version was easier to understand, and was told in a more interesting way. However, two children felt that perhaps the oral version was too long, while all thought the visual presentation was the right length. Overall, three liked the storytelling experience best, one liked the media, and six liked them the same. The remaining two children could not decide.

Since the winter flu epidemic still had not subsided, only twelve children had seen both versions. This might explain why so few chose either as their overall favorite presentation or story. It is more likely, however, that seven-year-olds do not understand the humor of this tale, based on a subtle play on words which is found so often in British stories.

The third presentation to be scheduled was *Hansel and Gretel*. Although the film version of the story had been set in Appalachia, very few changes in the text from the Grimm brothers' tale had been made; thus, the storytelling experience used the German version. There are, however, some striking differences between the oral version and Tom Davenport's film version: the children are deserted three times in the Grimm tale, and their return across the river is a major endeavor with the girl, rather than the boy, taking the lead. Child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim in his much quoted *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* says of the crossing:

Up to the time they have to cross this water, the children have never separated. The school-age child should develop

consciousness of his personal uniqueness, of his individuality. . . This is symbolically expressed by the children not being able to remain together in crossing the water. Gretel's importance in the children's deliverance reassures the child that a female can be a rescuer as well as a destroyer.<sup>6</sup>

This is not depicted in Davenport's film, but the story does vividly show the children's fears of desertion, anxieties about survival, and Gretel's need to kill the witch if she is to free herself and Hansel. While the film is not overtly violent, it is stark. One reviewer commented, "Compared with the violance [sic] available to children on most of the popular television series which abound in bloody encounters, this is a single, effective and useful film which will have great appeal to children-its sinister overtones add to suspense and thus to the enjoyment."<sup>7</sup> Once again the media narrator was male, but this time some of the characters within the visual drama spoke. The entire visual experience was more similar to live drama than any of the others. Because the reviews had discussed the film's frightening aspects, and because this evaluator felt that it was the most realistic media, a discussion of live action drama along with a warning that the film might seem frightening was provided before the group viewed the film.

All twenty-three children were in attendance for both the storytelling and filmed presentations. The results of their reactions to this story show that youngsters can clearly delineate between two similar experiences. In this case, the people in the film seemed very realistic to a much larger group than the characters in the oral rendition. Almost none of the children felt that the characters seemed realistic in the storytelling session. Similar proportions of these children felt that the characters were interesting, the story easy to understand, and the story the right length in both versions; but their overall evaluation of the two was very different. Eight children felt the story was funny in the film version, while eleven said the film scared them. Only one student preferred the storytelling experience, eleven liked the media best, and ten liked them the same. In the end, however, only a small group selected *Hansel and Gretel* as their favorite oral story. Yet, it did rate second in media popularity.

The final story used was *Snow White*. In this case, slides of Trina Hyman's illustrations for the Paul Heins translation of *Snow White* (Little, Brown and Co., 1974) were used along with a shortened version of the text. This time the narrator selected was a young girl, and the background music used was classical. Prior to the media presentation, the evaluator suggested that these children might enjoy creating a tape of one of their favorite stories.

Twenty-three children were once again present for both presentations. In both cases most of the children felt that the story was easy to understand, that it was not too long, and that it was interesting to listen to, but they were less certain about the characters and the moral implications of the story. A significant group did not care for the story's brutal ending. More children objected to the visual presentation's end than to the end in the oral rendition. Ten children felt that the story was sad, and eight said that it seemed real when told to them; seven felt it was sad and six felt it was realistic in the visual presentation. Overall, fourteen liked the story best when it was told to them, two liked the media best, and seven liked them the same.

Looking at the data, the following conclusions can be made. First, the sex and age of a storyteller will not determine a child's preference. In all cases the storyteller was female, while in three out of four media presentations a male narrated the program. In the final instance, a child narrated.

Generally, these children showed that they preferred the storytelling experience over the media. In the case of *Hansel and Gretel* the children preferred the media to the oral presentation; this preference could be attributed to the movie's use of live action drama, or to the fact that the story was shorter in the film version. Such conclusions, however, are not substantiated by this research, and would need further investigation.

In contrast, an overwhelming majority preferred the storytelling experience to the visual interpretation of *Snow White*. Yet, this same breakdown was not as clear when the students compared the narrative. Obviously, then, it was the use of visuals which distracted students who wanted to imagine the story for themselves. Or, perhaps, they were already familiar with the Disney version and could accept these sophisticated illustrations.

While the data gathered from this study is not conclusive, it substantiates the hypothesis that the traditional storytelling experience is often more enjoyable to small children than is a media presentation of folklore. The data does show, however, that children will choose live action drama over the storytelling experience, whether or not it is frightening.

Young children do prefer moving visuals to still ones. In fact, they identify most easily with a live action drama. Thus, before the media is chosen, the professional needs to understand what appeals to children at different points of development. This can be determined by further studies designed to elicit student/child responses.

On the whole, this group of children understood the oral version as well as they did the visual presentation. With the exception of one story (*Hansel and Gretel*), they seemed to be equally frighten-

ed of the story in either format. Children tend to see the storytelling experience as a presentation of a moralistic tale, and generally feel that the stories are not realistic or likely to happen.

*A Story-A Story* was a strong favorite in both formats, while neither *Mr. Miacca* nor *Snow White* were considered the best stories by any number of students. *Hansel and Gretel* was a very weak second place choice. It received less than one third as many votes as *A Story-A Story* in the media format, and just two thirds of the votes received by *A Story-A Story* for the storytelling favorite. Two children did not vote for their favorites, perhaps because they were unable to decide. Thus, children at a particular age do have similar tastes in literary and aesthetic experiences. These might be partially dependent upon the individual experience and the group's immediate responses to an experience, but it would be impossible to base any conclusions concerning the catalysis of a particular group on the responses without further research using similar groups of children.

Based upon this study, it can be concluded that many of the theories given by librarians concerning the significance of the traditional story hour are correct. The storyteller does have an impact upon the story, and does create a worthwhile experience which is equally as spellbinding as any modern media—save live drama—and does foster the young child's imagination. Children often do not consciously realize what the story is trying to show about human nature, but they can sense the joy, the sadness, and the fear as expressed through the characters and their activities.

Storytelling is a challenge to the leaders in children's services. It is a challenge which must be met more often through experimentation and through new research studies designed to determine children's understanding of literature, their preferences, and their ability to react to new sharing experiences in the field of children's literature.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ruth Sawyer, *The Way of the Storyteller* (New York: Viking Press, 1942), 29.

<sup>2</sup> Zena Sutherland and May Hill Arbuthnot, *Children and Books* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1977), 159.

<sup>3</sup> Augusta Baker and Ellin Greene, *Storytelling: Art and Technique* (New York: R. R. Bowker Company, 1977), 94.

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Goff, "Let's Update Storytelling," *Language Arts* 54 (March 1977): 276

<sup>5</sup> Caroline Feller Bauer, *Handbook for Storytellers* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1977), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 164.

<sup>7</sup> Review, *Film News* 33 (November/December 1976): 38.