



# Comparing Japanese Folktales with American Tall Tales

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**Featured Children's Literature:** *The Adventure of Momotarō, the Peach Boy*, by Ralph F. McCarthy

## **Objectives:**

1. Students will compare and contrast Japanese folktales with American tall tales, including their structural components.
2. Students will apply their understanding of the elements of Japanese folktales and American tall tales by creating an original piece of writing.

## **National Content Standards:**

### ***History***

*K-4 History Standards Topic 4: The History of Peoples of Many Cultures Around the World; Standard 7a: The student understands the cultures and historical developments of selected societies in such places as Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe (Benchmark: Illustrate or retell the main ideas in folktales, legends, myths, and stories of heroism that disclose the history and traditions of various cultures around the world.)*

### ***Reading and Writing***

*Reading Standard 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.*

*Reading Standard 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.*

*Reading Standard 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.*

*Writing Standard 3:* Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

*Language Standard 1:* Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

*Language Standard 2:* Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

### **Plan for Assessment:**

Students will write the story of Paul Bunyan as a Japanese folktale or will write the story of Momotarō as an American tall tale. A rubric is provided.

### **Notes:**

This lesson is intended for use in grades 3-6 and will require two or three 45-minute sessions. To adapt for use in primary grades, have students write the stories as a whole class and then individually draw illustrations for the stories. In primary grades, the teacher will need to provide additional guidance for the discussion on story characteristics.

The teacher should be familiar with the Paul Bunyan and Momotarō stories. Paul Bunyan is a classic American tall tale, especially popular in the Midwestern United States. Paul Bunyan is a larger-than-life hero who represents frontier enthusiasm. He is a symbol of strength, the willingness to work hard, and the ability to overcome challenges even larger than he is. Paul Bunyan and his companion Babe the Blue Ox take on gigantic mosquitoes, rainstorms that go on for months, and natural obstructions like mountain ranges. He was first made famous by Midwestern newspapermen in 1910. Paul Bunyan's stories have been used to explain natural features such as Minnesota's 10,000 lakes, as well as human activities, such as the massive logging industry in the early 1900s. Each Paul Bunyan tale is slightly different, depending on the region where the story originated.

The name Momotarō translates into Peach Boy (*momo*=peach, *tarō*=boy, often added to the end of the firstborn son's name). The story takes place in the Edo period (1603-1868 CE); the earliest written version was recorded in 1723. Three places in Japan claim to be the setting of the story; Okayama prefecture has the strongest association. The story involves an elderly couple who discover a child inside a large peach they found floating down a river. Later in the story, Momotarō leaves his parents to go to Onigashima Island, or Ogre Island, where he has vowed to defeat the *oni*, or ogres. On his way to the island, he befriends a dog, a monkey, and a pheasant, who vow to help him fight the *oni*. With the help of his new friends, Momotarō defeats the *oni* and returns victoriously to his parents. Many different versions of this legendary tale are available.

### **Materials:**

1. *Paul Bunyan* (many versions are available; see **Resources and References**)
2. *The Adventure of Momotarō, the Peach Boy*, by Ralph F. McCarthy (many other versions of the story are available, including a version in *kamishibai* format; if you

cannot locate the McCarthy text, see **Resources and References** for other possibilities)

3. Copies of **Rubric: Rewriting a Japanese Folktale or American Tall Tale** (provided) for all students
4. Chart paper and markers or chalk/white board
5. Maps of the United States and Japan
6. Computer, LCD projector, and screen (Optional)

### **Implementation:**

#### ***Introductions/Connections***

1. Ask students to brainstorm a list of American tall tales. Write the tales they suggest on the board. The list may include Paul Bunyan, Pecos Bill, Davy Crockett, John Henry, Calamity Jane, and Johnny Appleseed.
2. Then ask students if anyone has read any Japanese folktales. If they have, make a list of these stories on the board. The list may include the story of Kintarō, the superhuman Golden Boy; the story of Momotarō, the Peach Boy; the legend of Urashima Tarō, a fisherman who rescued a turtle that turned out to be the daughter of the emperor of the sea; and the story of Issun-bōshi, the One-Inch Boy.

#### ***Instruction***

1. Read *The Adventure of Momotarō, The Peach Boy*. This story can be read in many different formats including as a read-aloud, in *kamishibai* format, in small groups, or individually (if you have multiple printed copies of the story or have computer access to another version). Review vocabulary with students as needed.
2. Use the story as the basis for developing a list of elements of a Japanese folktale. This list might include:
  - A specific location (help students find Okayama Prefecture on the map of Japan)
  - Actions that are for the good of the group, rather than the individual; this group harmony is called *wa* in Japanese society
  - A magical object
  - Loyalty to leader (emperor) or to parents
  - Attribution of character traits to animals (e.g., dog/loyal, monkey/clever, pheasant/fierce)
  - Value placed on children
3. Read *Paul Bunyan*. Again, this story can be read in many different formats including as a read-aloud, in small groups, or individually. Review vocabulary with students as needed.
4. Use the story as the basis for developing a list of elements included in an American tall tale. This list might include:
  - Exaggeration (hyperbole)
  - Pioneer spirit (exploring new territory)
  - Humor
  - A specific region (help students identify the Midwest and Great Lakes region on the map of the United States)
  - A specific occupation, goal, and/or purpose
  - Explanation of natural features of geography

- Emphasis on the power of the individual over the power of the machine (industrial age)
5. Compare the lists, drawing students' attention to similarities and differences. Caution them that they will need to understand the differences well to complete the next phase of the lesson and encourage them to ask questions to explore the differences in greater depth, particularly the difference between the themes of individualism and doing what is best for the group.

### **Guided Practice**

1. Split the class into two groups or have each student choose one of the following writing assignments:
  - Write the story of Paul Bunyan using the elements of a Japanese folktale.
  - Write the story of Momotarō using the elements of an American folktale.
2. Have students follow the writing process to create their stories, including drafting, pre-writing, teacher and peer conferences, editing and revising, and writing a final draft. Writing can be shared in small groups or with the whole class. Make the **Rubric: Rewriting a Japanese Folktale or American Tall Tale** provided with the lesson available for use in the writing process.

### **Conclusion**

1. Review the similarities and differences of American tall tales and Japanese folktales as a class. Lead students in reflecting on how these similarities and differences reflect similarities and differences among cultures.

### **Extensions and Cross-Curricular Ideas:**

1. Discuss and sample regional foods mentioned in the stories (millet cakes in Momotarō and pancakes in Paul Bunyan).
2. Discuss animals that live in Japan and in the Midwestern United States. Have students include these animals in their stories.
3. Discuss and compare regional clothing in the time periods in which the stories occurred. Have students include descriptions of clothing in their stories.
4. Compare folktales to other types of traditional children's literature, such as fairy tales.

### **Resources and References:**

#### **Resources for Use in Lesson**

Folk Legends: Momotarō. Kids Web Japan.

<http://web-japan.org/kidsweb/folk/momotaro/index.html>

Kellogg, Steven. *Paul Bunyan 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*. New York: Harper Trophy, 1984.

The Legend of Momotarō. Okayama Prefecture Webpage.

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Matsutani, Miyoko. *Momotarō, the Peach Boy*. Eigoro Futamata, illustrator. Donna

Tamaki, translator. New York: Kamishibai for Kids, n.d. <http://www.kamishibai.com>

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Paul Bunyan. American Folklore.net. 2008.

<http://www.americanfolklore.net/paulbunyan.html>

Paul Bunyan: The Giant Lumberjack. Brainerd, MN: Paul Bunyan Trail. 2005.

<http://www.paulbunyantrail.com/talltale.html>

### **References for Teacher Background**

Japanese Folklore. Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. 2009.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese\\_folklore](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_folklore)

Kahara, Nahoko. "From Folktale Hero to Local Symbol: The Transformation of Momotarō (the Peach Boy) in the Creation of Local Culture." *Waseda Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 25, 2004, pp. 35-61.

Kelley, Jane E. "Analyzing Ideology in a Japanese Fairy Tale." *The Looking Glass*, vol. 10, no. 2 (April 2, 2006).

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Tall Tale. Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. 2009. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tall\\_tale](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tall_tale)