



-Folklore: A Closer Look-

“To say that we actually believed in vampires or werewolves would be a carelessly inclusive statement. Rather must it be said that we were not prepared to deny the possibility of certain unfamiliar and unclassified modifications of vital force and attenuated matter; existing very infrequently in three-dimensional space because of its more intimate connexion with other spatial units, yet close enough to the boundary of our own to furnish us occasional manifestations which we, for lack of a proper vantage-point, may never hope to understand.”

(Howard Phillips Lovecraft, *The Shunned House*, 1937).

How do you know what you know, and where do you turn for answers when the unexplained occurs or tragedy strikes? What do you have in common with your neighbours, and how do you create shared understanding and shared meanings with them? Before science, before medicine, before television, people shared their knowledge and entertained each other with stories that were not held in any library but that lived in the minds, speech, song, and work of the community. Only when people began to live outside these beliefs, only when there was a rupture in the continuity of this traditional culture, could the term ‘folklore’ be used by those who wished to preserve from oblivion a cultural heritage that seemed to belong to a rapidly receding past.

In the early 1800s, Britain was transformed by urbanization and industrialization. Between 1800 and 1825 the population more than doubled, from nine to twenty million. The construction of thousands of miles of railways in the 1840s further contributed to emptying the countryside as the formerly agrarian, rural population sought higher wages and standards of living in the new industrial cities. There were those who realized that the Industrial Revolution was also a cultural revolution.

They recognised that, as rural populations dwindled and their traditions were abandoned, replaced by the speed and smoke of a new age, part of the British way of life was being left behind. ‘Antiquaries’ or amateur historians began to collect and preserve these traditions that seemed in danger of disappearing forever. Some of the traditions related to practical aspects of life, such as ways to thatch a roof or make cloth. Others related to the stories and songs passed down orally. Still others served as lessons or warnings regarding the creatures and monsters that exist on the fringes of human settlements or lurk dangerously in the shadows. Antiquaries began to develop a language to describe their object of study, labelled in various awkward phrases such as “the ways of folk” or “the lore of the people”. William J. Thoms was one such antiquary, a clerk at Chelsea Hospital and subsequently Deputy Librarian to the House of Lords. In 1846 he coined the term “folklore” as a catch-all description of these disparate areas of historical and cultural enquiry.

- What is folklore? -

Folklore is a moveable feast that has never been tied down to a single meaning, leading some scholars to question whether it is even useful as a concept, but at the same time producing a rich and varied tapestry in our cultural record. Folklore encompasses the traditional customs, stories, beliefs, songs, dances, myths, legends, visual art, practical knowledge, crafts and superstitions passed down orally from one generation to the next.



Folklore can take as its subject mundane aspects of daily life, such as how to mend fishing nets or the origins of place names. At the same time, folklore can cross the boundaries between ordinary life and the magical, unseen world, allowing the weather to be predicted, spells cast or the future divined.

Folklore can soar to the heights of fancy, passing through the lands of elves and giants to the spirit world and beyond in the company of heroes, princesses and fabulous creatures. And folklore can penetrate to the darkest corners of existence, taking us behind the veil of reality to witness for ourselves the terrible, alien truths of the universe beyond, capturing vague notions of evil, malevolent beings, their horrible deeds, and the primal fears that they inspire for preservation in the cultural memory.

phenomena, or recount the deeds of gods and goddesses who once walked the earth in common with humanity, but have since withdrawn to distant realms.

To read folklore now is to find out what it was like to live in a time when the human imagination was free to create explanations for lived experiences unfettered by scientific principles or religious doctrine. From this freedom sprang proverbs, beliefs, and tales that generation after generation of storytellers crafted and honed into memorable forms preserved in the life of the community, their survival ensured because they met fundamental human needs, not just for roofs and fishing nets but for excitement, consolation or reassurance, and the thrill of fear.



Fairy tales, myths, and legends are sub-categories of folklore. Fairy tales are stories intended for children that frequently make use of folkloric elements such as magical objects and creatures. They use archetypal characters such as kings and queens, knights and princesses, fools and peasants, and beings imbued with magic (good or evil) such as fairies and phantoms, witches and wizards, and talking animals. Legends are traditional stories presented as having some historical basis yet with uncertain truth-value, such as the stories of King Arthur and his court, or Fionn MacCumhaill and the Fianna warriors. Myths, like legends, are traditional stories set in a long-ago time, but derive their truth-value from cultural or religious belief rather than putative historicity. Myths tell stories of the creation of the world, explain natural

The knowledge embodied in folklore could satisfy primal psychological needs, explain mysterious events, and even give power over life and death. The stories of heroes and monsters, great deeds, and magic gave even the poorest folk their cultural treasures to be re-told and passed down to their children.

- Folklore in 1920s Britain -

In the 1920s, science was well embedded in the United Kingdom as the dominant paradigm for explaining natural and seemingly unnatural phenomena. New technologies dazzled the imagination on a daily basis and steadily infiltrated every