

Source Annotations: Story 1

Motif: "Theft of Light"

Focus for assignment: "Raven Steals the Light" (Pacific Northwest/British Columbia/Alaska)

I. Overview of Tale

Age levels: traditionally, mythology for all ages; in most modern renderings, probably early elementary (6-8)

Sources Recommending:

Macdonald's Storyteller's Sourcebook gives its most complete listings for these tales under the motif numbers A1411 and following (Theft of light) and A721.1 and following (Theft of the sun). Tales of this type specific to Raven can be found in the title section under Raven, leading to the motif numbers (if not known from some other source). The Eastman/Ireland/Sprug Index to Fairy Tales volumes give best listings under Raven (or Bird—Raven) and Light.

I did not find formats for this tale in the recommending sources other than print.

Plot Summary: "Bones" of tale for different versions:

There is darkness in the world. One individual or one village has possession of all the light, either because that is the way things are or because they are hoarding or guarding the light for themselves. The hero (raven, arctic hare, coyote, fox) journeys to where the light is being kept (usually inside a box, bag, or jug) and manages to steal the light, either by becoming a baby in their household, by running off with the light when it is being used in a ball-game, by simply snatching it away, or by tricking the light-hoarder to reveal the light with the promise to remove thorns from the hoarder's foot. Various codas end the story, some explaining the moon and stars, night vs. day, or the relationship between the hero/trickster figure and human beings.

For this assignment I am limiting the versions to those featuring Raven.

Program use:

Could be used with other tales about daylight; would work well with poems and/or songs about the sun or the light or the dawn. I regret that I did not have time to research such poems or songs for this assignment.

There are many tales from all over the world about someone having to steal the sun, or fire, or the seasons, for human benefit. One of those stories might make a good counterpart to this tale about light. This story could also be combined with one of the many other Northwest and Eskimo tales about Raven,

who is sometimes a powerful Creator and sometimes a foolish, greedy Trickster, and often both at once (the Kwakiutl say that you could spend your whole life telling the stories about Raven and not tell all of them). Other trickster tales might also be fitting for a comparative multicultural story hour—for instance, a Raven story teamed with a Coyote story and a Brer Rabbit story and an Anansi story.

Games or crafts might be appropriate, especially with younger children, to break up the story hour. Stewart Culin's Games of the North American Indians (Dover ed., 1975; reprint of the 24th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnography, 1907) describes many in detail, although you have to learn your way around anthropologists' culture areas for North America to use this hefty volume effectively. E. Barrie Kavasch's Earth Maker's Lodge (Cobblestone Publishing, 1994) is a more practical book for the non-expert, with many clearly presented models for activities. For this story, the Frog Race described on p. 125 might be a good follow-up (if the Tshimshian version from Thompson is used, which ends with a riff on frogs); or perhaps the Bone Game on p. 124, which is similar to "Button-Button" and fits the motifs of theft and trickery.

II. Versions

1. "The Theft of Light". Tales of the North American Indians. Selected and Annotated by Stith Thompson. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1966. 22-24. First published 1929. Tshimshian (British Columbia); collected by Franz Boas, originally published in the Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology 31.

Sources Recommending:

I could not find this volume referenced in the storytelling indices/recommending lists. It is a standard work in Folklore study, complete with Thompson's annotations of tale motifs and listings of collecting sources. I hope it is acceptable as a source.

Notes:

This book provides the most authentic version of the story that I could find in the time allotted, in terms of traditional language use and story structure. However, it is not readily tellable as printed, since this was a translation and slight condensation meant for folkloric study, not for performance. I have adapted it somewhat to tell in class.

Plot Summary:

A mythological figure named Giant becomes Raven when he wears the raven skin his father gave him, in the days before there was daylight. Raven provides fish and fruits for the people, but they people are distressed by the dark. Because he cannot see to get his own food, either, Giant decides to bring light down from heaven. He flies through the hole in the sky, sheds his raven skin, and goes to a spring next to the house of the chief of heaven, where he

knows the light is kept. There he transforms himself into a cedar needle dropped on the water, and in that form is swallowed by the chief's daughter when she comes to fetch water from the spring.

Giant is born as her baby, and is doted on by the unwitting grandfather. Giant cries and cries ("Hamaa! Hamaa!") until the chief of heaven and his advisors figure out that what the "baby" wants is the box (called "Maa") that holds the light. Finally they give it to him, and for four days he plays with it harmlessly. On the fourth day he picks up the box and runs with it to the hole in the sky, putting on his raven skin again to carry the light to the world.

Back in the world, the (animal) people are out working hard trying to catch fish in the dark. Raven asks for some of their fish, threatening to break the box with the light in it, but the people only mock and scold him for being a trickster and a liar. After asking for fish four times, he breaks open the box; daylight comes, and the north wind blows so hard that the fisherfolk (frogs) who mocked Raven are blown downriver to the islands, where they are frozen into stone. "The fishing frogs named him Txá'msem [Liar, Transformer: now a sacred name for Raven], and all the world had the daylight."

2. "The Raven Steals the Light". In The Raven Steals the Light. Stories by Gill Reid and Robert Bringhurst. Drawings by Bill Reid. Seattle: U of Washington P, 1984. 11-17. Haida (British Columbia).

Sources Recommending:

Ireland & Sprug, 5th supplement to Index to Fairy Tales.

Notes:

Bill Reid's charcoal/pencil drawings in the style of traditional Haida art are impressive, and make the book a good table-side companion for a telling of this tale. However, the literary style is a bit strenuously "humorous" and over-embellished, providing a good example per Macdonald's warnings against oral tales that have been re-fitted for the written/printed context.

Plot Summary:

In the beginning, an old man lived in a house by a river with his daughter. The whole world was dark, because the old man had all the light in the world locked up inside a box inside a box inside an infinity of boxes. Raven was tired of blundering around in the dark. One day he blundered near the old man's house and overheard him muttering about how he had the light in his boxes. Raven decided to steal the light, but couldn't find a way into the house. Finally he changed himself into a hemlock needle and slipped into the river to be caught by the old man's daughter when she came to fetch water. She swallowed him, and he became her baby, doted on by the old man. Raven found the box inside the house, and cried until after many days the old man got out the light and tossed it, like a ball, to Raven. Raven flew away through the smoke hole of the house, but with all the light in the world now, suddenly Eagle saw Raven, and came after him. Trying to get away from Eagle, Raven dropped half of the light, and it shattered on the ground into one large piece and many small ones, which

bounced up into the sky and became the moon and stars. Eagle chased Raven all the way to the edge of the world, where Raven finally got tired and let go of the light. There it floated into the sky behind the mountains and became the sun.

3. "Raven Recovers Light for His People." In Raven: Creator of the World. Eskimo Legends Retold by Ronald Melzack. Illustrated by Laszlo Gal. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970. 61-69.

Sources Recommending:

Macdonald, Storyteller's Sourcebook. Motif A1411.2: Theft of light by being swallowed and reborn.

Notes:

This version features some great traditional plot punctuation, as the villain goes out to the end of the earth three times to capture the sun, moon and stars for himself. Other details give the flavor of the original myth, emphasizing Raven's dual nature as a man, as a bird, and as a supernatural man who "wears" his bird-ness. Some of the dialog and details, however, feel like forced modern additions, and might be trimmed.

Plot Summary:

An evil, selfish man named Tupilak became the chief of his village. He wanted all the beautiful things in the world to be his alone, so he made a plan to catch the sun, moon and stars in three clay jugs he made himself. Everywhere but Tupilak's village was plunged into darkness. In Raven's village, the chief was a good man who wanted everyone to share all the good things on earth. He promised one of his daughters in marriage to whoever could bring back the light. Many went away on this quest, but none returned. Finally, Raven promised to bring back the sun, moon and stars. He flew until he saw a faint light, and followed that light to Tupilak's village. He could see the sun, moon and stars shining from Tupilak's tent, as Tupilak lifted the lid of each jar in turn.

Raven changed himself into a tiny feather, and was drunk by Tupilak's daughter. He was born as her son, much loved by his unwitting new family. He fussed for the jugs until finally Tupilak gave in. The baby played with them like toys until everyone was used to him handling them. Then when no one was around one day he became a raven again, grabbed the three jugs and flew away. Tupilak chased him, but fell into a stream and was never seen again. Raven returned the lights to the sky, went home to his village and married the chief's eldest daughter. They lived together for many happy years. His wife grew old but Raven never aged. When his wife finally died, Raven wept and buried her, and left the village where he had lived so long with people.

4. "How the Light Came." In Shadows from the Singing House: Eskimo Folk Tales. Retold by Helen Caswell. Illustrations by Robert Mayokok. Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Company. 64-67.

Sources Recommending:

Macdonald, Storyteller's Sourcebook. Motif A1411.2: Theft of light by being swallowed and reborn.

Notes:

Charming illustrations and an atmospheric, informative Prologue make this another good book to have on hand for curious readers to explore further. The Prologue begins with an Eskimo chant for greeting the dawn, which could be used either to open or close the story.

Plot Summary:

In the beginning, the Chief of the Sky kept all the light in the world as a ball inside a box. Wise, supernatural Raven felt sorry for the people, and decided to get the ball of light for them. He flew a long time until he came to a steep, narrow river gorge; through the end of the gorge came a bright light. The gorge opened and closed, but Raven flew through into the Sky. Raven flew to the Sky Chief's home next to a lake, and became a spruce needle so that the Sky Chief's daughter drank him when she came to fetch water. Some months later he was born as her son. The Sky Chief loved his new grandson, giving him anything he wanted. Then the baby began to cry "Ball! Ball!" and wouldn't be comforted; finally the Chief's wise man decided that the baby must want the ball of light. The baby played with the light, and over time everyone got used to him having it. One day the baby rolled the ball out the door, then became Raven again and flew away with the light. Raven returned to his people, who were still trying to fish in the dark, and he burst the ball of light so that they could see again. The people heard Raven's caw when he burst the light, and thanked him for helping him by sharing their fish, which they have done ever since.

5. "How Raven Found the Daylight." In The Blind Boy and the Loon, and Other Eskimo Myths. Ramona Maher. New York: The John Day Company, 1969. 39-51.

Sources Recommending:

Macdonald, Storyteller's Sourcebook. Motif A1411.2: Theft of light by being swallowed and reborn.

Notes:

This longer version would be difficult to adapt for a short telling (i.e., this assignment). Trimming some of the modern descriptive trappings and inconsistencies in diction (combining slang phrases with weighty "Indian" talk) might help both in that respect, and in making the story more true to the original source. Includes a brief song/chant text for Raven's arrival and departure.

Plot Summary:

A rich old man kept the sun on a loop of rope. He had a vain daughter who would not marry. The rich man was keeping the sun to provide for her when she started her own family, and refused to share it with anyone. Meanwhile, the villagers suffered from hunger, not being able to see to hunt or gather food or keep their fires. The old man could hunt, because he carried the sun with him

when he went out. The villagers went to the old man and asked him to sell the light to them, but he refused.

Then someone came paddling down the river, and it was Raven. Raven is greedy and clever. The villagers told him about their problem, and Raven liked the challenge of getting the sun away from the rich man. He decided to go to the well, and wait for the rich man's daughter to come with her bucket. First he tried turning into a leaf and floating on the water, but the daughter just picked him up and flung him away. Then he tried being a feather, but she saw that, too, and flung him away. The next time Raven became a fine, silver hair, and was successful. She drank him, and he became her baby. She noticed that he had a strange bump on his forehead [Raven's beak: the Raven mask is worn on the forehead], but the rich man didn't care: he was so happy to have a grandson. Before long Raven started fussing for the light, which was hanging from the ceiling by its rope. Finally the rich man gave in and let him play with the light. After everyone had gotten used to him playing with the light, Raven rolled the ball of light outside, became Raven again, and shattered the light with his beak. Now there was light everywhere.

Raven went back to the village, and collected the presents the people had assembled for him. In the middle of the festivities, he slipped away in his canoe.

6. "Raven Lets Out the Daylight." In Raven-Who-Sets-Things-Right: Indian Tales of the Northwest Coast. Retold by Fran Martin. Pictures by Dorothy McEntee. New York: Harper & Row, 1975. 17-25. Revised edition, with new art, of Martin's Nine Tales of Raven (1951).

Sources Recommending:

Macdonald, Storyteller's Sourcebook. Motif A1411.2.1: Old-One-at-the-River.

Notes:

The clear line-drawn illustrations based on Northwest art are well done, and Martin provides useful cultural and story context in an introduction entitled "The People Who Told the Tales". She states that these retellings are in some cases compilations, and does not give specific tribal derivations for the stories; she implies that she used original folklore field collections for her sources. A long coda for "Raven Lets Out the Daylight" should almost be a separate story, and is actually a condensed version of an important Northwest myth of a great flood, which deserves its own setting.

Plot Summary:

Raven made the rivers and filled them with fish, but the people still suffered because there was no light. Raven knew that the Old-One-at-the-Source-of-the-River was hiding the sun, moon and stars in his house, so Raven decided to steal the light back. Raven turned himself into a baby, born of the only daughter of the Old One. [details of transformation omitted in this version] Raven saw three big bags hanging from the rafters, and knew they must hold the sun, moon and stars. He started crying for the bags, until finally the Old One

let him play with one. The baby played with it for a while, then suddenly pulled the drawstring of the bag and released all the stars inside out of the house through the smoke hole and into the sky. Raven kept crying for the other two bags until the Old One gave in. He gave the baby the moon bag, and once again Raven opened the bag, and let the moon out through the smoke hole. Again Raven cried, but this time when the Old One gave in he tightened the cord of the bag in a dense knot. When Raven couldn't untie the knot as a baby, he changed back into Raven, grabbed the bag, and flew out with it through the smoke hole.

Raven flew back to the people, who were fishing in the moonlight. Raven was hungry, and asked the people for fish, promising to let out the daylight for them. But the people were rude, and scoffed at him. He went down the river to another group of people and asked for fish again, and those people sent him away too. He kept going down the river until he came to the last village, near the coast; this time the people scoffed, but gave him fish anyway. Raven ate the fish, and then tore a hole in the bag and released the sun. The people upstream, who had been rude to Raven, had no warning of the bright light. They were so startled that some of them fell into the water, and others ran into the forest. The ones who fell into the water became seals and otters, and the ones who ran into the woods became forest creatures. The people who had given Raven some of their fish not only stayed human, but became strong and prosperous.

[Long coda, feels improperly added: Those people don't get to stay prosperous very long.] Raven flies back to the Old One's house to see what he thinks of the sun. The daughter comes out and tries to warn Raven away. The Old One is furious, and twists his conjuror's hat to cause a great flood that covers the entire world. Raven flies out over the water, and discovers that the tallest mountain peak is the only bit of land left. He finds four little children there, who are all that is left of all the people on earth. Raven rescues them, and calls on Frog to carry them until the waters recede. From those four children descended all the people of the earth.

7. "Raven and the Coming of Daylight." In Coyote the Trickster: Legends of the North American Indians. Retold by Gail Robinson and Douglas Hill. Illustrated by Graham McCallum. New York: Crane Russak & Co., Inc., 1976. 33-37. Haida.

Sources Recommending:

Macdonald's Storyteller's Sourcebook. Motif A1411.3: Gull keeps light in box.

Notes:

Short, tidy tale. Little to no flavor of original source, but well-presented for modern storytelling.

Plot Summary:

In the beginning, it was dark and cold like a winter's night all through the year. Gull was the Custodian of Daylight, which he kept in a cedar box beneath his wing. The other animals complained that Gull was too self-important, and

that their lives were too hard in the dark and cold. They asked Raven to go talk to Gull, who was his cousin, to make him change his mind and release some light. Gull agreed to meet with Raven, but it was clear he had no intention of paying any attention to the need for light. Raven was angry, and wished to himself that Gull would step on a thorn. No sooner did he think this, than it happened, and Gull cried out in pain. Raven offered to remove the thorn—but said he'd need some light to do it. Finally Gull opened his box just a crack. Raven just pushed the thorn in deeper, and called for more light. Gull's foot was hurting him so badly that he just flung the lid completely off the cedar box, and the sun escaped into the sky. Gull was never able to retrieve it.

8. "The Ogre, the Sun, and the Raven." In A Book of Charms and Changelings. By Ruth Manning-Sanders. Illustrated by Robin Jacques. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Incl., 1971. 81-84.

Sources Recommending:

Macdonald, Storyteller's Sourcebook. Motif A721.1.1: Ogre steals sun, keeps in box.

Notes:

This book takes a personal narration style to the stories, as if the reader were sitting with the teller. No culture origin is given for this story of raven and the sun, but raven as trickster and reference to smoke hole in house indicates a possible Northwest/Eskimo source. Definitely a "translation", this story "feels" very much like a European fairy tale in terms of style (if it weren't for that smoke hole). This version would be easy to learn and would probably tell well.

Plot Summary:

A wicked ogre stole the sun out of the sky and put it in a box. The birds begged their king, the Raven, to get the sun back. Raven flew to the ogre's house, went in the smoke hole and snatched away the ogre's baby. He brought the ogre's baby back to his own nest and put it in the nest with his own three children. Then he turned around three times, muttered some spells, and turned the ogre baby into a raven chick. He told his wife to take care of the new chick, then flew back to the ogre's house, went in through the smoke hole and turned himself into an ogre baby. When the ogre came home, the baby cried and cried to play with the sun. Finally the ogre gave in and threw the sun into the baby's cradle. When the ogre went out, the baby turned back into Raven, and picked up the sun to fly out of the smoke hole. But the sun wouldn't fit through the hole, so Raven had to peck little bits of it off, which flew up into the sky and became the stars. Finally Raven got the sun through the hole, and the sun went back into the sky. Raven went home, and found his wife at her wits' end with the new chick that was really the ogre's baby. Raven turned him back into an ogre, and took the ogre baby back to the ogre's house. The ogre came home to a screaming baby, and no sun, and he never did get the sun back into his house.

9. "The Raven Brings Light: An Alaska Indian Tale." In A Harvest of World Folk Tales. Ed. Milton Rugoff. Illustrations and Decorations by Joseph Low. New York: Viking, 1949. 100-102.

Sources Recommending:

Ireland, 4th supplement to the Index to Fairy Tales.

Notes:

This version was adapted from a story in the 18th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1899 (collector's name not given). The name of the culture is not given, but the lower Yukon is mentioned in addition to the "Alaska Indian" of the subtitle. This version has less in common with the others, offering an interesting contrast in ideas.

Plot Summary:

One day the sun and moon disappeared, leaving the people with only the stars. The shamans tried everything they knew, but could not make the light return. An orphan boy, who was ill treated by everyone in the village, began to mock the shamans, until finally they drove him away. The orphan had a magical black coat that turned him into a raven when he wore it. The orphan went to his aunt after the shamans drove him away, and asked her how he could find the light. Reluctantly she told him to put on his snowshoes and go far to the south. The Raven boy left on his snowshoes, and after a very long journey he saw a ray of light ahead. He came to a large hill, and at the bottom of the hill was a man shoveling snow in front of his house. A great ball of light sat next to the house. When the man shoveled his snow up into the air, it blocked the light.

Raven boy thought about how he could get the light and the shovel away from the man. After a while he walked up to the man and just asked him why he was blocking the light with his shoveling. The man replied he wasn't hiding the light, he was just clearing the way to his house. Then he asked the boy what he was doing there. The boy told him that it was so dark in his village that he didn't want to stay there, so he came to live with the man who had the light. The man agreed to this, and invited the boy into his house. He dropped his shovel on the ground, turned and lifted up the door flap to his house, thinking the boy was right behind him. But instead of following the man, the boy caught up the ball of light into a fold of his coat, picked up the shovel, and ran away to the north. Then he turned into a raven and began to fly away. The man realized what was happening and chased after him. Realizing he couldn't catch the raven, the man called out saying Raven could keep the light, but please leave him the shovel! Raven refused: "you made our village dark and you may not have your shovel."

As Raven flew he broke off pieces of the light one at a time, making day along his route. Different pieces were different sizes, and lasted different lengths of time. When he got home he showed the shamans what he had done, and explained that now there would be day and night, and the shamans could say nothing to that. After that day and night followed each other as they should, but days were different lengths because of how Raven had broken off the pieces of light as he flew home.

Story Card

Title: “Raven Steals the Light”

Author: Traditional

Source: Tshimshian (Boas), in Tales of the North American Indians, ed. Stith Thompson (IUP, 1966). Adapted for storytelling.

Running time: 4-5 minutes (practiced aloud)

Characters: Raven; Chief of the Sky; Chief’s Daughter; Fishing Frogs

Scenes: In the dark world, at the river; land of the Sky, house of Sky Chief; returned to dark world, at the river; islands with frogs turned to stone

Synopsis: The world is dark. After Raven has provided food for the people, he sees how hard it is to find food in the dark and decides to bring the light down from the land of the Sky. He goes to the Sky Chief’s house and becomes a cedar needle on the water when the Chief’s daughter comes to drink. Raven becomes her baby. He cries “Hama! Hama!” until the Chief and his advisors realize that he his calling for the Ma, the box hanging in the corner which holds the light. They give him the Ma, and he stops crying. For four days he plays with the Ma, until no one pays attention to him with it. On the fourth day, he picks up the Ma and runs with it. He becomes Raven again and takes the Ma back to the world, where the people are net-fishing from their canoes in the dark. Raven asks them for some fish, but they only make fun of him, calling him a liar. When he has been refused four times, he breaks open the Ma. Daylight appears, and with it a mighty north wind. The fisherfolk (frogs) who taunted Raven are blown all the way downriver to the islands off the coast, where they are frozen by the wind and turned to stone.

Phrases: “Where did you come from? Don’t they call you Txä’msem, you great liar?”

“The fishing frogs named him Txä’msem—the great liar, the trickster, the transformer, for that is what he is—and all the world had the daylight.”

Audience: 6-8 year olds; mixed children and adults