

Fungal Folklore and Beyond

OBJECTIVE

- To stimulate interest in fungi through student-specific exploratory activities

BACKGROUND INFO

There isn't a fairytale-loving child who is not familiar with the bright red cap and dappled scales of the classic *Amanita muscaria*, the fly agaric mushroom. Anyone ever so fortunate as to meet this most spectacular mushroom in its natural habitat will immediately understand why so much folklore surrounds the Fungi--this mushroom is simply too beautiful and too mysterious to be of this earth--and this is just the beginning! Some fungi, like the Jack o' Lantern and the mycelia of the honey mushroom, glow in the dark! Coral mushrooms look like they were taken directly from the ocean and dropped in the forest. The basket stinkhorn is decorated in a gown of the finest lace and an Octopus Stinkhorn could easily be mistaken for a large, neon spider!

Folklore and mythology are typically traditional stories and legends that are transmitted orally from generation to generation. Such stories are often born from attempts to explain natural phenomena like the northern lights, unusual physical characteristics of animals (like a beaver's flat tail), and of course, mushrooms.

In this activity, students will be introduced to some of the mythology surrounding mushrooms throughout the ages. Using these tales as a springboard, students explore the world of mushrooms through whatever creative medium they find appealing--be it poetry, drama/skits, or art.

TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS

1. Explain to your students that fungi have long been thought to be mysterious and magical. It wasn't until very recently that people understood what mushrooms are and where they come from. Ask your students if they are aware of any folklore/myths about mushrooms (like the origin of fairy rings) and then share some fungal folklore from the next page with your students.
2. Refer to the activity suggestions on page 63 to help guide students through their own explorations into fungi and folklore.
3. You may wish to set aside an area of the classroom to display all of your students' wonderfully mushroomy creations.

Activity 4.1



GRADES

3-6

TYPE OF ACTIVITY

Teacher read and student-led activities

MATERIALS

- assortment of fairytale books containing mushrooms (esp Brian Froud books) or access to a library with a supply of fairy tale books
- mushroom picture books or field guides with good plates (eg. Arora's Mushrooms Demystified),
- art supplies for painting and drawing
- clay/playdoh
- props for skits
- copies of "What's in a Name" chart on page 63 for each student or an overhead of the chart

SOURCE

Text adapted from FAIRY RINGS AND FUNGAL SUPERSTITIONS <http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/~mushroom/English/Folklore/fairy.html#>

ON ORIGINS

- The sudden and rapid eruption of mushrooms from the soil led people to believe that dark or terrible forces were at work. Lightning strikes, meteorites, shooting stars, earthly vapours, and witches have all been proposed as agents of their origin.
- In parts of Africa, mushrooms were sometimes regarded as souls of the dead or as symbols of the human soul.
- In Silesia, morel mushrooms were once believed to be the work of the Devil.
- In parts of Central America, a children's tale relates that mushrooms are little umbrellas carried by woodland spirits to shelter them from the rain; the spirits leave the mushrooms behind at dawn when it is time to return to their underground world.

ON FANTASTICAL FAIRY RINGS

- In France, fairy rings were called sorcerers' rings and in Austria, witches' rings.
- A Tyrolean legend claims that the rings were burned into the ground by the fiery tail of a dragon.
- In Holland, they were said to mark where the Devil rested his milk churn.
- In England, they were considered places where fairies came to dance. The mushrooms around the perimeter of the ring were seats where the sprites could rest after their exertions. People in rural England claimed to have seen fairies dancing at fairy rings as recently as a hundred years ago.
- One common theme in all these traditions is the belief that dire consequences await anyone foolhardy enough to enter a fairy ring. Trespassers would be struck blind or lame, or even disappear to become slaves in the fairies' underground realm.
- Occasionally fairy rings were said to bring good luck to houses built in fields where they occur.
- In Wales, it was also widely believed that if animals grazed within a fairy ring, their milk would putrefy.
- In another tradition, the rings were sites of buried treasure, but there was a catch—the treasure could only be retrieved with the help of fairies or witches.
- If a maiden washed her face with dew of the grass from inside a ring, the fairies would spoil her complexion.

ON THE NOTORIOUS *AMANITA MUSCARIA*: THE FLY AGARIC

- Even Santa Claus has been linked to fungi. One anthropologist has suggested that his red and white outfit symbolizes Fly Agaric. Siberian shamans were known to consume this mushroom, and Santa's use of the chimney is similar to a shaman custom of leaving a dwelling through its smoke hole during a festival.
- According to the Norse, Odin and his attendants were riding across the sky on their horses when suddenly they began to be pursued by demons. In order to escape these demons, they had to ride their horses very hard. As a result, the horses began to foam at the mouth and bleed. The blood and foam mixed and wherever it struck the ground, a red fly-agaric with white spots sprang up.
- Koryak Siberians have a story about the fly agaric which enabled Big Raven to carry a whale to its home. In the story, the deity Vahiyinin ("Existence") spat onto earth, and his spittle became the wapaq, and his saliva becomes the warts. After experiencing the power of the wapaq, Raven was so exhilarated that he told it to grow forever on earth so his children, the people, can learn from it.
- Some pop culture uses of the mushroom are in the video game series Super Mario Bros. and the dancing mushroom sequence in the 1940 Disney film *Fantasia*.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Of all the living things that have been identified, classified, and named, fungi have received the bear's share of odd ones. Listed below are some of the common names given to mushrooms. These names alone are rich sources of inspiration for young artists exploring "all things mushroomy".

Yuck on a Stick	Witches' Butter	Dryad's Saddle	Fuzzy Foot	Dead Man's Fingers
Bleeding Mycena	Train Wrecker	Destroying Angel	Fried Chicken	Angel's wings
Tree Ears	Parrot Mushroom	Laughing Mushroom	Old Man of the Woods	The Blusher
Pinwheel	Slippery Jack	Horse Mushroom	Liberty Cap	Cannon Ball
Inky Cap	Sweating Mushroom	Apricot Jelly	Hen of the Woods	Poison Pie
The Gypsy	The Prince	Turkey Tail	Orange Peel	Jack-O-Lantern

ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS

For the writers...

Pass out copies of the "What's in a Name" table and have students write their own mythologies about one of these oddly named fungi.

For the pen and brush artists...

Encourage students who like to draw or paint to create an illustration of one of the mushrooms listed above.

For the hands on artists...

Students who like to make things with their hands could invent their own mushroom and mold it out of clay or playdoh. After seeing the colour plates in a book like Mushrooms Demystified, they will know that the sky is the limit! Have them name their mushroom and share it with the class.

For the actors...

Students interested in acting could perform a 5-minute skit demonstrating one of the mythologies you shared with the class, or they may act out their own mythology.

For the researchers...

Send book-loving students to the library and have them hunt down pictures of mushrooms in fairy tale books. Have older students document where they found the mushrooms (both in context and bibliographical).