
APPROPRIATION OR CELEBRATION OF THE JAPANESE FOLKTALE “THE CRANE WIFE”? START THE CONVERSATION

Miriam Barton
Hesston College

Abstract

The underlying concept of this learning module, for secondary or college level English language arts (ELA) courses, is to begin a conversation about what it means to celebrate a culture vs. to appropriate a culture. This module features an original folktale from Japan “The Crane Wife” and two Western adaptations.

Keywords: “The Crane Wife,” Japanese folktale, world literature, cultural appropriation, cultural awareness

As English teachers, we must remain cognizant of freedom of expression as a mindset, including the need to respectfully discuss the question of celebration vs. appropriation in relation to Western-centric adaptations of non-Western culture, art, and literature. Originally, I created this learning module for a college world literature course, though it would also be appropriate for secondary students.

The reading assignment is to examine a beloved Japanese folktale, as well as two adaptations of the folktale by Western artists:

- *Tsuru Nyōbō* – “The Crane Wife,” a Japanese folktale. There are many versions available (free online and in the children’s section of public libraries). It is perhaps the most well-known folktale from Japan.
- Ness, P. (2014). *The Crane Wife*. Canongate Books/Penguin.
- The Decemberists. (2014). “The Crane Wife, Parts 1, 2, and 3” [video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPOMHM6waxk&t=164s>.

I facilitate the conversation through an online discussion forum. Regardless of the assessments assigned to analyze and synthesize the material, students should base their responses on their personal insight and life experiences. Students need to engage with all three versions in the analytical work assigned to answer the following question: *Does a cross-cultural adaptation equal appropriation or celebration of the culture from which the original piece came?* There is no right or wrong answer here; we are simply looking for an open-minded and insightful conversation.

In the students’ initial post, they need to include cited textual evidence from all three works in connection with an interrogation of their notions of cultural appropriation vs. appreciation. Then students are required to respond to at least two classmates in which they either elaborate on the

points made based on their personal experiences/perspective or they respectfully complicate the points being made by their classmates, based on their perspective from life experiences. The culture of the classroom learning community is that we value alternative perspectives as valid and important; that expectation is extended into this conversation. What students learn from this conversation grants them insight into their own cultural biases, helping to shift their previous notions and descriptions based on diverse cultural awareness.

Regardless of how the conversation goes, teachers are encouraged to let the students openly explore their thoughts and feelings without fear of judgement or disagreement from the instructor. We need to teach our students to respectfully disagree with and engage with each other. That begins with us encouraging diversity of thought in academic circles.

Author Biography

Miriam Barton is a professor of English at Hesston College, dual enrollment English outreach instructor for Hutchinson Community College, and a preservice teacher educator for the Kansas Independent College Association (KICA). She is also a PhD candidate at Kansas State University in Curriculum & Instruction with an emphasis in English language arts. She teaches a variety of composition, literature, creative writing, and secondary ELA methods courses.

