

**Lone Star Stories:
An Examination of the Tales of
Texas and the Southwest**



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Thematic Description and Project Rationale

John Steinbeck said, "Texas is a state of mind. Texas is an obsession. Above all, Texas is a nation in every sense of the word." This "like a whole other country" philosophy makes Texas popular, and for years, Texans have claimed to be bigger and different. Even traditional children's stories take a twist in Texas, and there are numerous Texas renditions of these well-known tales, each just as endearing as the original version. What, then, is it that makes a story truly Texan? What elements define these stories and continue to enthrall audiences today? This project is an examination of Texas retellings and original tales. Ideally, the titles explored are suitable for an elementary classroom or public library. The purpose is to create a definition of the Texas tale, including its characters, themes, and stylistic characteristics. Further, this project provides a collection of Texas tales for teachers or librarians interesting in creating a unit on Texas stories and adaptations. The titles studied are from the library catalog, found by searching specific variations and common subject headings among titles.

Bibliographic Citations and Story Synopses



Applegate, Katherine. *Jack Rabbit and the Beanstalk*. New York: GT Publishing Corporation, 1997. When Jack's carrot patch is empty, his friends suggest trading his wheelbarrow, but on the way, Jack makes the trade for magic beans. When he gets home, his friends throw them out, but the next morning he finds a giant beanstalk. Climbing gets him in more trouble than he planned, and he needs his friends to escape.



DePaola, Tomie. *The Legend of the Bluebonnet: An Old Tale of Texas*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1983. The Comanche turn to the Great Spirits for help in the drought, and receive the command of sacrificing their most valuable possession. Only She-Who-Is-Alone realizes what the Spirits command, and her selflessness saves the Comanche, leaving them with a beautiful reminder.



Johnston, Tony. *The Cowboy and the Black-Eyed Pea*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1992. After inheriting the ranch, Farethee Well searches for a real cowboy who loves her, not her fortune. She devises a unique trick to test the sensitivity of each cowboy, and finally, with a bit of determination and some help from the weather, she discovers her true cowboy.



Kellogg, Steven. *Pecos Bill*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1986. When Bill falls off the family wagon, coyotes adopt him. When a drifter discovers him years later, Bill decides to try life as a Texan. He sets out to become a rancher, but soon encounters trouble. In each situation, Bill must rely on his determination and ingenuity to find a solution, even in catching the love of his life.



Ketteman, Helen. *Armadilly Chili*. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman & Company, 2004. When a blue norther blows in, Miss Billie Armadilly decides to make her famous chili. She gathers the ingredients, asking her friends for help, but gets nothing but excuses. When her friends return later to taste the chili, they help Billie learn a few lessons about hard work, humility, and friendship.



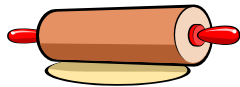
Ketteman, Helen. *Bubba the Cowboy Prince: A Fractured Texas Tale*. New York: Scholastic Press, 1997. Bubba does all the ranch chores for his evil step daddy and lazy stepbrothers. When Miss Lurleen decides to throw a ball to find a real cowboy, Bubba runs about for them until there is no time for him to get ready. With the help of his fairy god cow and a lost boot, Bubba finds his own chance at happily ever after.



Ketteman, Helen. *Waynetta and the Cornstalk: A Texas Fairy Tale*. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman & Company, 2007. Hard times force Waynetta and her mother to sell the last longhorn, but Waynetta decides to trade for lucky corn that her mother throws out. The next morning, she finds a cornstalk, and at the top, the tools she needs to save the ranch. Her determination helps her make some luck of her own.



Kimmel, Eric A. *The Great Texas Hamster Drive: An Original Tall Tale*. Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Children, 2007. When little Sal asks for a pet, Bill promises her anything, and before long, two hamsters arrive, multiply, escape, and take over the ranch. The family decides to send them to the children of Chicago, but it will take a lot of determination to get all 18,736 hamsters to the depot safely.



Kimmel, Eric A. *The Runaway Tortilla*. New York: Winslow Press, 2000. Tía Lupe makes the best tortillas in Texas, but they are so light that one day, one jumps up and rolls away. The tortilla rolls across the desert, singing all the while. Eventually, everyone gives up the chase, but the tortilla rolls on. She soon meets a sly coyote who teaches her a painful lesson in humility.



Lowell, Susan. *Dusty Locks and the Three Bears*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001. When dirty little Dusty Locks stumbles upon a cabin in the woods, she bursts in and makes herself at home, eating the beans, sitting in the chairs, and sleeping in the beds of the three grizzlies. When the three bears return home, they follow the trail of destruction straight to their intruder.



Lowell, Susan. *Little Red Cowboy Hat*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997. When Little Red Cowboy Hat's grandmother gets sick, her mother sends her to the ranch with homemade bread and cactus jelly. Along the way, Little Red meets a creepy wolf who peppers her with questions, but she gallops away. When she arrives, things do not seem right, and it takes some quick thinking to find a way a solution.



Medearis, Angela Shelf. *Tailypo: A New Fangled Tall Tale*. New York: Holiday House, 1996. Kennie Ray and his vicious Chihuahua, Fang, are at home one night when a swamp critter crawls in the window and tries to eat the last of the greens. Kennie Ray and Fang scare it off, catching its tale, which they trade for food. The next night, the creature returns, and Kennie Ray must find a way to take care of it for good.



Rice, James. *Texas Night before Christmas*. Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1988. On Christmas Eve, in the midst of a Texas blue norther, Santy makes his rounds to the ranch. He arrives in a wagon pulled by longhorns and quickly goes about his business. Dressed in rawhide, a Stetson, and his cowboy boots, there is no mistaking who he is.



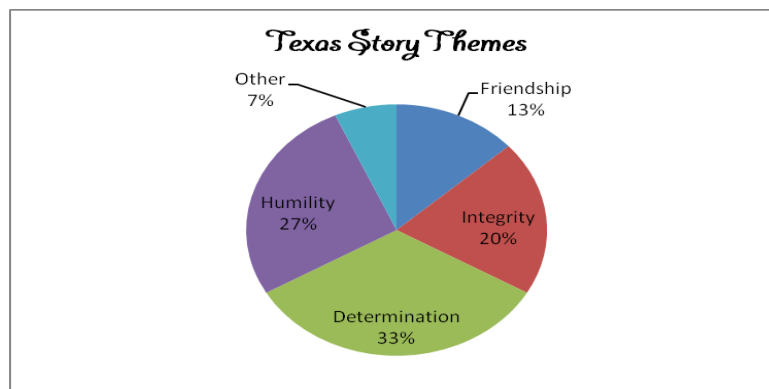
Squires, Janet. *The Gingerbread Cowboy*. New York: Laura Geringer Books, 2006. One morning, the rancher's wife decides to make gingerbread. When the rancher opens the oven, the Gingerbread Cowboy leaps out and runs away. He runs across the prairie, and when he reaches the river, a coyote helps him escape. He may have escaped the ranchers, but he still learns a painful lesson about humility.



Wooldridge, Connie Nordhielm. *The Legend of Strap Buckner: A Texas Tale*. New York: Holiday House, 2001. Strap knocks everyone down, but when he realizes people are hiding, he resolves to live peacefully. It is not long before his pride surfaces, challenging the Devil himself to a contest. Both Strap and the Devil disappear in the fight, and strange sightings leave the settlers pondering just what happened.

Story Analysis: Theme

While stories vary widely in characters and plot sequences, they often have the same theme or underlying message. This is true of the Texas story as well. As the graph indicates, there are four major themes common to these stories: friendship, integrity, determination, and humility. While not all stories show these themes, most Texas stories contain these messages.



The following themes are common in Texas stories:

- ✦ **Friendship:** Stories in this group teach the value of having friends and being a good friend. Two stories exemplify this: *Jack Rabbit and the Beanstalk* and *Armadillo Chili*. In the former, Jack needs his friends to escape from the giant; without help, he cannot escape. In the latter, Miss Billie realizes the importance of friendship when her chili tastes dull alone, and her friends realize the importance of kindness, helping a friend in need, and apologies.
- ✦ **Integrity:** Stories in this group teach the value of integrity and good character, values commonly associated with Texas cowboys. Three stories exemplify this: *The Cowboy and the Black-Eyed Pea*, *Bubba the Cowboy Prince*, and *Dusty Locks and the Three*

Bears. In *The Cowboy and the Black-Eyed Pea*, Farethee Well searches for a cowboy with integrity; it is only when she discovers one sensitive and true that she marries. In *Bubba the Cowboy Prince*, Bubba's integrity and hard work earn him a place in Miss Lurleen's heart; these characteristics set him apart as a true cowboy. In *Dusty Locks and the Three Bears*, Dusty Locks learns the importance of integrity and respect when her destructive actions earn her a frightening surprise. Each story presents characters whose integrity, honor, and genuineness earn them happiness; those who do not exemplify these characteristics find only unhappiness.

- ✦ **Humility:** Stories in this group teach the importance of humility. Four stories exemplify this: *The Runaway Tortilla*, *The Gingerbread Cowboy*, *The Legend of Strap Buckner*, and *The Legend of the Bluebonnet*. In the first two stories, both the tortilla and the gingerbread cowboy meet a tragic end because they are too prideful. In *The Legend of Strap Buckner*, Strap's pride gets him into a fight with the devil; it is only when he defeats his pride that he has a chance of winning. In *The Legend of the Bluebonnet*, She-Who-Is-Alone shows humility by offering her most prized possession for the sake of the tribe. Each story shows the importance of humility: if characters express humility, they receive rewards, while those who do not often meet violent or tragic ends.
- ✦ **Determination:** Stories in this group teach the importance of determination and perseverance, again values associated with cowboys. Five stories exemplify this: *Pecos Bill*, *Waynetta and the Cornstalk*, *The Great Texas Hamster Drive*, *Little Red Cowboy Hat*, and *Tailypo*. In *Pecos Bill*, Bill must use determination to master challenges others cannot, and when he does, he achieves his goals. In *Waynetta and the Cornstalk*, Waynetta uses determination to outwit the giant, earning the magical tools she needs to save the ranch. In *The Great Texas Hamster Drive*, determination gets the hamsters safely to the depot, and in *Little Red Cowboy Hat*, Little Red's determination outwits the wolf and Grandma's scares him off for good. In *Tailypo*, Kennie Ray must use determination to scare off the swamp critter and protect the greens. Each story presents lessons in determination, presenting characters who stick to their plans to obtain their desires.

Story Analysis: Story Setting

Often, setting serves as a defining characteristic in stories. The setting often illustrates its mood, its characters, or even the theme or moral presented. The Texas story has a definitive setting, and, while this may vary from story to story, generally all Texas stories share some attributes.

The following characteristics help define the setting of a Texas story:

- ✦ A remote or isolated location. Deserts and plains are commonly found. The isolation of the characters underscores such themes as determination and perseverance.
- ✦ Realistic or believable location, with appropriate illustrations. While the setting is clearly Texas or the southwest, stories rarely contain specific names to identify settings.
- ✦ Simple homes; ranches are commonly found. Ranches provide a setting conducive to determination and other themes, while emphasizing the ideas of Texas.

Setting is important for two main reasons. First, it provides a believable background for the story, often emphasizing familiar Texas stereotypes. When considering Texas, the audience

might picture cowboys on the plain, ranches with Texas longhorn, or isolated deserts. The stories utilize these stereotypes to emphasize the story as Texan; by identifying the location as Texas, the story emphasizes Texas culture. Second, it provides the story with a setting conducive to Texas themes. Ranches provide settings that necessitate hard work, perseverance, and determination, all themes recognizable in Texas stories. Other thematic elements, such as humility and integrity, arise naturally from settings containing cowboys. The use of Texas settings provides a framework for characters that exhibit these characteristics.

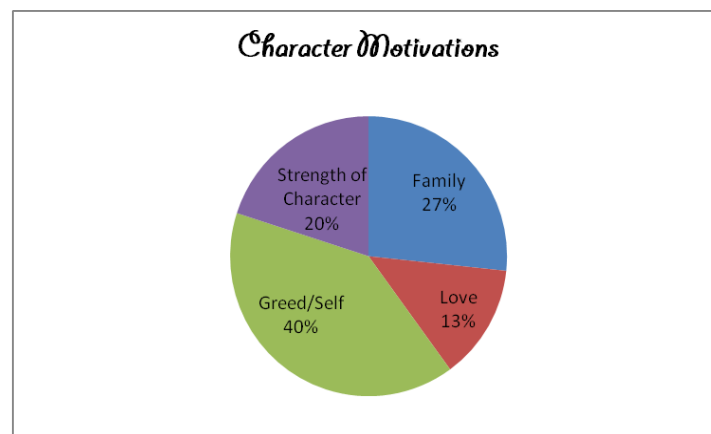
Story Analysis: Characters

Characters are the driving force in any story. As such, types of characters often prove useful in defining a specific story type. While the characters in Texas stories are varied, there are certain shared characteristics that help define the “typical” character. When developed, these characteristics feed on both the necessary motivations and stereotypes inherent in Texas stories.

The following are characteristics are important of characters in the Texas story:

- ✦ **Gender:** Gender does not appear to be an important character consideration. Stories feature both male and female protagonists. *Jack Rabbit and the Beanstalk*, *Pecos Bill*, *Bubba the Cowboy Prince*, *Tailypo*, *Texas Night before Christmas*, *The Gingerbread Cowboy*, and *The Legend of Strap Buckner* all feature male protagonists. *The Legend of the Bluebonnet*, *The Cowboy and the Black-Eyed Pea*, *Armadilly Chili*, *Waynetta and the Cornstalk*, *The Great Texas Hamster Drive*, *The Runaway Tortilla*, *Dusty Locks and the Three Bears*, and *Little Red Cowboy Hat* all feature female protagonists.
- ✦ **Age:** Most Texas stories utilize young protagonists, arguably providing a connection with the intended audience. *The Legend of the Bluebonnet*, *Bubba the Cowboy Prince*, *Waynetta and the Cornstalk*, *The Great Texas Hamster Drive*, *Dusty Locks and the Three Bears*, *Little Red Cowboy Hat*, and *Tailypo* all rely on young protagonists. *The Legend of Strap Buckner*, *Pecos Bill*, and *The Cowboy and the Black-Eyed Pea* all feature adults, but these appear as young adults. *Texas Night before Christmas* utilizes a father, a relatable character for children. *Jack Rabbit and the Beanstalk*, *Armadilly Chili*, *The Runaway Tortilla*, and *The Gingerbread Cowboy* all feature protagonists of unspecific age, noted by using characters that are not humans.
- ✦ **Stereotypes:** Texas stories utilize stereotypes, but these often refer to personality characteristics rather than individuals. Two stereotypes, the rancher and the cowboy, play an important role in characterization. *Pecos Bill*, *Waynetta and the Cornstalk*, and *The Great Texas Hamster Drive* all provide specific examples of ranchers. *Bubba the Cowboy Prince* and *The Cowboy and the Black-Eyed Pea* offer the stereotype of the cowboy. In both scenarios, the importance of the stereotype is that it adds to the Texas setting, providing an expected character type while also adding to the story’s themes by providing a stereotypical rationale for behavior. Other stories use personality stereotypes, such as hard work, determination, southern hospitality, and strong morals.
- ✦ **Motivations:** Texas stories portray four main character motivations: family, love, strength of character, and greed or selfishness. The first three generally appear as positive factors, while the latter provides characters that learn lessons within the story. The graph below shows the breakdown of these motivations. Characteristics include:

- ✦ **Family:** Characters want to help, protect, and/or support their families, and are often willing to take extreme actions. Examples include *The Great Texas Hamster Drive*, *Waynetta and the Cornstalk*, *Tailypo*, and *Little Red Cowboy Hat*.
- ✦ **Love:** Characters want to find true love based in strong character, and often devise methods of testing the worth of possible suitors. Examples include *Bubba the Cowboy Prince* and *The Cowboy and the Black-Eyed Pea*.
- ✦ **Strength of Character:** Characters exemplify positive character traits, thus receiving the rewards they deserve, often attributing success to these traits. Examples include *Pecos Bill*, *The Legend of the Bluebonnet*, and *Texas Night before Christmas*.
- ✦ **Greed/Selfishness:** Characters exemplify negative character traits, often finding punishment or trouble. Repentant characters receive rewards, but those unrepentant frequently meet tragic or violent ends. Examples include *Jack Rabbit and the Beanstalk*, *Armadillo Chili*, *The Runaway Tortilla*, *The Gingerbread Cowboy*, *The Legend of Strap Buckner*, and *Dusty Locks and the Three Bears*.



Story Analysis: Style

Stylistic characteristics often help to define story type, and Texas stories are no different. These stories exemplify a variety of characteristics, and these emphasize the Texas settings and characters portrayed, as well as general characteristics of Texas stories. Some of the most prevalent stylistic characteristics include:

- ✦ **Use of dialogue:** Most Texas stories rely on dialogue to tell the story, so the audience experiences events through the words of the characters. For those stories without much dialogue, the narrator frequently knows much about the event, lending authority to the story. The importance of this characteristic is to increase the immediacy and believability of the story for the audience.
- ✦ **Use of similes:** Many Texas stories rely on similes for description. Often, these similes provide references to the Texas elements of the story, as in such phrases as “purty as a bluebonnet” or “flat as a Texas prairie.” These similes provide strong visual images, allowing the audience to make connections with ideas. They also emphasize the Texas nature of the story by drawing on words, phrases, or ideas associated with Texas. Overall, the story is more descriptive while continually referring to its Texas roots.

- ✦ *Use of repetition:* Some stories utilize repetition of words, phrases, or ideas. While this is not required of the Texas story, it is often useful for emphasizing the moral or key events. Repetition also provides a framework for keeping the audience involved in the story, contributing to pacing. Examples include *The Runaway Tortilla*, *The Gingerbread Cowboy*, *Waynetta and the Cornstalk*, and *Jack Rabbit and the Beanstalk*.
- ✦ *Apparent morals:* Texas stories provide apparent morals, whether explicitly stated or clearly shown through consequences. The audience clearly distinguishes between right and wrong in the story, and characters frequently receive rewards and punishments based on personality traits or specific actions. The combination of explicit morals and reward and punishments serves to emphasize the good while underscoring the bad.
- ✦ *Use of “Texas” words or spellings:* Texas stories often utilize “Texas” words or spellings. Use of “purty” rather than “pretty,” for example, emphasizes the southern roots of the stories, while also providing a basis for Texas dialogue. Other words, such as “howdy” or “blue norther” further emphasize Texas culture in these stories. Overall, the audience experiences greater Texas flavor throughout the telling.

Summary

What, then, is the definition of Texas story? A Texas story is an original work or retelling that delivers the plot, characters, and morals while emphasizing Texas culture. Common themes include friendship, integrity, humility, and determination. Settings are believable and remote, often utilizing ranches. Characters tend to be younger, with motivations including family, love, strength of character, or greed and selfishness. Overall, the choice of characters and motivations generally emphasizes the moral of the story. Common stylistic traits include heavy dialog, use of similes, repetition, and “Texas” words or spellings, and obvious morals. What is it that makes these stories so popular? Perhaps it is that they are understandable, entertaining, and unique.

One of the greatest problems that I had was locating the stories. While there are many Texas stories, few share subject headings or shelf locations. My searches thus focused on specific stories to find Texas variants, necessitating a lengthy and frustrating search process. Because I knew some of these stories, I was better able to locate similar titles, but someone with little or no background would have a hard time locating materials. From this project, I learned about the complexity of stories. I initially thought defining a Texas story simple, but I realized that to define a group of stories relying so heavily on culture you must also define the culture itself. I also learned the importance of cultural stories as an inspiration for cultural identities.

Redoing this project, I would focus on a specific story type (i.e. fairy tales), creating a definition for the type based on many of the same criteria. While Texas stories share many characteristics, there are obvious differences between story types and the analysis would be stronger by limiting the research. At the same time, I would like to use that idea to continue the research. Utilizing more forms of analysis and more titles (which space constraints prohibited here) will provide more detail. Overall, I hope to share these results, beginning with compiling a list of Texas stories for teachers and librarians, as I could find no existing resource bringing together these titles. In my professional career, I hope someday to create a Texas story program. In short, I would like to continue to work to spread appreciation and awareness of the Texas story.

Resources

Baker, Dan. "Famous Texas Quotes." Texas Web Guide. 2008. 29 Oct 2008.
<<http://web2.iadfw.net/danb1/Quotes.htm>.>