



# **JACK AND THE BEANSTALK**

*Based on the story by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm*

*Adapted for the stage by Gayle Cornelison*

*A California Theatre Center Study Guide for Teachers and Students*

## **SYNOPSIS**

The play begins as a troupe of performers gather together to plan a birthday celebration for the King's daughter. The young royal wishes to see them perform the adored tale "Jack and the Beanstalk." Thus, a curious boy, a hardworking mother, an old cow and a touch of magic come to life as the "rehearsal" for the play within the play unfolds. Jack and his mother are forced to sell Old Snow, their beloved cow, because she can no longer provide the milk they need to survive. On his way to sell Old Snow, Jack meets Fantastico, a great magician, who captivates Jack with his magic. Jack agrees to trade Old Snow for magic beans, which Fantastico promises will grow into a colossal vine that will reach high into the sky, which, if climbed, would lead Jack to the palatial residence of the angry, menacing Giant. Wanting to live up to the heroic legend of his father who fought the same mean giant, Jack climbs to the top of the beanstalk and sneaks into the castle. Jack meets the giant's wife, who was brought there from earth against her will. She warns him that the giant is an old tyrant that eats little boys for breakfast. Brave little Jack is not scared, and vows to battle it out with the giant, who years before stole gold and a goose that lays golden eggs from his village below. Using his wits and ingenuity, Jack retrieves the stolen gold. Later,

he returns to further free the town from the giant's corruption by taking back the precious goose that lays golden eggs. Following in the footsteps of his father, Jack becomes the hero of the village.

### **GENERAL DISCUSSION**

1. If you were in Jack's situation, when you needed to make a difficult decision, what would you do? Would you take the "magic" beans, not knowing if they could produce the promised results, or keep trying to sell the cow for some more useful goods? Which choice would you make and why? What strategies would you use to make the decision?
2. Discuss Jack's motivation for wanting to climb the beanstalk and confront the Giant. What does he hope to achieve by taking on such a challenge? Do you think Jack's father would have been proud of his son's heroic deeds?
3. What is the Giant's weakness and how does Jack discover it? How does this help Jack achieve his goals?
4. Discuss the character of the Giant's wife. Why does she choose to help Jack? What does this reveal about her feelings toward the Giant?
5. Discuss Fantastico, the magician. Is he a real, honest magician, or is he a con man trying to take advantage of needy citizens? Why do you think he chose to go to Jack's village? What do you think happened to him after his encounter with Jack?

### **LITERATURE/LANGUAGE ARTS**

1. Read the Grimm Brothers' version of *Jack and the Beanstalk* as a class and then discuss it, drawing comparisons and making distinctions between the book and the stage adaptation. Is there anything from the story that you would like to see included in the play? Write a short critique of the play, giving your opinion of it and its similarities/differences from the original story. Back up your argument with specific examples.
2. *Jack and the Beanstalk* consists of several literary "archetypes." What are archetypes? How have they affected literature and storytelling through the ages? What archetypes do you see in *Jack and the Beanstalk*?
3. Discuss the hero as a literary figure. What is the literary definition of a hero? What kind of a hero is Jack? Compare and contrast Jack with some other well-known fairy tale and mythological heroes.
4. Discuss the villain as a literary figure. What is the literary definition of a villain? What kind of a villain is the Giant? Compare and contrast the Giant with some other well-known fairy tale and mythological villains. What other stories feature giants as villains? Can you think of any in which a giant is not a villain?

### **VISUAL & PERFORMING ARTS**

1. This production of *Jack and the Beanstalk* makes innovative use of theatrical elements such as puppetry, masks, and moving scenery to create visual effects such as Jack climbing the beanstalk and making the Giant and his wife appear huge compared to Jack. Discuss the effectiveness of these techniques as a class. See if you can come up with some ideas to create the same effects using different techniques.
2. The production's scenic design uses small set pieces to suggest settings such as Jack's house, the village in which he lives, and the Giant's castle. This allows the audience to understand where scenes take place without the use of large, dominating scenery. How does this technique enhance other elements of the play, such as the story and the acting?
  - a. Based on the scenic elements you saw, draw pictures of what you imagine Jack's house, his village, or the Giant's castle to look like. Be creative and as detailed as possible. Choose one setting to draw or all three!
3. The puppetry technique used in the production, in which a puppeteer operates a puppet in view of the audience while clothed in concealing fabric, is inspired by a Japanese puppet theatre style called "bunraku."
  - a. Discuss the experience of watching the bunraku technique. What did you like and/or dislike about this method? Was it effective in telling the story? Did you forget that the puppeteer was there while watching the puppet version of Jack?
  - b. Research bunraku as a class. It originated in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century and is still widely seen in modern Japanese theatre. Design and draw pictures of your own bunraku puppets.
  - c. Research other types of puppets and puppet theatre with the class. Possible topics include kabuki, marionettes, shadow puppets, rod puppets, hand puppets.
4. This version of *Jack and the Beanstalk* employs a device called a "prologue" at the beginning of the story. What is the literary definition of a prologue? What is its purpose? Was the prologue for *Jack and the Beanstalk* effective in establishing the story?

### **SOCIAL STUDIES**

1. What did you observe about the time period in which the central story is set? It is not specified, but we can infer that Jack and his mother live under a social system called "feudalism". Research feudalism as a class. How does a feudal society work? How did it originate? What countries operated under feudalism? Roughly how long did it last?

2. One of the central struggles of the story is that Jack's family cow can no longer produce milk, which is a crucial part of keeping the family from starving. What foods and beverages made up the diet of working-class feudal citizens? What roles did livestock (animals such as cows, pigs, chickens, etc.) play in their day-to-day lives?

### **SCIENCE**

1. In this production, the beanstalk effect is created through a mechanical device called a "pulley." What is a pulley? How does it work? What are some real-world objects that are operated, either wholly or in part, by pulleys?
  - a. Look up the following physics terms and define them as they relate to pulleys: force, tension, weight, torque, friction, equilibrium.
2. In the story, Jack trades the cow for some powerful "magic" beans, which, in spite of his mother's skepticism, result in the great beanstalk. Have you ever known a bean to be magic? Research the properties of a common type of bean, such as lima. How might such beans have been useful to Jack and his mother (besides growing an enormous beanstalk)?
3. Grow beans as a class. They can be grown in soil or in water, using containers such as small paper cups, zip-top bags, or glass jars. Draw and label the parts of the bean, as well as any growth that it may sprout. Observe the beans each day and keep a journal of their progress.

### **WRITE TO CTC!**

After watching the play, write us a letter about it. Tell what you liked or disliked about the story, the characters, costumes, set, or anything else you observed. Support your thoughts with examples and reasons. (*Teacher's comments are also appreciated!*)

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