

# Puppet Study Guide

By

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# THE ORIGINS OF PUPPETS

In his book, *The Art of the Puppet*, Bil Baird proposes that masks became associated with magic when they effectively disguised hunters seeking food. Thus, divinity became a central part of the ceremonies in which successful hunts were acted out by masked dancers in hopes of guaranteeing the success of the next hunt.

The first puppeteer may have been a priest who discovered he could hinge the jaw to his mask and fool his peers into believing it was alive. The addition of strings to objects used in rituals performed in dimly lit caves served the same function. Again the tribe was fooled and the great priest became greater because his magic had induced the spirits to visit the totems and bring them to life.

Unfortunately, very few artifacts of ancient puppetry have survived. We know that the ancient Egyptians used puppets, as evidenced by a moving statue found in the ruins of shrines. However, we can only speculate about how they were used. Figures on strings are mentioned in documents of the ancient Greeks and Romans, but we know nothing of the content of the plays that were performed. Clearly, puppets, in one form or another, have been with us since the beginning of civilization.

Different cultures have evolved different kinds of puppets. Many of the ancient forms have been passed down from generation to generation and are now part of the cultural heritage of India, Turkey, Indonesia, Japan, and China. In some cases the puppet show were basically slapstick, geared to the common audience. There were also highly refined performances produced for the enlightened nobility.

It is a testament to the universal appeal of puppets that they have been making people laugh for thousands of years. Puppets have also been used to educate people and to comment on the political and social mood of the day before the advent of universal education.

## PUPPETRY IN EDUCATION

Using puppets to teach is not a new idea. The ancient shadow shows taught popular folk tales to illiterate masses. Even the rowdy Mr. Punch encouraged his audience to think about social and political issues of the day. Children are especially receptive to the lively characters and learn easily from puppets.

While making puppets, children learn skills that carry over into other developmental areas. Motivation is high, so self discipline comes easier. With such concentration, children learn the patience required by craftsmanship. Also, working closely on a project improves their eye-hand coordination. They are guided to pattern their sometimes helter skelter imaginations into meaningful forms.

A puppeteer themselves, children can express themselves more freely through the puppets. The threat of acting or exposing one's emotions is less apparent when a puppet becomes the actor. Communicating original ideas is a valuable experience for all students, and puppets are means to that end.

Children are encouraged to work in small groups to develop an original script or modify an existing story. Through this exercise, students learn the elements that make up a simple story. By creating plot, theme, and climax for their own stories, they can identify them in other reading assignments.

The puppeteer is an artist, actor, writer and director. Many skills are developed and utilized in the course of creating a puppet play or production. This experience is invaluable for the student and a compliment to any school curriculum.



## PUPPETS IN SCHOOL CURRICULA

Artistic expression in making the puppets is only the first step in the process of a puppet production. The puppet's speech and action are also determined by the maker. Once brought to life, children's characters can add dimension to many different study plans, be they historical, social, or cultural.

Puppets can be used to dramatize historical figures introduced through Social Studies and American History classes. In past programs, students have acted out scenes from the westward expansion of the United States, and the Lewis and Clark expedition to the transcontinental railroad. Scenes from the American Revolution and State history come alive when students put the names, places, and dates into a written script that is learned and then performed for other students.

In such a project, language and writing skills are essential and actively incorporated. The children research and transform information into creative writing. One example, is a class whose assignment was to create characters from countries around the world. Students whose country assignment was France, devised a scene where an American newlywed couple on their honeymoon in Paris met the Prime Minister and his wife at a café. Who could be better tour guides!

Puppets can also be useful in helping students cope with social situations. Characters created from a child's imagination can teach them how to react to a bully, greet a new student, help a shy classmate, play during recess, or say no to drugs. In one instance, a boy whose grandmother was dying of cancer wrote a skit with his classmates on how to cope with death of a loved one. Puppets provide a valuable tool for students to internalize what is presented in their personal lives and/or school.



## PREPARATION FOR ARTIST IN RESIDENCE

- \* Research puppet history, stressing their different uses in various cultures around the world.
- \* Note what puppets are popular in our own culture, as seen in television, theaters, shopping malls, and elsewhere.
- \* Identify the various types of puppets used in performance, such as marionettes, shadow puppets, hand puppets, and rod puppets.
- \* Research masks and the societies that use them. Examples can be drawn from American Indians and African tribes, as well as Halloween and other holidays.
- \* Collect pictures of masks and puppets to make a collage.
- \* Read stories, folk tales, and poems from various cultures, to spark plot ideas.
- \* Discuss the elements of a story, including characters, setting, plot, and theme.
- \* Write a simple story about a familiar experience.
- \* Collect "junk" objects to include them in a story. Think about animating them as puppets.

For further reading:

The Art of the Puppet, Bil Baird

The Complete Book of Puppet Theatre, David Currell

The Complete Book of Puppets and Puppeteering, Robert Hanford

The Puppet Theatre Handbook, Marjorie Batchelder



# Puppet Styles

## Shadow Puppets

The oldest puppet shows that bear a resemblance to those performed today were probably silhouettes set to motion on the tents of the early nomads. These crude shadow puppets most likely had no moving parts. Yet a storyteller, with the aid of a campfire, could easily jiggle the cutouts to entertain the tribe on the other side of the tent wall.

The addition of dangling limbs was the next logical step, but it was not until the limbs had control rods attached that a major breakthrough in puppetry was accomplished. With the development of puppet animation through control rods, the emergence of three-dimensional puppets was just around the corner—give or take a couple of hundred years.

Three distinct types of shadow puppets were used in ancient Turkey, China, and India. Though of similar construction—leather cutouts that cast shadows on translucent screens, operated by control rods—the movement, size, style, manner of operation, and content of the plays give each type unique qualities.

## String Puppets and Rod Puppets

As the early civilizations of the East and Far East left their borders to explore new lands, they undoubtedly borrowed the new puppet techniques they encountered. The exact chronology of the development of three-dimensional puppets is unknown but the puppets and marionettes of today have obvious roots in certain older forms. Wayang Golek Rod Puppets; This Indonesian shadow puppet (still in existence today) was three-dimensional rather than flat. Support came from a vertical rod extending down from the puppet. The operation of the arms was also much like its flat counterpart; the Wayang Kulit.

The characters usually represented good, evil, and other human virtues (not unlike the Medieval Morality Plays).

## European Marionettes.

In Europe during the Middle Ages, wooden figures controlled with strings became a popular part of church services. Miracle Shows, as they were called, commonly depicted the Assumption of the Virgin and the Story of the Nativity. The name marionette meaning "little Mary," is derived from these church puppets.

As the popular performances became more and more comic, they moved into the church courtyard and eventually into the public squares. The guilds took over from the monks, and eventually the performances became so rowdy that puppets were no longer used in connection with church services.

## Hand Operated Puppets

**Chinese Hand Puppets.** The hand puppets of ancient China were manipulated by one puppeteer who did all the work, including voices and occasional sound effects. The puppeteers used a small booth or bag-like stage, large enough for just one person. Certain stages could stand free, attached only to the puppeteer (whose feet were visible below the fabric of the booth). Other stages were supported by a single pole, leaned against a building or a wall for stability.

The puppets were small, and snugly fit the hands of the puppeteer. Bamboo and silk reeds were occasionally used to provide the characters with squeaky voices, like Karaghoiz and Punch. Punch and Judy. Punch did not join forces with his wife and the baby until after 1688 A.D. However, the ancestry of Punchunello, the hook-nosed humpback clown, goes back to the Italian Commedia Dell'Arte of the 1500s.

Originally brought to England by an Italian string puller, Punch is classically a vain and brutal scoundrel. Although commonly thought to be mainly an English creation, the same character can be found under different names, in Russia, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Germany. His name may be different, but his personality is essentially the same wherever he is found. His voice alone, distinct from the other characters who appear with him, is created with a reed (swazzle) in the puppeteer's mouth. The fundamental reason for his popularity, in spite of his bad habits, is that as a puppet he is able to do and say all the things that we can't. He satisfies our negative fantasies by beating up the landlord, the police, his wife, his child, the judge, the hangman, his dog, and even the devil himself.

