

**RESEARCH ARTICLE** OPEN ACCESS

# Teenager Image in American Folklore

Sevara Shermamatova

EFL teacher, FerSU, Uzbekistan

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the image of teenagers in American folklore, analyzing how folk narratives, legends, and myths portray adolescence. Using the IMRAD structure, the study examines recurring themes such as rebellion, heroism, transformation, and social belonging. The literature review synthesizes scholarly perspectives on folklore's role in shaping teenage identity. The methodology employs a qualitative approach, analyzing a corpus of American folktales featuring teenage protagonists. Results reveal dominant archetypes, including tricksters, reluctant heroes, and seekers of wisdom. The discussion interprets these findings within cultural and historical contexts, linking folklore to contemporary youth narratives. The conclusion underscores folklore's lasting impact on teenage identity formation in American culture.

**Keywords:** Teenagers, American folklore, myths, legends, archetypes, identity, transformation, cultural narratives.

## INTRODUCTION

Teenagers have occupied a significant place in American folklore, serving as symbols of transformation, defiance, and discovery. Folklore, as a collective repository of cultural knowledge, reflects society's evolving perceptions of adolescence. The study of teenagers in folklore provides insight into historical and cultural attitudes toward youth, highlighting societal expectations, moral lessons, and the transition from childhood to adulthood. Various American folktales feature young protagonists who challenge norms, embark on transformative journeys, or outwit authority figures.

American folklore spans diverse genres, including Native American myths, frontier legends, and urban folktales, each offering distinct portrayals of teenagers. Trickster figures, such as the youthful Coyote in Native American lore, embody cunning and adaptability, traits associated with adolescent development. Similarly, frontier folklore highlights young pioneers navigating harsh landscapes, reflecting resilience and independence. Urban legends, often cautionary, depict teenagers as both victims and agents of supernatural encounters, reinforcing moral and

social boundaries.

Teenagers in American folklore often symbolize the tension between innocence and experience, embodying the transition from childhood to adulthood. This developmental stage is marked by challenges, including the struggle for independence, the confrontation of authority, and the navigation of social norms. Many folktales encapsulate these struggles, portraying young protagonists who must prove themselves in trials of wit, strength, or endurance. In these stories, adolescence is depicted as a time of personal transformation, often accompanied by supernatural elements or moral dilemmas.

The motif of rebellion is particularly prevalent in folklore featuring teenagers. Trickster characters, such as Br'er Rabbit in African American folklore, frequently challenge societal hierarchies and outmaneuver more powerful opponents using intelligence and cunning. These figures resonate with teenage audiences, reflecting their own experiences of questioning authority and seeking autonomy. Similarly, folktales that depict runaway youths, such as Johnny Appleseed, emphasize themes of

exploration, self-discovery, and the pursuit of ideals.

In frontier legends, young protagonists are often cast as resourceful individuals navigating the perils of an untamed land. Their adventures reflect the broader American cultural values of independence, perseverance, and resilience. The young pioneer archetype, for example, demonstrates how adolescents in folklore are often depicted as figures of promise and transformation. These narratives serve not only as entertainment but also as instructional tales, instilling cultural values in younger generations.

Urban legends provide a more modern portrayal of teenagers, often presenting them as both protagonists and cautionary figures. Stories such as "The Vanishing Hitchhiker" or "The Hook" feature adolescents in perilous situations, warning against reckless behavior or moral transgressions. These cautionary tales serve as social commentaries on contemporary teenage experiences, addressing concerns related to peer pressure, responsibility, and the consequences of risky actions. Through these narratives, folklore continues to shape the societal perception of teenagers, reinforcing expectations and norms.

This article investigates the recurring motifs in American folklore concerning teenagers, analyzing their roles and transformations. It situates folklore within broader cultural frameworks, demonstrating how adolescent figures in folk narratives contribute to the construction of teenage identity. By examining these tales through historical, cultural, and psychological lenses, the study reveals the enduring significance of folklore in shaping and reflecting the adolescent experience.

### Literature review

The study of teenagers in American folklore has been the subject of various scholarly discussions, particularly in the fields of folklore studies, cultural anthropology, and literary analysis. Researchers have explored the ways in which folklore encapsulates societal attitudes toward adolescence, often portraying teenagers as figures of rebellion, transformation, and self-discovery.

**Teenagers in Folklore Studies** Folklore scholars such as Alan Dundes (1965) and Richard Dorson (1972) have emphasized the role of folk narratives in shaping cultural perceptions of youth. Dundes argues that folklore serves as

a repository of societal values, reinforcing collective norms and expectations. Dorson extends this argument by suggesting that folklore acts as a cultural mirror, reflecting historical and social changes, particularly in the representation of youth.

**Archetypes of Teenagers in Folklore** Studies have identified several recurring archetypes of teenagers in folklore, including the trickster, the reluctant hero, and the seeker of wisdom. Tricksters such as Br'er Rabbit and the Native American Coyote character embody adolescent rebellion and defiance of authority (Radner & Lanser, 1981). The reluctant hero, often found in frontier narratives, represents the adolescent's transition from dependence to independence, as seen in figures like Johnny Appleseed (Baker, 1996). Meanwhile, the seeker of wisdom, prevalent in Native American storytelling, symbolizes the intellectual and spiritual growth associated with adolescence (Leeming, 1998).

**Psychological Perspectives on Teenage Folklore** Psychologists have also analyzed the representation of teenagers in folklore through the lens of developmental psychology. Erikson's (1950) theory of identity formation suggests that adolescence is a critical period for self-definition, a theme frequently explored in folktales. Bettelheim (1976) applies psychoanalytic theory to folklore, arguing that stories featuring teenage protagonists help young listeners navigate the emotional and psychological challenges of adolescence. These interpretations highlight the symbolic nature of teenage characters in folklore as tools for socialization and personal development.

**Folklore and Socialization** Scholars such as Patricia Sawin (2003) have explored the socializing function of folklore, particularly in relation to teenagers. Folktales often reinforce moral lessons, warning against reckless behavior while encouraging perseverance and intelligence. Urban legends featuring teenagers, such as "The Vanishing Hitchhiker" or "The Hook," serve as cautionary tales, reinforcing societal concerns about youth behavior (Brunvand, 1981). These narratives suggest that folklore not only reflects but also actively shapes societal expectations of adolescence.

**Folklore in Contemporary Youth Culture** The influence of folklore on teenage identity extends beyond traditional storytelling into contemporary media. Scholars such as Jack Zipes (2006) and Maria Tatar (2009) argue that

modern young adult literature and films frequently draw upon folkloric archetypes to construct teenage narratives. The trickster's defiance, the hero's journey, and the seeker's quest for knowledge remain central to contemporary storytelling, demonstrating folklore's lasting impact on teenage representation.

This literature review establishes a foundation for understanding the role of teenagers in American folklore. By synthesizing perspectives from folklore studies, psychology, and cultural anthropology, it highlights the enduring significance of teenage archetypes in folk narratives and their influence on contemporary youth culture.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a qualitative research approach to analyze the representation of teenagers in American folklore. The methodology consists of three key components: data collection, textual analysis, and theoretical framework application.

**Data Collection** The corpus for this study includes a diverse selection of American folktales featuring teenage protagonists. These narratives are drawn from Native American myths, African American folklore, frontier legends, and urban folktales. The primary sources include collections by Richard Dorson, Alan Dundes, and Stith Thompson, as well as archival records from the American Folklife Center. Secondary sources, including scholarly analyses of folklore and adolescence, supplement the primary materials.

**Textual Analysis** A thematic analysis is conducted to identify recurring motifs, archetypes, and character roles associated with teenage figures. The analysis examines how these narratives portray adolescence, focusing on three dominant archetypes: the trickster, the reluctant hero, and the seeker of wisdom. These archetypes are analyzed for their symbolic meanings and their relation to broader societal values and expectations of youth.

**Theoretical Framework** This study integrates folklore theory, psychological analysis, and cultural anthropology to interpret teenage representations in folktales. Alan Dundes' structuralist approach to folklore is employed to classify narrative patterns and symbolic elements. Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development provides a psychological lens, particularly concerning identity

formation during adolescence. Additionally, cultural anthropology perspectives, as explored by scholars such as Richard Bauman and Patricia Sawin, help contextualize these folktales within historical and social frameworks.

**Reliability and Validity** To ensure the credibility of the findings, the study cross-references folktales across multiple sources and applies established folklore classification systems, such as the Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index. Comparative analysis is also utilized, examining how similar teenage archetypes appear in different cultural contexts within American folklore.

By employing this methodological approach, the study provides a comprehensive analysis of the teenage image in American folklore, revealing how these narratives reflect and shape cultural understandings of adolescence.

## **RESULTS**

The analysis of American folktales featuring teenagers reveals three dominant archetypes: the trickster, the reluctant hero, and the seeker of wisdom. These figures embody different aspects of adolescent identity, including rebellion, personal growth, and the pursuit of knowledge.

**The Trickster Archetype** The trickster figure is one of the most prevalent archetypes in American folklore featuring teenagers. Tricksters use wit, deception, and cleverness to outmaneuver more powerful figures, reflecting adolescent tendencies toward rule-breaking and defiance of authority. Folktales such as the Br'er Rabbit stories illustrate this archetype, where the young protagonist consistently outsmarts stronger opponents through intelligence rather than brute force. Similarly, Native American folklore features the youthful Coyote, a cunning trickster who challenges conventions and disrupts societal norms. These figures symbolize teenage rebellion, independence, and resistance to control, mirroring real-life adolescent struggles for autonomy.

**The Reluctant Hero** Another recurring archetype is the reluctant hero, a teenager who initially resists their heroic journey but is ultimately forced into a leadership role due to circumstances beyond their control. This archetype is prominent in American frontier folklore, where young pioneers and settlers face immense challenges and must demonstrate resilience and perseverance. Stories of Johnny Appleseed, for example, depict a young wanderer who unwittingly becomes a cultural icon of perseverance and

environmental stewardship. The reluctant hero's journey reflects the universal adolescent experience of self-discovery and growth through hardship, reinforcing the idea that maturity is attained through trials and responsibilities.

**The Seeker of Wisdom** The third major archetype is the seeker of wisdom, a teenager who embarks on a quest for knowledge, truth, or spiritual enlightenment. This figure is common in Native American myths, where young individuals undertake vision quests or spiritual journeys to gain insight into themselves and their communities. These narratives emphasize the importance of personal growth and the adolescent's role in shaping their own destiny. Folktales featuring seekers of wisdom highlight themes of curiosity, transformation, and the transition into adulthood through intellectual and spiritual discovery.

## **DISCUSSION**

The recurring motifs in folklore highlight societal expectations for teenagers, illustrating cultural values such as independence, resilience, and moral responsibility. The trickster figure represents the teenager's defiance of authority, while the hero's journey emphasizes personal growth through trials. The seeker of wisdom archetype underscores the role of knowledge and experience in the transition to adulthood.

These archetypes remain relevant in modern storytelling, influencing contemporary literature, films, and digital folklore. The rebellious teenager in modern young adult fiction often reflects the trickster's defiance, while contemporary coming-of-age narratives continue to explore the hero's journey. The continued presence of these motifs in media suggests that folklore continues to shape teenage identity and cultural expectations.

**The Trickster and Modern Rebellion** The trickster archetype in folklore mirrors the rebellious nature of modern teenagers, who often resist societal rules and challenge authority. This figure persists in young adult fiction, where protagonists like Holden Caulfield (*The Catcher in the Rye*) or Ferris Bueller (*Ferris Bueller's Day Off*) embody the same spirit of defiance seen in Br'er Rabbit and Coyote. These characters navigate social structures by using wit and intelligence rather than brute strength, reflecting adolescent problem-solving strategies.

**The Hero's Journey and Adolescent Development** The

reluctant hero remains a central figure in literature and media, representing the teenager's transition to adulthood. In folklore, this archetype often undergoes trials that shape their identity and prepare them for future responsibilities. Modern parallels include characters like Harry Potter and Katniss Everdeen, whose growth mirrors the challenges faced by Johnny Appleseed and frontier heroes. These narratives emphasize resilience, responsibility, and self-discovery, reinforcing the idea that hardship is integral to personal growth.

**The Seeker of Wisdom in Contemporary Youth Culture** The seeker of wisdom archetype finds resonance in modern narratives about self-discovery and personal enlightenment. Teenagers in folklore embark on vision quests or seek hidden knowledge, much like contemporary figures who pursue self-knowledge through travel, education, or personal experiences. Films such as *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and books like *Looking for Alaska* reflect this search for meaning, showing how teenagers today still navigate their coming-of-age experiences through exploration and introspection.

## **CONCLUSION**

Teenagers in American folklore serve as cultural symbols, reflecting historical and contemporary understandings of adolescence. These narratives continue to shape perceptions of youth, reinforcing themes of transformation and self-discovery. The enduring impact of folklore on literature and media suggests that these archetypes remain relevant in modern cultural discourse. By understanding these recurring figures, we gain deeper insights into the evolving societal views on adolescence and the ways in which folklore continues to influence teenage identity formation.

The continued analysis of folklore and its relationship with teenage identity highlights how cultural narratives evolve yet retain their core themes. Folklore serves as both a mirror and a mold for societal expectations, continually shaping the way teenagers see themselves and are perceived by others. By recognizing the relevance of these traditional stories, we can better appreciate their role in cultural continuity and the ever-changing landscape of adolescence.

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