

# Stories from Myth: The Tale of Jiraiya the Gallant

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*This article from a blog describes the traditional Japanese folk tale and suggests alternatives. As with any folk tale, contemporary authors often take their own spin on the traditional telling (for example, a reinvention of the three little pigs or the gingerbread man). Students could begin with the familiar tale of Jiraiya and then alter it to another setting or purpose.*

Some of you may already be familiar with the name Jiraiya, but today we are going to focus on the Japanese folktale, “The Tale of Jiraiya the Gallant”. The tale itself has been told in a number of formats since its origin in 1806 with the novel, (“The tale of Jiraiya”) appearing as kabuki theater plays, picture novels, shamisen plays, movies, video games and so on.



The author was supposedly inspired by a tale of a robber in the Northern Song region of China who scribed “I, have come” on the wall in a home he had entered. The name Jiraiya (自来也) came from that phrase: 自 I, myself; 来る to come, to arrive, to be due; 也 to be (somewhere, a sum).

The picture novels (“The Tales of Jiraiya the Gallant”) published 1839 – 1868 were also highly influential. These were based on the original novels, but deviated from and added to the tales in many ways. The first apparent change is in the spelling of Jiraiya’s name which changes the meaning to “young thunder” a nickname acquired in his youth. The other is that Jiraiya is a ninja (more so than a robber). This helped establish the image of ninja as sorcerers.

The tale in its barest form features an heir to a powerful clan that learns Toad magic and becomes a chivalrous robber (much like Robin Hood). He marries the beautiful maiden Tsunade who knows Slug magic. His arch-enemy is Orochimaru, a former comrade, who has mastered Snake magic. The two oppose each other in a war between clans and eventually Orochimaru and the opposing

clan are defeated. Jiraiya is given a title in honor of his deeds and they live out their days peacefully.

The magic of the three main characters is based on a 3-way stand-off idea from that era: snake > toad > slug > snake ... and is functionally the same as: rock > scissors > paper > rock, etc.

Snakes swallow Toads in one gulp, Toads snag Slugs easily with their tongues, and Slugs dissolve Snakes with their mucus (although this proves to be untrue in actuality).

**Classroom Activity 1: Create an alternate ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS** game with different animals and powers. Students explain why one should beat or be defeated by the other. For example, ELEPHANT, MOUSE, CHEESE. Mouse beats elephant because he would tickle his foot. Cheese beats mouse because the mouse can't resist. Elephant beats cheese because he sits on it, etc.



With this in mind, the story can be simplified further! Our hero is a virtuous rascal who has A power. He joins with a beautiful maiden who has B power. His arch enemy has C power. War comes. A+B prove to be greater than C.



At this level we have such a simplified frame that it could cover any number of stories. Personally, I find Toad, Slug, and Snake magic interesting and bursting with interesting applications and ideas, but any number of things could be used instead. If we substitute in Air, Water, and Fire, it sounds a lot like Avatar: the last air bender.

**Classroom Activity 2: Change the story to a political intrigue setting.**

The citizenry are being strained and squirming in dismay beneath the heel of the country's self-declared dictator. A young rebellious merchant stakes his fortunes against the evil rule. In his struggle he is joined by a beautiful and charismatic farm girl who incites crowds with her passion. The dictator's private forces begin moving to quell rebellion before it can take hold, but the spark is lit! Can they survive against the might of the dictator? Is the will of the people strong enough to topple the regime?

**Classroom Activity 3: Remove the magic element but keep the medieval setting.**

Our hero is a young noble ousted from his birthright by the assassination of the King by his half-brother. His family, loyal retainers to the crown, were deposed and disposed of. Our young hero narrowly escapes and he studies the art of mounted combat and cavalry tactics from his mother's family and grows to become an ideal[istic] knight, chivalrous and pure. In his travels returning to his native lands, he becomes enamored of an engineer both brilliant and beautiful! He patronizes her artillery research and she patronizes him mercilessly. His lands are held by a former childhood friend, the son of the usurping half-brother, who has long studied the application of earthworks and infantry. The conflict brewing between the proponents of the fallen King's line and the incumbent usurpers has begun to boil over. Fate is drawing our hero to the fore. He shall reclaim his birthright, by might if he must!

Some links for reference or further reading:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jiraiya> (ENG)

<http://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E8%87%AA%E6%9D%A5%E4%B9%9F> (JPN)

<http://www.fumikura.net/paper/edoyo/edoyo33.html> (JPN)

<http://zui.zeus.blog.163.com/blog/static/9710723020098705942672/> (CHN, JPN)