

Uncle Septimus's Beard

Tall Tale by Herbert Shippey

Why do we EXAGGERATE?

COMMON CORE

RL 4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative meanings. **L 6** Gather vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension.

Have you ever claimed you were hungry enough to eat a horse, or said that you waited in the rain until you were soaked to the bone? Sometimes, in order to express feelings or describe adventures, people exaggerate. As you will see in the tale that follows, exaggeration can add humor to a story and make everyday experiences sound more interesting.

QUICKWRITE Think of a time when you or someone you know exaggerated in order to make a point or make a story more exciting. Then write a brief version of each—the real story, and the exaggerated version. Share your writing with your classmates.



Meet the Author

Herbert Shippey

born 1944

Weeding and Reading

As a teenager, it was Herbert Shippey's job to weed his family's garden. He would often take rests from his work in the hot Georgia sun to read Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. He says that reading opened his mind to "imaginative possibilities." Later, when deciding upon a career, Shippey chose to combine work with pleasure by becoming an English teacher.

BACKGROUND TO THE TALL TALE

Campfire Stories

Folk tales are traditional stories that have been handed down from one generation to the next and are about common people, or folk. When a folk tale is about extraordinary events and characters, it is called a **tall tale**. Some of the first tall tales were told around campfires in the American West of the 1800s.

Humorous Tales

To help cope with their difficult lives, some early American settlers created and told humorous stories. Some of the heroes and heroines of these stories were imaginary characters. Others were real people who were known for their strength and courage. As the stories of these people's deeds were retold, they often became exaggerated, and the people became larger than life.

TEXT ANALYSIS: CHARACTERISTICS OF A TALL TALE

A **tall tale** is a humorous story in which the characters and events are exaggerated. This means that the characters and events are made to seem bigger, louder, or greater in some way than they really are. For example:

Eventually the beard reached down to his toes and began to drag on the ground. Then he had to wash it out every evening to get rid of the dust and grit that would collect during the day.

As you read "Uncle Septimus's Beard," look for other examples of exaggeration. Look especially for the use of a kind of figurative language called **hyperbole**—a phrase or statement that is wildly exaggerated. Often, a hyperbole involves a comparison. Common hyperboles include "I nearly died laughing" and "That cat ran like his tail was on fire."

READING STRATEGY: VISUALIZE

Tall tales are often so full of exaggerated action and description that you can **visualize**, or picture in your mind, many of their characters and scenes. As you read "Uncle Septimus's Beard," make a list of strong sensory images, descriptive words and phrases that help you create a strong mental picture of the tale's events.

Vivid Descriptions

1. Beard used to sweep floor
2. Beard used as a jump rope

VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

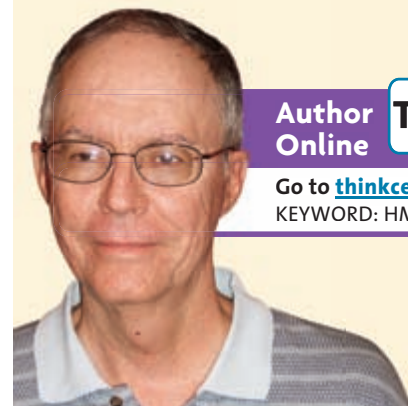
Herbert Shippey uses the boldfaced words to help tell the story of a man's unbelievable beard. Try to figure out what each boldfaced word means within its sentence.

WORD LIST assert imposing incident inspiration

1. Everyone remembers an **incident** involving the beard.
2. No one knew Septimus's **inspiration** for growing it.
3. People **assert** that it was the greatest beard ever.
4. The **imposing** beard was the talk of the town.



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.



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UNCLE SEPTIMUS'S BEARD

Herbert Shippey

No one knows exactly why Uncle Septimus began growing a beard. Aunt Rachel always said that she admired a man with hair on his chin. Her grandfather, a circuit-riding Methodist preacher, was noted for having a long beard. Whenever he stood at the pulpit,¹ pounding his fists and preaching hellfire and brimstone, some people thought he looked like Moses in their Bible pictures. So maybe this **imposing** image, recalled so vividly by Aunt Rachel, was the **inspiration** for Uncle Septimus's decision. Or maybe one day he just got tired of shaving.

Moreover, no one knew why everyone—including his grandchildren—
10 called him “Uncle.” Perhaps his blue eyes sparkled with such good humor and he did so many neighborly deeds that he seemed like an uncle to half the county.

When his beard extended to his waist, Uncle Septimus tucked it beneath the bib of his overalls to keep from dribbling milk, gravy, or cane syrup on it when he sat down to eat. Sometimes, though, he'd forget, and after a meal he'd have to walk to the back porch to shake out the crumbs and bacon rinds. The shakings alone were enough to keep his bird dogs and chickens fat and happy. **A**

Analyze Visuals ►

In what ways does the illustration add humor to the tall tale?

imposing (ĩm-pō'zĩng)
adj. impressive; grand

inspiration
(ĩn'spə-rā'shən)
n. something that motivates or influences

A TALL TALE

Reread lines 9–18.
What details about Septimus and his beard seem exaggerated?

1. **pulpit**: raised platform or stand used in preaching or leading a religious service.



Eventually the beard reached down to his toes and began to drag
20 on the ground. Then he had to wash it out every evening to get rid
of the dust and grit that would collect during the day. Aunt Rachel
was rather pleased with this new development, because she no longer
had to sweep the floor, except under the beds.

The beard grew longer and longer. It became so long that it dragged
several feet behind Uncle Septimus, but he refused to trim it. Sometimes
at family dinners he fell asleep in his favorite chair beneath the pecan tree
in the front yard. Then the grandchildren took the beard and used it as
a jump rope. They swung it round and round and took turns jumping,
but Uncle Septimus never seemed to notice. On other occasions, he
30 looped the beard up in his own hands and let the children swing on it.

The grandchildren all loved the beard, and they enjoyed examining it
while he slept, because they found marvelous surprises. Since the beard
was so long, all kinds of things became entangled in it. One summer
morning two of the grandchildren pulled out a robin's egg, a broken
arrowhead made from caramel-colored flint, six chicken feathers, two
swirled marbles, a silver dollar, and two green lizards that had set up
housekeeping, not to mention tons of cockleburrs and beggar lice.² B

Later that same day Uncle Septimus went fishing at the creek with his
sons. He sat on a log and carefully removed his beard from beneath the
40 bib of his overalls. Handful by handful, he drew the beard out, letting
the end down into the water and then allowing the current to carry
it downstream. It steadily unreeled the way a harpoon rope uncoils when
it has stuck firmly in a sounding whale. Septimus's sons watched the long
gray strand floating downstream until the whole mass was quivering
underwater like seaweed.

Uncle Septimus sat still for several minutes, and then the sons waded
into the creek and began drawing the beard in. Coil after dripping coil
fell upon the sand, and the fish tangled in the beard flopped onto the
bank. Soon there were catfish, bluegills, largemouth bass, pike, jack, gar,
50 snapping turtles, and even a water moccasin.³ There were so many fish
that Uncle Septimus gave a fish fry for the whole community.

Oftentimes on a cold winter night Uncle Septimus wrapped his beard
around himself to keep warm in bed. If Aunt Rachel wanted to wake him
up, she just asked one of her hefty sons to jerk the end of the beard, and
out he would come, rolling like a bolt of fabric tossed on a store counter.

B VISUALIZE

What specific sensory
images about the uses
of the beard most help
you picture the beard
in your mind? Add this
information to your list.

2. **cockleburrs and beggar lice:** any of several plants having small, prickly fruits that cling to clothing or animal fur.

3. **catfish . . . water moccasin:** catfish, bluegills, largemouth bass, pike, jack, and gar are all types of freshwater fish. The water moccasin, also known as a cottonmouth, is a poisonous water snake found in the southeastern and south central United States.

Sometimes Uncle Septimus wrapped the beard round and round himself when he sat at his deer stand before daybreak on a frosty winter morning. In the uncertain predawn light, it looked as if a large, gray boa constrictor had attacked him. Uncle Septimus claimed, though, that winding the beard around himself allowed him to walk through the woods without getting it tangled in the branches and briars. But there was a drawback. It took him most of the night just to entwine⁴ himself, and he had to be careful to leave openings for his arms so that he could shoot. Needless to say, going to the bathroom was a problem. So most of the time he preferred just to let the beard drag behind him on the ground. **C**

You could always tell where Uncle Septimus had been. Old man Marchant said that one time he went to Drothers's store, hoping to find Uncle Septimus. He needed to see him about a hog that had broken out. So he said to Bill Drothers, "I see Septimus has just left because yonder goes his beard dragging out the front door. If I run, maybe I can catch him."

But Bill Drothers, sitting by the stove and reading the weekly paper, didn't even look up. "You needn't bother," he said. "Septimus left over an hour ago, and his beard's been unwinding ever since. Most likely he's home now, sitting on his front porch and chewing tobacco while one of his boys hauls in the beard."

The beard did create problems. One time Uncle Septimus walked several times around the yard raking leaves, and the beard got all fouled up. It had wrapped around a tree several times, and you could no longer see the well for the beard. And the chicken coop was completely covered. It took his boys three days to untangle him, and all that time the chickens didn't lay a single egg because they thought it was night. Uncle Septimus sat there the whole time, complaining about how he missed his fried eggs.

Aunt Rachel kept saying, "Septimus, if you don't cut off that beard, it's going to be the death of you! One of these days you're going to get so tangled up, ain't nobody going to be able to get to you." **D**

After that **incident**, Septimus's sons rigged up a windlass⁵ and wrapped the beard around it. That way he could work around the yard, and his boys could wind the beard back up after he was finished. The beard didn't completely unwind unless he went a long ways. Aunt Rachel also found the windlass useful. Whenever she needed her husband, all she had to do was start turning the handle, and eventually she'd see him coming down the road, led by his beard. **E**

C TALL TALE

Reread lines 52–65. In what way does the simile "rolling like a bolt of fabric tossed on a store counter" create a humorous effect? What other strong sensory images add to the humor here?

D TALL TALE

Reread lines 76–86. How many examples of hyperbole do you find here? Explain how hyperbole and sensory images add to the meaning of the story. What does the skillful use of hyperbole add to the effectiveness of a tall tale?

incident (ɪn'sĩ-dənt)
n. a single event or occurrence

E VISUALIZE

Reread lines 87–93. What sensory details do you find amusing when you visualize this scene?

4. **entwine** (ən-twin'): to twist or coil together.

5. **windlass**: a machine used for pulling and lifting, usually on ships.



◀ Analyze Visuals

What similarities do you see between the tornado and Uncle Septimus's beard in this illustration?

COMMON CORE L 6

Language Coach

Jargon Specialized language used by a group of people who share a profession or interest is called **jargon**. The term *funnel cloud* in line 105 is an example of jargon used by scientists and weather reporters. A funnel cloud is a kind of whirlwind. When a funnel cloud touches land, it is a tornado. When it touches water, it is a waterspout. Some other kinds of whirlwinds are dust devils, gustnados, fire whirls, and landspouts. What are some other examples of jargon that you might hear in a weather report?

Late one March afternoon, Uncle Septimus was plowing in the back field. The wind had been blowing all day, and the beard went streaming off downwind. Everything worked all right for a while. Uncle Septimus simply plowed upwind, and the beard didn't get in his way. It was a big field, and the beard had plenty of room to swish back and forth. But not quite enough room. There was a fence at the edge of the field, and the beard
100 backed up behind the fence and didn't go flowing off into the next county.

Well, Uncle Septimus got nearly forty acres plowed that afternoon, but the wind was blowing so hard he couldn't hear Aunt Rachel standing on the back porch calling him to supper. The boys came out and yelled to get their daddy's attention. But to their horror, the family saw a funnel cloud form over the woods beyond the field and start moving in Uncle Septimus's direction.

That tornado was twisting around, pulling up trees and stumps by the roots and tossing them in the air, and Uncle Septimus, not noticing

anything, just kept on plowing. At first it seemed the twister would miss
110 him. But though it had passed Uncle Septimus by, it was heading straight
for the beard pile behind the fence.

What happened next was simply amazing. The tornado caught that beard
and began winding it up round and round until Uncle Septimus himself
shot off into the cloud like a yo-yo snatched up by a child. That twister
began to roar louder and louder, and the lightning flashed all around.
Hail the size of hen eggs fell. Then the twister began to make a peculiar
high-pitched noise that gradually dwindled to a low hum. Finally, the thing
squeaked once and fell silent, like a man who's choked on a piece of tobacco.
That cloud swelled out like it would bust. It turned green and then gray and
120 purple and black. It swayed back and forth, uncertain which way to go.
And then the thing just blew up. Rain, hail, and clouds flew off in all
directions, leaving a clear evening sky with the full moon shining through.
Even a rip-snorting tornado couldn't deal with that much beard. **F**

Nobody knows what happened to Uncle Septimus. He just disappeared.
Some folks say he was carried up into heaven like the prophet Elijah.
Others say he was blown clean to Texas or some other place out West.
They speculate that even now he's trying to find his way back home.
Others say that he got blown to the Great Smoky Mountains and that he's
living up there today on top of Clingman's Dome,⁶ and that a lot of times
130 when we look up and see a jet contrail,⁷ it's not really vapor but Uncle
Septimus's beard. On windy days, they say, he goes up to the highest peak
and lets the wind catch that beard and stretch it out across the sky, just
to give it a good airing. Other people **assert** that what we take to be
Spanish moss hanging on the oaks in southern Georgia and northern
Florida may really be pieces of Uncle Septimus's beard.

Aunt Rachel preferred to take that view. She'd ride down the road beneath
the oak trees and say, "You know, it's kind of comforting to see the Spanish
moss. In a way it's kind of like Septimus never really left home. Seems all I'd
have to do is start tugging on one of those moss tips, and pretty soon here
140 would come Septimus back from Texas or Tennessee or wherever he's gone."

You may take whichever view you prefer. But one thing is for certain.
Uncle Septimus's beard was the most wonderful ever, and it's unlikely
people in this part of the country will ever stop talking about it. Probably
in the future they'll say he was kidnapped by aliens and that the tail of
Halley's comet⁸ is really just his beard stretching across the night sky. **G**

F VISUALIZE

Reread lines 112–123.
Which descriptive words
and phrases help you
visualize the scene?

assert (ə-sûrt') v. to put
into words with force or
confidence; maintain

VISUAL VOCABULARY



Spanish moss *n.* a plant
of the southeastern
United States with gray,
threadlike stems that
droop in long clusters

G TALL TALE

In what ways has Uncle
Septimus become larger
than life?

6. **Clingman's Dome:** a mountain located on the border of North Carolina and Tennessee. It is the highest peak in the Great Smoky Mountains.

7. **jet contrail:** a visible trail of water vapor or ice crystals that sometimes forms behind a jet plane.

8. **Halley's comet:** a bright, heavenly body with a cloudy tail that is visible from Earth about every 76 years.

Comprehension

1. **Recall** Reread lines 24–30. How do Uncle Septimus’s grandchildren make use of his beard?
2. **Clarify** What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of the beard?
3. **Summarize** What happens to the beard during the tornado?

Text Analysis

4. **Visualize** Look at the list of vivid descriptions you made while reading. Which sensory images made it easiest for you to visualize the beard? Explain.
5. **Identify Characteristics of a Tall Tale** As Septimus’s beard grows, so does the unbelievability of details and events. Draw a picture of a long beard. List examples of sensory imagery and figurative language, such as hyperbole, that the author uses to describe the beard as it grows. (Put the earliest descriptions at the top of the beard and the last examples at the bottom.) How does the increasing exaggeration add to the meaning and effect of this tall tale?
6. **Examine a Character** Aunt Rachel has both positive and negative feelings about Septimus’s beard. Skim through the story and note her reactions to the beard. Are her feelings about Septimus and his beard more positive or negative overall? Explain your answer.
7. **Analyze a Character** Uncle Septimus was not a hero in the usual sense, yet he was a much-celebrated character. What made him special to the people around him? Cite examples from the story.

Extension and Challenge

8. **Creative Project: Music** Many American folk heroes, such as John Henry and Pecos Bill, had songs written about them. With a group of classmates, write a song about Uncle Septimus and his incredible beard. Present your song to the rest of the class.
9. **Inquiry and Research** Some characters who appear in tall tales were real people. Research American folk literature and find a character from a tall tale who was based on a real person. Why did he or she become the subject of a tale? Share your findings with your classmates.

COMMON CORE

RL 4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative meanings. **W 7** Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources.



Why do we EXAGGERATE?

Look back at the two versions of a story you wrote—the real story and the exaggerated version. After reading “Uncle Septimus’s Beard,” what new ideas do you have about the reasons people exaggerate the things that happen to them?

Vocabulary in Context

▲ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Choose the vocabulary word that best completes each sentence.

1. Len's unusual height and large build made him an ____ figure.
2. The winner of the race was an ____ to her fans.
3. In one embarrassing ____, Stella tripped on the stairs.
4. Lisa's parents ____ that she is a gifted pianist.

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN SPEAKING

• circumstance • contribute • element • significant • tradition

The **traditions**, customs, and stories passed down within a culture are known as its folklore. With a small group, decide which **elements** of "Uncle Septimus's Beard" make it a good example of folklore. Use at least two of the Academic Vocabulary words in your discussion.

VOCABULARY STRATEGY: ANALOGIES

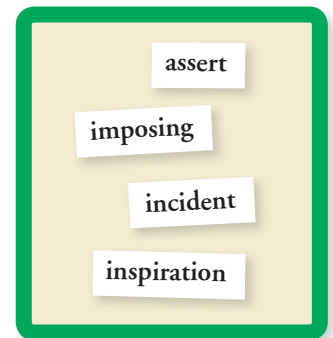
In tests, you may encounter test items called analogies. An **analogy** describes a relationship between two different things. It is expressed using two groups of words. The relationship between the first pair of items is the same as the relationship between the second pair of words. For example,

whisper : shout :: soft : loud (*Read this as "whisper is to shout as soft is to loud."*)

In this case, you are comparing degrees, or qualities, of things: A whisper is soft; a shout is loud. Another common kind of analogy asks you to compare whole to part or part to whole: "pizza : slice :: cheese : wedge" (*A pizza is divided into slices; cheese is divided into wedges.*)

PRACTICE Choose the word that correctly completes each analogy.

1. strings : guitar :: keys : ____
a. car b. piano c. door d. chain
2. face : beard :: head : ____
a. wig b. hat c. hair d. scarf
3. engine : car :: ____ : flashlight
a. lens b. bulb c. switch d. battery
4. teachers : school :: ____ : hospital
a. doctors b. interns c. patients d. visitors



COMMON CORE

L 5b Use the relationship between particular words to better understand each of the words.

