

ICELANDIC CONCEPTUALIZATION OF WOMANHOOD: FOLKTALES AND THE SHAPING OF THE MODERN MINDSET

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**Abstract:**

For my research, I would be examining the culture surrounding fairytales and folkloric traditions in Iceland. The focus of my examination would be through a gender studies perspective, analyzing how female characters are portrayed in classic folklore and how, in turn, this has affected the modern Icelandic conceptualization of womanhood. I would extensively read Icelandic folktales and visit a variety of cultural centers in Iceland to identify how well-preserved fairytales are in their culture. I would use evidence from Iceland’s governmental gender policies, statistics regarding the gender divide in public spheres like the workplace, as well as a conducted survey of native Icelanders studying at the University of Iceland, which would include questions on how they view gender, how egalitarian they believe Iceland is, as well as how they identify with the folkloric culture of their country. For convenience and functionality, I would be traveling to Reykjavik, Iceland specifically because, as the center of political and cultural life in the country it is the most ideal place to conduct my research.

**Introduction**

From a psychological perspective, there is no other form of literary cannon more influential on society’s Jungian “collective unconscious” than that of the folktale tradition. Fairytales represent the simplest, purest form of a culture’s shared human psyche because their fabric of archetypal characterizations and their moral teachings weave together to form the basic material of cultural identity. As Marie-Louise von Franz puts it; “their value for the scientific investigation of the unconscious exceeds that of all other material” (2). How we conceptualize gender and the ideal woman often comes from the impression fairy tales have on us during the formative points in our childhood psychology. With all this in mind, if we were to look at a progressive society, one in which gender equality policies are considered the best in the world, the most effective way to examine the social psyche of this society would, in theory, be to explore their folktale traditions. One such society exists: Iceland. By examining, in tandem, both Iceland’s modern governmental policies regarding gender equality and the archetypal, moral themes prevalent in their folktales and how they represent women specifically, can we discover a connection between Iceland’s progressive views and their oral heritage traditions?

**Background/related work and motivation**

I previously took a Gender and Pop Culture course, which first sparked my interest about the ways in which our cultural psychologies are shaped from early exposure to fairy tales. Most works in this area of research are concerned with how westernized fairytales have influenced American culture specifically because of our extensive exposure to folktales via entertainment platforms such as Disney and Pixar films. I studied the ways in which the overt glorification of often violently heroic storylines in fairytales have contributed to the American conceptualization of the ideal masculine figure as being brutish and soldier-like and how this false idyllic figure has contributed to certain societal issues, such as domestic violence, fraternity hazing, and the celebrity of warfare. Although fascinating, the study of fairytales as shapers of *American* culture is not only already extensively researched, but the results of the studies are often that fairytales have largely been a detriment to the pursuit of gender equality in our society (Neikirk 38). I wished to find a culture in which it’s folktales have perhaps benefited how they view gender and who’s cultural mentality is reflected in governmental policies. In terms of a virtual gender utopia, there is no country in the world more progressive than Iceland (Einarsdóttir 5), nor is there many countries with such a rich folktale heritage. Their mythology and fairytale stories have been well preserved within their cultural memory (Somvichian-Clausen 3) and I found many articles related to the portrayal of women within these tales. For instance, Catharina Raudvere and Martin Puhvel’s articles both addressed the characterization of female creatures in Icelandic sagas, either as shape-shifting horrors of the night called maras or as mighty, ferocious she-trolls. What these sources, as well as many of their kind, lack is the applicability to the present culture. Inversely, I found many statistical analyzations of Iceland’s progressive policies that lacked application to the past. What they require is a connecting factor – a true analysis of their possible interdependence.

**Methods**

The first act of my research would be to extensively read Icelandic folktales. This would help me to better understand others’ interpretations as well as help me formulate my own understanding of their female representations. This could realistically occur while I still remain in the United States, before any trip to Iceland itself. Digital achieves exist containing a plethora of Icelandic folktales.

I would also preemptively research the official policies put forth by the Icelandic government regarding gender equality as well as the history of feminism within their government. For instance, researching the history of The Women’s Alliance, female presence in positions of political power, and the current statistics regarding the equal gender ratio of representatives in their parliament (Marinósdóttir 1).

In order to properly investigate how folktale traditions are upheld in Icelandic culture, I would need to travel to Iceland to visit certain heritage museums, institutions, and sites.[[1]](#footnote-1)\* For instance, Safnahúsið (the Culture House) would be a good place to visit because it houses exhibitions on the literary traditions of Iceland in culturally historical context. The Nordic House is another cultural center and is unique because it boasts an impressive library of children’s literature and host many children’s cultural events throughout the year revolving around folktales. The Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies has an impressive manuscript and archival library, but the reason I would want to visit it specifically is for their folkloric collection. The Institute has collected over 2,000 hours of recorded folklore in order to preserve the tales in the original which they were intended to be heard – orally (Eggertsdóttir 1). Not only would I examine the abundance or dearth of historical material and access to folktales in these institutions, I would also note the number of such institutions and how well funded they are by the Icelandic government. This would give me an idea of how well upheld the preservation of Icelandic folk heritage is in terms of policy and how much national attention it warrants from those in charge. Also, I would note the popularity of these institutions among the populace, for instance, how many people attend the events put on by the centers. As a result of my previous readings of Icelandic folk literature, while at these institutions, I could specifically look for the folktales I know to be pertinent to the characterization of women.

As for the cultural importance of folktales to a modern Icelandic audience, there is one woman I would love to interview. Ragnhildur Jónsdóttir lives about a half hour south of Reykjavik and she self identifies as a translator and a communicator between the world of humans and the world of the hidden-folk (creatures from Icelandic folklore). She provides guided tours through her Elf Garden where visitors can ask about the “elf world” (Collins 1). I could not only ask her about the hidden-folk and their relevance to modern Icelandic society, but I could also ask her about the portrayl of women in these folktales. As an Icelandic woman and an expert on these tales, I’m sure she could provide useful insight that is relevant to my project. If Jónsdóttir is unavailable for me to interview, I could also visit the Elf School which is designed to educated and entertain visitors with the folkloric stories of Iceland.

Once I have fundamentally established the importance and relevance of folklore in Icelandic society, I can hone in on the gender studies aspect of my project. My plan would be to formulate a survey which I would administer to both female and male students at the University of Iceland who are Icelandic citizens. The nature of the survey questions would be formulated after my preliminary research (the reading of folktales and familiarizing myself with governmental policies) but would relate somehow to how relevant folktales have been to them throughout their lives and in their surrounding culture, how they have been exposed to the folktales (entertainment, films, books, libraries, oral stories, etc.), how they conceptualize the ideal woman or man, and how these fairytales have affected their outlook on gender. I would also like to interview Ólöf Magnúsdóttir, Svanhvít Tryggvadóttir, Sólrún Ingvadóttir, and Kristín Mjöll Jakobsdóttir. These four women are currently conducting a project through the University that aims to translate Icelandic folktales into a virtual reality experience. As experts in their field, I believe it would be useful to get their take on folktale culture in Iceland and as women, they would have a helpful outlook on how these stories contribute to the Icelandic conceptualization of womanhood.

**Expected Results**

As a result of my research, I would write a formal research paper based on my findings. To accompany the paper, as I am primarily a visual artist, I would also take my research and transform it into a painting. The content of the painting would depend on my conclusions and relate directly to the subject matter in my paper, however I would like to incorporate the stylistic aspects of Icelandic folktale illustration in my final work possibly paired with certain modern techniques and symbolisms.

**Conclusion**

I believe that in order to adequately analyze the possible relation between Iceland’s egalitarian mindset regarding gender equality and their long history of folktale traditions, I must explore several aspects of Icelandic culture. Through the extensive reading of folktales and familiarization with gender policies, I can contextualize further research and provide a foundation upon which I can develop. By visiting cultural heritage centers in Iceland, I will investigate the systems and institutions Iceland has put in place to preserve their folk traditions and continue them on into modern society. Likewise, stepping away from national cultural centers, by interviewing Ragnhildur Jónsdóttir I can also gain insight into how regular Icelanders view the importance of fairytales in their society. Lastly, through surveying university students and through an interview with female academics studying and conducting research on the preservation of fairytales in modern culture, I could get a consensus from educated Icelanders about how they conceptualize womanhood and the importance of folktales in that understanding.

**Budget**

Time:

* The time I would be investing into this research endeavor would include the preliminary research, writing the final paper, and painting the final piece.

Airfare:

* Flights from LAX to Reykjavik average around $600.

Entry fees:

* The Nordic House, the Culture House, and the Árni Magnússon Institute are all free admission public centers.
* I would require $64 for a session at the Elf School.

Lodging:

* The hotels/motels in Reykjavik average around $50-$60 per night.

Food:

* Since I would only stay in Reykjavik for 4-5 days, averaging $20 a day for food purchases, $80 - $100 would suffice.

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1. \* Reykjavik, as the center of Icelandic modern life, is home to almost all of the cultural centers and all cultural institutions I mention in this section are located in Reykjavik except for Jónsdóttir’s Elf Garden. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)