Summary

Trolls are recurring characters in Icelandic folktales, there are numerous stories about them turning into stones and abducting children. One of the most famous trolls in Icelandic folktales is the female ogre, Grýla. While she is best known for her influence in old folktales, Icelandic parents did, and still do, scare their children from certain places or from misbehaving by telling them that Grýla could come and abduct them. The main focus of this thesis is on Grýla, and her household is also introduced. Her husband Leppalúði, her sons whom are well known as well (as the Yule lads) and her vicious cat. A major part of this thesis is also about how Grýla is depicted in both pictures and stories. Poems from as early as the 17th century to more modern stories such as Adventure on Christmas Eve is analyzed. Whether Grýla is an animal, a troll or some kind of a breed between those two will be discussed with reflection on what it can mean that she has all these animalistic features. The focus is also on other creatures in folktales and fairy tales that resemble Grýla, they will be compared to her and to each other. Famous trolls from two Icelandic children’s books; The Go-Between and A Giant Love Story are used in comparison to Grýla; and to show that even though they are of the same race they are not necessarily similar in all ways. Grýla stories can be categorized as both cautionary and folktales, these genres are examined as well with a focus on the main themes; cannibalism, violence, fear, courage and heroes.
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Introduction

Grýla, the main subject of this essay, has a special place in the Icelandic nation’s heart, she is an infamous troll woman who was used as a tool to scare children into submission, but today she is mostly known for being the Yule-lads’ mother. Because Grýla is of a troll race, this essay also covers how that race is presented in Icelandic folk and fairy tales. Grýla will be compared to two well known troll characters in two Icelandic children’s books, the night troll in *The Go-Between* (ic *Skilaboðaskjóðan* 1986) and Flumbra of *A Giant Love Story* (ic *Ástarsaga úr fjöllunum* 1988). Even though this essay mostly covers Grýla and stories about her it also covers the categories Grýla stories fit into, fairy tales, folktales and cautionary tales. These stories all have common themes which will be covered as well.

The first and largest chapter of this essay covers Grýla and her family. We will see who she is what she looks like and a few pictures of her will also be shown and analyzed. Grýla’s pet cat will be introduced as it has also been in folktales almost as long as Grýla herself. The main books that were used while writing this essay are *The Go-Between, A Giant Love Story, Adventure on Christmas Eve* (ic *Ævintýri á aðfangadag* 1993) and *The Tale of Augasteinn* (ic *Ævintýrið um Augastein* 2003). These stories all have one thing in common, and that is trolls and/or Grýla. The trolls in both *The Go-Between* and *A Giant Love Story* will be compared to each other and to Grýla, they both have a lot in common with her and even though they are both night trolls they are quite different from each other. The difference between night trolls and more “normal” trolls will be examined in this chapter as well. The second chapter covers cautionary tales and the themes they have in common with other stories such as fairy tales and Grýla stories. Fear, courage and heroes are a common theme in many of these stories; we will look at what fear can do to young children and what defines a hero or a heroine. The third and last chapter covers what myths and fairy tales have in
common, and why all stories need to obey certain kinds of rules. It also covers cannibalism which is a big part of cautionary tales and much folklore that the brothers Grimm collected.
1. Grýla and other trolls

Grýla is married to Leppalúði and together they have 13 sons, the Yule-lads. Grýla is a predator and preys on children who disobey their parents. She is believed to be a troll but looks more like a breed between a human, troll and an animal. It is quite difficult to find the origin of the word Grýla but the Norwegian word *gryle* means to howl or growl which goes well with the way Grýla has been described (Lamb). The name Grýla can also be translated as the one who terrors (Guðjónsson 13), so the name Grýla suites her quite well as she does terrorize children.

Every child and adult in Iceland knows who Grýla is and has heard stories about her while growing up. She is a troll, she is the Yule-lads’ mother and last but certainly not least she loves to eat naughty children. Grýla’s favorite pastime is to find naughty children to eat, so if they do not want to be eaten they should do as they are told and behave. Trolls such as Grýla, her sons and the three troll men she has been married to (Gusti and Kuldaboli, her ex husband’s and Leppalúði, her current husband) have been used for time immemorial to get children to behave and do what their parents tell them. It seems as though the writers of the stories do not agree on how many children Grýla has, some say she has 8 others 13 and yet others say she has 20 children but today it is more common that she has 13 sons. In a verse about Grýla’s children called “An old verse about Grýla’s children” (ie “Gömul þula um Grýlubörn”) it says that she had 20 children and the youngest ones were twins who died in their cradle. Leppalúði is Grýla’s third husband and he is the Yule-lads father; he is extremely lazy and in some stories he is bed-ridden so Grýla has to fend for herself and beg and steal so her children can get something to eat. Nowadays Grýla and the Yule-lads are most often “used” around Christmas time to get children to behave and go to bed early. During the middle of the 20th century the Yule-lads started giving Icelandic children little gifts in their
shoes at night, a few nights before Christmas. The children nowadays put one of their shoes in the windowsill in their room, and if they behave and go to bed early they get something nice but if they are naughty and stay up late the Yule-lads will leave a potato or a piece of coal instead of candy or toys in their shoe (Björnsson).

There are many Icelandic children’s books that star Grýla as a major character, there have also been written many poems and verses about her. She is most often described as very vicious and hideous, she has horns, hoofs, fangs and many eyes in some stories (Bergsson) but in more recent stories she is more like a big-boned, tired housewife. Grýla as we know her first appeared in a poem by a priest named Guðmundur Erlandsson who died in 1670 (1595-1670). She also appears in a poetry book by Jóhannes úr Kötlum that was published in 1932 and a character similar to Grýla (of a troll race) is mentioned in Snorra-Edda from the 13th century (Ólafsson). In Guðmundur’s poem Grýla is described as being gray around the neck and sounding like an eagle. And in this poem she tries to spend the night at the children’s homes. It is hard for her as she cannot stand the Christmas lights or sounds of the people singing Christmas carols. She also complains about hunger so the children must be very well-behaved there seeing as she does not eat them. In this poem Grýla’s description is similar to the description of a vagabond, who travels from house to house and tries to lure the people into giving her something to eat. At the time Guðmundur was young it might have been a common thing to see vagabonds begging, so his description of Grýla might be colored by his acquaintance with one of them.

Back in the days when Grýla was used every day to scare children into doing what they were told by their parents, the parents used to point at a hill that was near their home and say that Grýla lived there and could hear if the children were misbehaving and would come and take them away if they did (Sveinsson). In Jóhannes’s poem Grýla is described as being sad and ugly, and depending on how the children behaved she would be overweight or bony
and one Christmas the children were so well-behaved that she and Leppalúði starved to death. At the end of the poem Jóhannes asks the children not to bring her or Leppalúði back to life (Kötlum 5). The author might have been trying to ease the children’s fear of Grýla by saying she was dead and also telling them that they have to stay nice and well-behaved if they do not want it on their conscience that she came back to life.

In one non-traditional story, published in Morgunblaðið newspaper in 1962, Grýla becomes good after listening to a sermon at the town church. In that story she does not eat the naughty children but instead she eats their cuss words and bad behavior. The Yule-lads are sent to town every Christmas to irritate the children when they are playing with each other so that they will squabble and fight. Then the Yule-lads will collect all the bad words the children use and bring them back home and Grýla then makes a stew out of them and the worse the words and behavior is the better the stew tastes. One Christmas the Yule-lads all come home empty handed because the children are so well behaved, Grýla is not happy with this and decides she will go with them to town next Christmas to make sure they will not return empty handed again. Next Christmas Grýla dresses up as gentlewoman and goes to town with the Yule-lads. They follow the town’s people to mass and after listening to the priest, Grýla gets very upset. She is ashamed of her behavior and goes straight home and tells her husband, Leppalúði, that now they have to change their ways and to compensate for the Yule-lads bad behavior towards the children, they will from this day forward make sure the children feel the true Christmas spirit (Guðjónsson 13).

In this story Grýla resembles a low class woman rather than a troll; her children are not well behaved or well raised. She is not as big or scary as in the other stories and she has no animalistic features. The main theme in this story is the same as in Jóhannes úr Kötlum’s poem but different from other Grýla stories, it is conscience. Here we see a more vulnerable side of Grýla and her family, because of what Grýla does (eat children) it is very bizarre to
think of Grýla even having a conscience. The conscience is our ability to know when we have done or said something wrong, when this happens people get feelings of remorse and feel quite bad about themselves. Because of Grýla’s remorse and guilt she wants to make things right and make up for all her bad behavior, this shows a more human side to Grýla which is very uncommon. The fact that Grýla’s demeanor and looks changes in the story above, from being very cruel and hard too being soft and nice is a more effective way of showing the reader that Grýla has indeed changed.

In an issue of the Canadian newspaper Lögberg-Heimskringla from the year 1989 there is a recount of what Grýla is doing at that time. It states that Grýla “sits in her cave with an ear horn pressed to her ear and listens, listens hard for the sounds of bad children. But our modern conveniences are great inconveniences for Grýla. The chorus of jet planes, cars, telephones, radios and televisions impair her hearing” (H.K.D).

Grýla has been moved from folktales to poetry and into modern children’s books. The modern stories do not really have a real course of events and they are more or less just descriptions of what she looks like and what she does to children. Sometimes they also describe how Grýla is feeling when the children are being naughty or nice. One thing these stories also have in common is that Grýla never succeeds in eating the children she abducts; there is always this one character who can be both a boy and a girl who saves all the other children. In The Tale of Augasteinn her own sons (the Yule-lads) make sure she cannot feed the main character, Augasteinn, to her cat by knitting him a pair of new socks in time for Christmas (Bergsson 47). The children who outwit Grýla are the heroes or heroines of the stories and poor Grýla must get even madder and hungrier, for it seems as though she never gets to eat her favorite meal.
Grýla has a pet cat who is just as horrible as his owner, he is black and in some stories he is big like Grýla and in others he is just like any other cat in size and shape. Grýla and her cat have been of immeasurable assistance to parents in Iceland while they try to discipline their children in the very busy season before Christmas. In pictures, the cat is generally shown as very vicious, his teeth are big and sharp and his eyes are often yellow. The cat’s teeth give the fact away that it is evil and it could jump right at you and bite. This cat’s name is the Yule cat (ic Jólakötturinn) and he eats children who do not get new clothes to wear for Christmas. In other stories the Yule cat eats adults and children and in yet others it just steals their food instead of eating them. Maybe people did not want to scare the children as much when telling them stories about the Yule cat, so it was decided to tell them he eats their food instead of the child itself. According to Jón Árnason’s folktales, recorded in the 19th century, the Yule cat sometimes ate the people’s Christmas dinner. The master of the house did not want his family to be taken away by the Yule cat so he would punish his servants around Christmas by giving them less food or no new clothes to wear (“Jólaföt – Jólaköttur”).

Thinking back to when these stories were most effective it comes as no surprise to see why the people were scared of the Yule cat and of Grýla. People were very poor and it was not a given thing to get any Christmas presents and food was very sparse and it was thought of as very shameful if the Yule cat came and took you away because you were too poor to get any new clothes (Ólafsson 8). We see this in the modern children’s book, The Tale of Augasteinn:

“Aha,” she said and smirked. “You only have one shoe, little one. And your clothes are in rags. You may be very good but you do not have any new clothes! And Christmas starts at six! Hahahaha,” she growled in spite...“You are a kid for the cat, kid for the cat, kid for the caaaaat, hahahahahaha.” (My transl. Bergsson, 44-45)

In The Tale of Augasteinn the cat is so gigantic that Grýla cannot control it, so it has to be tied up far from her cave. The reason why the cat has to be tied up far away is because it
is so vicious and mean, but around Christmas it is let loose and wanders about looking for food (Bergsson 38). In *Adventure on Christmas Eve* the cat is much smaller and fits on Grýla’s shoulders (Árnason 16). When the cat is described as gigantic it is more efficient in making the reader believe it is very vicious and there is a good reason to be afraid of it, but it is harder to believe that a small cat is as dangerous as it is described. Who would not be afraid of a cat that is bigger than a horse or even a troll?

The pictures that are included in the stories or poems about Grýla show the reader just how horrible she looks. Children often “read” the pictures while the adults read the actual story and by presenting Grýla as changing in the picture the painter shows the young reader that she has indeed changed and become kinder. When people experience emotions whether they are good or bad they show facial expressions which give people around them a glimpse of how they are feeling. So by having a picture that shows Grýla’s changing demeanor says almost as much as the words describing her change. Grýla is most often portrayed as very ugly and mean and here when she turns good she becomes slightly pretty, this could be argued to be society telling us that if you are bad you are thought of as being ugly but if you are nice you automatically become pretty. In a picture by a well-known Icelandic artist (illustration 1), Tryggvi Magnússon, one can see Grýla running after two boys and a girl with her hand stretched out and her big bag on her back. In this picture she looks more like a giant woman than a troll. The children in the picture look very afraid as they run away from Grýla.

Illustration 1: Grýla with her bag chasing young children.

By Tryggvi Magnússon.
In *Stafrófskver* (an alphabet book) by Jónas Sveinsson which was written in the year 1873 Grýla is described as

Grey and hairy with a horn on her head. Tall of stature, she had teeth that reached to her chest and a tongue that could reach across great distances. Of her four eyes the largest was on the nape of her neck. She had a large lump on her back and the fingernails at the end of her long arms were claw like. (Hanson 19).

In an Icelandic poem written by Þórarinn Eldjárn in 1992, Grýla and Leppalúði decide to go to school. Their children are all grown up and moved out, so they are depressed and have nothing to do. The picture that reflects what is going on in the poem is by Sigrún Eldjárn and it shows the old couple carrying their schoolbags (Illustration 2). In the same picture Grýla has hoofs on both her legs but she does not have a tail, her nose is still big and pointy and her hair is black and thick. The main difference in this picture from all the others is that she has two hoofs instead of just the one.

In *Adventure on Christmas Eve* Grýla is not described with words but there are a few pictures of her and she looks really mean, she has fangs and an enormous mouth. Her black cat is standing on her shoulder and looks just as mean as its owner. In comparison with the two children Grýla is holding in one of the pictures (Illustration 3) she looks very coarse and big-boned. Her clothes do not resemble anything trolls are thought of wearing. She is wearing a cap with tassel that is worn with the national dress of Iceland, a green jacket or a rope, her dress is striped red and white (the conventional colors for Christmas) and she has a huge blue
bow on her chest. Grýla’s skin is pinkish and almost wrinkle-free except for the wrinkles around her mouth. Her nose is really thin, long and pungent and she has red lipstick on. Her hands are very big and if it wasn’t for her long red painted nails they could be described as masculine. Grýla’s eyes are relatively small and she has very long black eyelashes, her eyes seem to be dark and the lens is very stingy and small. In this picture it seems as though Grýla takes care of herself and the way she looks, to some extent at least. In picture number five, Grýla looks more like a cat-like animal than a troll or a woman, her chops look like a snout on a cat without whiskers and there is blood running down her chin.

Illustrations 3 and 4: Grýla cooking children and Grýla with her cat.
By Halldór Baldursson.

Illustration 5: Grýla and her sons. By Halldór Baldursson
In an article published in the Canadian newspaper *Lögberg-Heimskringla* in 1995, Gudrun Hanson recalls her mother telling her stories about Grýla and singing special children’s songs to her (ic *Ljúflingskvæði*). In her recollection Grýla is not a troll or an animal-like creature but a witch who was married twice and not three times like in most of the other stories. Gudrun also says that after Grýla’s second husband died (according to the story, both her husbands died) she had to fend for her family and she begged, stole and sang with one of her daughters. Gudrun says that she was told that Grýla used to stand in the corner of a room where children were learning their lessons and was ready to take them away if they misbehaved or did not study (Hanson 19).

In the book *The Tale of Augasteinn* it says that Grýla is so hideous that she cannot really be described, and no one has ever dared to look at her so no one really knows exactly what she looks like. Like people can imagine she has not bathed, brushed her teeth or washed her clothes for hundreds of years so she does not just look bad but she also smells horribly bad (Bergsson). Seeing as no one has ever seen what Grýla really looks like in this particular story there is only one picture of her and it shows how people imagine what she looks like.

Illustration 6: The many faces of Grýla. By Halla Sólveig Þorgeirsdóttir
In the first picture Grýla has a fish instead of a head, her fingers are out of alignment and her back is very crooked. In the second picture she has a tail and big goat-like horns on her head. The third one shows her as a two-headed monster, one head has horns and three eyes and both heads have long black hair. On the fourth picture one can only see Grýla’s head and she has three eyes, very pointy teeth and long black hair. The fifth and last picture shows Grýla more like she is described in other stories, she has one hoof and one leg, her nose is huge (just as in the other pictures) with a wart. But what is very different from other descriptions is that she has a fish-like creature sticking out of her back (Illustration 6). In The Tale of Augasteinn the reader only gets to see Grýla’s hand as she puts Augasteinn (the main character of the story) in her pocket, her skin is green, with black streaks which are probably dirt and her nails are long (Bergsson 44–45).

In a picture that was published in Morgunblaðið December 24th 1961 Grýla is standing outside her mound as Leppalúði crawls out the doorway. That picture depicts Grýla in a very different way, her ears are very large and they dangle down to her shoulders, her horns are thin and very long and sharp, she also has a long beard that almost touches the ground. This is also the description of Grýla in the poem by Guðmundur Erlendsson discussed earlier. (SJ)

In more modern pictures and stories Grýla resembles more a human being than a troll, in some pictures she still does have a hoof and her tail but she is dealing with normal problems like weight loss. In the book Rakkarapakk: með kveðju frá jólasveinafjölskyldunni the reader gets to see a different side of Grýla as she stands in front of a mirror in her underwear, her black hoof is very visible, the leg is normal down to her knee and then one can see the thin black hoof, she has a big pointy nose, a hairy wart on her chin and elfish ears (Björnsdóttir).
In Brian Pilkington’s version of Grýla she resembles more the troll-like creature children have been hearing about for time immemorial. Grýla has little horns coming out of her head, a big nose, one hoof and her hair is long and black. It could be said she resembles a devil.

What can it mean that Grýla has all these animalistic features? The fact that Grýla has a tail, a hoofs instead of feet, and horns on her head can all lead to people thinking of her as an animal rather than a human being or even a troll. Seeing as trolls are not often described to have tails or hoofs it can be argued that Grýla is indeed a mixture of an animal and a human being and not a troll. Grýla’s tail is similar to the tails of many animals, such as the cow’s tail and the lion’s. Similar to the lion, Grýla is a predator and she is high in the food chain just like the lion. She sits and waits very impatiently for her pray all year long and finally in December when it draws near Christmas, she attacks. Unlike the lion, Grýla is rather picky about what she eats and she does not “hunt” in a group of trolls but goes alone to catch her pray. Grýla’s hoof is similar to the hoof of a bull or a horse. It depends on what picture is being examined or analyzed what animal’s hoof Grýla’s hoof resembles. Similar to the wild and untamed horse breed the mustang, Grýla’s hoof strength is a result of the environment she lives in. The fact that she does not have any horseshoes on her hoofs gives us the impression that she could be a wild animal. Grýla lives in the mountains where there are stones and rocks and not a lot of grass or other even ground, so her hoof must be very strong to endure such a big woman walking or even running on the ground.
There are descriptions of Grýla’s horns as both very large similar to the horns of the Rocky Mountain Bighorn sheep or goats, but sometimes they are very small like the horns of the Devil (e.g. Illustration 7). It is very unlikely that Grýla uses her horns the same way as the rams do, but they fight for the right at mating time to reproduce with the ewes by clashing their horns together (“Rocky Mountain”). It is very unlikely that Grýla would have clashed horns with Leppalúði to reproduce all her Yule-lad sons so it is not known if she has any use of her horns. In other pictures her horns resemble the horns of the Devil, the enemy of humankind and is an embodiment of all that is evil (“Devil”). Grýla is in a sense the embodiment of evil like the Devil seeing as she was used to scare children and people. It could also be argued that she is an enemy of the humankind because she wants to eat all the naughty children. On the other hand it indeed could be argued that Grýla is not an enemy of the humankind seeing as she only takes the naughty children whom cause their parents a lot of grief and sorrow, so in a sense it looks as though Grýla is trying to rid the humankind of the “unwanted” children. Grýla can smell children from far away but she only likes the smell of the naughty ones; the good children smell too sweet for her to handle. So like an animal her sense of smell is much more evolved than that of a human. In *Tale of Augasteinn* Grýla cannot stand the smell of Augasteinn because he is so well behaved and innocent: “‘Oh!’ Shrieked the shrew, ‘that little one is more innocent than the sun!’” (Bergsson 44)

When a person is perceived as ugly, he or she tends to be treated with a different attitude than people whom are perceived as pretty. Ugly people are also thought of as being unpleasant to look at and nobody wants to be ugly. The moral in these stories could be that if you do not want to be perceived by others as being ugly then you should not be naughty or mean. Ugly people are often judged quite quickly, this might not be correct in Grýla’s case seeing as she is both evil and ugly, but if there was ever a woman whom was the prototype for Grýla, she might have been judged too quickly by the people who saw her because of her
looks. If Grýla is in fact real, she might have been nice and maybe she was not trying to eat the children, she might have been trying to be nice to them but they always got scared of her because of the way she looked.

Not all trolls are like Grýla, they can be nice and could not care less about the humans, and they can be very motherly like Flumbra from *A Giant Love Story* or lazy like her lover. So in fact some trolls can be similar to humans by the way they interact with each other. The difference between trolls also depends on whether they are night trolls or more “normal” trolls like Grýla. The night trolls turn to stone if the sun hits them while the normal ones can be outside whether it is day or night. These two kinds of trolls can mainly be found in Icelandic folktales. There are some modern Icelandic stories for children, for instance *Skilaboðaskjóðan* and *Ástarsaga úr fjöllum* that include night trolls.

The night troll in *The Go-Between* by Þorvaldur Þorsteinsson does not like any of the other creatures that live in the forest. He strides through the forest during the night and abducts the main character, Putti, and takes him to his cave; his intention is to make a troll-doll out of him so he can play with him for thousands of years. It can be seen in *The Go-Between* that the other forest creatures are always thinking about the night troll and are extremely afraid of him:

At first I thought it was the night troll knocking on my head. But then I remembered that it cannot lurk about when the sun is shining. It would turn into stone at once if it would look out its cave on such a beautiful day. (My transl. Þorsteinsson 4).

This night troll is the only one of its kind in the whole forest, and he has no one to love or play with. Because he is a kind of a hermit he must be very lonely and sad, and being lonely and sad must make him extremely angry. The night troll might be so envious of the rest of the forest creatures because they are happy and he is not, that he wants to make their lives
miserable, and make them afraid of the dark. Guðrún Helgadóttir’s *A Giant Love Story* is about a troll woman named Flumbra; she has eight troll sons with her lover with whom she is very much in love. Flumbra does not want to irritate the humans or steal children to eat them, in all likelihood she does not have any time to wonder about the humans as she has enough to do with her time, taking care of her children and she therefore seems very happy. This story tells us that the trolls are very lazy and dirty and they only cook every hundred years but despite how they act it does not mean they are evil. They are just living their lives far from the human-beings and are not trying to interfere in their lives. Flumbra and her lover are very tall, so tall in fact that a whole sheep can easily stand in the palm of their hands (Helgadóttir 4). Flumbra is a mother figure and extremely different from the night troll in *The Go-Between*, she is in love and is loved. Perhaps love is the reason why Flumbra leaves the human-beings alone, the trolls in *A Giant Love Story* are family people or trolls in this sense and not loners like the night troll in *The Go-Between*. The night troll in *The Go-Between* turns to stone when the other characters in the story trick him out of his cave right before the sun rises. But Flumbra turns to stone with all her sons when she is on her way to see her lover who is too lazy to come to her.

It can be asserted that Flumbra resembles Grýla in some ways, she has black hair that she wears in two braids, and she has a big nose and many children. She is a mother like Grýla but unlike her, Flumbra actually looks motherly and seems too show affection to her sons, she breastfeeds them and apparently takes good care of them (Helgadóttir 12). Pictures show more than a thousand words and the difference between these two night trolls is best seen by examining how they are portrayed in pictures. These show that the two creatures seem to be opposites of each other, one is evil, the other is not, one is a mother and the other is a loner, one is hideous and the other is quite cute and kind looking.
Like the trolls in *A Giant Love Story* the night troll in *The Go-Between* is very large and towers over all the trees in the forest; he has grey tangled hair and very hairy legs (Illustration 8). The nails on his fingers and toes are very long and they look dirty. His eyes are big and far apart and his mouth which is open is very wide and it seems as though he only has five or six teeth. His hair resembles the hair of a crazy professor who has become a hermit and he dislikes everyone around him. The hair on his legs underlines the fact that he is a male. He is wearing a skirt which is strange, but also makes sense. There is no one to sew him some clothes so he must have taken it upon himself to make that skirt so he would not have to walk around naked.

Flumbra is quite cute, she has very prominent and big ears, her eyes are squinting but despite that the kindness in them is obvious (see Illustration 9). She has a warm smile that shows in her entire face, she has hairy arms and it seems as though she also has a hairy chest. Flumbra is not a very feminine creature, just like Grýla. Her clothes are very
different from the night troll’s clothes is *The Go-Between*. The fact that she does not care to mingle with the humans makes it believable that she must sew her own clothes and the clothes her sons are wearing.

In *The Go-Between* everyone is extremely happy that the night troll is dead because then they can all live without fear of the dark and fear of him coming to take them away. When Flumbra and her sons turn to stone in the end of *A Giant Love Story* the reader could feel emotions of sadness because he might have related to her in some ways and also because she seems to be kind so the reader might have some compassion for her and her sons.

There are numerous stones in Icelandic nature that resemble trolls and are believed to have been trolls in the past. The small Icelandic island Drangey is mentioned in an Icelandic folktale about two night trolls that were walking their cow through Skagafjörður, when the day broke and they all turned into stone. The troll woman still stands to the south of the island but the man fell into the sea years ago ("Upptök Drangeyjar"). Almost every Icelandic person has heard this folktale and each time they drive past the troll woman they point at it and tell their children or foreign friends the story behind it. No one really knows why night trolls turn to stone instead of dirt, grass or something else but the reason might be that they live in the rocks (ic *Bergbúar*) and it is more logical that they turn to stone than into something else that does not affiliate with them (Þorsteinsson). It is also only logical that the night trolls turn to stone when the sun comes up rather than when it goes down, as the contrast to day light is the night and the darkness and that is when the “evil” creatures go on the move (Þorsteinsson). Most trolls in Icelandic folklore and fairy tales live like the poor and that is the reason why they are presumed as being grumpy and mean. People are often very afraid of them because they believe they are evil, and because they are often depicted to eat human flesh (Þorvarðardóttir).
There are some creatures in the world outside Iceland that resemble Grýla and were also “used” to scare children. Jakob Jakobsen was a Faroese grammarian and writer, he wrote his thesis about the Norse language that was spoken in the Shetland Islands. Jakobsen had heard of a word used for female trolls or ogresses, ketthontla, the word derives from other words that are used to describe female dogs and female cats. His informants heard stories about a ketthontla when they were children and in them she is depicted as a terrible female monster, a monstrous hybrid of a dog and a cat (“Ketthontla”). From the description of the ketthontla she seems to be very similar to Grýla, a breed between some kind of a monster and an animal.

In the Shetland Islands and the Orkney Islands people told stories about an ogress named Kit Huntling and she was said to be very bestial and thought to be a variation of a fertility-spirit, but those kinds of spirits were very common in Norse folklore (Lamb). In Germany there lived a creature similar to Kit Huntling, she was tall and elegant and her name was Bertha. She was believed to be very bestial like both Kit Huntling and Grýla. Bertha had long teeth and messy hair and she traveled the skies riding her wolf, when she got angry she became very mean. Like Grýla she abducted children but she did not eat them, instead she would cut them up and fill them with straws. Like Grýla these ogresses were used to scare children from certain places. In the Shetland Islands these kinds of creatures were called Greuili or Uiligreuli which means a “mean-Grýla” and children were told she would come down the chimney of their house and abduct them if they behaved badly.

Grýla is an ugly and evil creature, but it depends on the stories that are being told just how ugly and evil she is. She was obviously used to scare children so that they would not dare to misbehave. There are many stories about different kinds of trolls, like the night trolls and they are not all bad like the story of Flumbra shows us. Folktales and Grýla stories can be
categorized as cautionary tales, their attributes and traits will be rounded up in the next chapter of this essay.
2. Survival of the Cautious.

Many cautionary tales are very violent; they show what happens to curious and naughty children in a very vivid way.

The word *caution* means “security” or “surety” and these cautionary tales were meant as security tales, and the reason why children were told these kinds of stories was to make sure they would not endanger or hurt themselves. They were told all kinds of monsters lived in the sea or on the cliffs so that they would be too afraid to go there. What people might have forgotten is that children are born with a natural curiosity so it is very unlikely that they would comply with their parents’ wishes or threats because they would want to see the monster with their own eyes. These stories resemble horror stories, as the children who disregarded the warnings come to very unpleasant fate and it is all described in gruesome detail, they for example catch on fire and get beaten to death. Many stories that adults read for their own entertainment were changed into cautionary tales for children. “Little Red Riding Hood” for an example was a thrilling entertainment story for adults but was changed into a cautionary tale where the little girl disobeys her mother and ends up almost getting eaten by the wolf (but like in most cautionary tales she narrowly escapes from her horrible fate). Today people might say these kinds of horror stories could have had the opposite effect on the vulnerable children, they might have had a deep emotional effect on them and could have caused nightmares and left them with all kinds of fears of certain places, acts or even people. The reason for parents to scare their children in the olden days was because they could not spend a lot of time making sure their children would not hurt themselves in dangerous surroundings. So these stories helped the parents make sure their children would not do things they were not supposed to do when they were not around (Ingólfsdóttir). One of the reasons why cautionary tales were so popular with parents was that they could make
someone else out to be the bad guy, the only one to blame if Grýla would come and abduct you was yourself.

As regards, the children who heard those stories of Grýla stealing and eating naughty children, there is a higher chance that they would get worried, instead of being cautious. The children could become anxious because of these frightening stories they could also develop psychological trauma as a result of them being insecure. People can fear things they have never actually experienced as the children who were told Grýla and cautionary tales did, and it can provoke exactly the same response as if they were experiencing it in real life. The children were taught to fear Grýla and therefore, they could start fearing people who resemble her description (Layton). The parents who used cautionary tales in their children’s upbringing probably did not realize that they were creating fear inside their children’s minds or that it could have such a long-term effect on them. It can be said that the people who are clever enough to keep away from dangerous situations or places are more likely to stay alive (Layton).

Children disobey because they are naturally curious and stubborn; these are thought of as vices and are singled out for punishment in cautionary tales. Cautionary tales aim to mold the child’s behavior by showing them in gruesome details the consequences of their disobedience (Tatar 25). In all cautionary tales the prohibitions lead to violations and the consequences are generally distributed once the child has disobeyed their parents. Some people might think that the consequences are unfair because most children are curious and test the boundaries, and that trying to change the nature of children means trying to make them into miniature adults. Many children also have a very active imagination and hearing stories of mutilation or cannibalism could make their imagination go wild and that could be like pouring oil on a fire when it comes to fear.
Cannibalism is one of the themes of many folktales, fairy tales and cautionary tales. The witch in “Hansel and Gretel” tries to fatten the children up so she can eat them, in “Tom Thumb” the main character is almost eaten by a man he is staying with. People seem to be very afraid of being cooked alive or eaten by someone. All these stories have the same themes in common which are the hero or heroine, courage and fear.

Fear is an emotional response and it makes sure we respond to dangerous situations or things. There are physical responses to fear that prepare us to flee or fight for our life when we find ourselves in dangerous situations (Layton). Fear has many different faces, it can be classified as caution, worry and horror and all these classes can be related to cautionary tales. The fear that the children experience in safe surroundings is said to contribute to a valuable experience and that is how they learn á hreadsluvíðbröð sín (Klintberg 36-37). That kind of fright is different from the fright children experienced in the old days when the parents did not have time to make their children feel safe and they were just scared and had to fend for themselves, but on the other hand children often like to get a bit scared and especially if they feel safe in their surroundings (Ingólfsdóttir).

The violence used in these types of stories is often excessively cruel and unusual and it is very unlikely that it would happen in real life. These stories are supposed to teach children a lesson, if you do not obey you get hurt or punished. In many countries children had to witness executions and hangings because they showed the price people had to pay for criminal behavior, and by witnessing such gruesome events people thought it very unlikely the children would follow in the criminals footsteps (Tatar 46).

There are two kinds of courage in the world, physical courage and moral courage. Whereas physical courage is when people show courage when they themselves could get hurt or die while helping out the ones that are in danger, moral courage is when a person does the
right thing. In *Adventure on Christmas Eve* the main character Nonni shows much courage when he sneaks into Grýla’s cave and saves his two friends Sigga and Gummi, he gets really close to Grýla and the rest of her clan and could end up in the cell where his friends are kept. Nonni’s physical courage makes him a hero, not only does he follow Grýla up to her cave but he jeopardizes his own life by saving his friends’ lives. But it seems as though he does not care or think about the fact that he could die or get hurt (Árnason 27). In an Icelandic poem called “Grýla reið með garði” (“Grýla rode by the wall”), Grýla is carrying a bag full of children but one girl is so courageous that she follows Grýla and cuts a hole in the bag so all the children get out safely and escape.

A hero or heroine is someone who shows a lot of courage in the line of fire, he or she might not be the most courageous in the beginning of the story but ends up saving the day. All of these heroes follow similar rules or steps, they leave their home (their safe place) to go on a quest or an adventure. In this adventure the hero grows up and matures, the hero leaves as a child but returns as an adult or at least a more mature person. In the end when they return home and get their happy ending, sometimes the hero or heroine marries the prince or princess and sometimes they reunite with their family and loved ones. Every story has to have a hero or a heroine because he or she is not just someone who has super human powers but the person who gets away from Grýla or the evil witch in “Hansel and Gretel.” The hero and heroine are also characters the reader has to be able to relate to and put himself or herself in their situation and perhaps even look up to.

All Grýla and cautionary tales have more in common than just these themes; they have also the same rules in common that they need to obey. These rules are very important but why are they so important? Cannibalism is also a big theme in many cautionary and Grýla tales, but what is cannibalism and why is it believed to have been practiced?
3. What kind of stories are we telling our children?

All stories have rules they must obey, otherwise the story may become unbelievable and the reader might start to lose interest in the story and the plot. The reason why stories need to obey these rules is because they need to assure a degree of predictability in the plot (Tatar 36). The witch in *The Go-Between* exclaims:

> “Haven’t you ever read fairy tales?” howled the witch.

> “Don’t you know that they would be spoiled if we would suddenly start doing good deeds?”

Maddamamma was speechless.

> “You have to accept reality, Maddamamma. We are not going to help you and you are never going to see Putta ever again. Fairy tale rules are fairy tale rules. Now leave this instance so we can eat our dinner.” (Þorsteinsson 22)

Many fairy tales and folklore were written and told in a time of much poverty and famine (“Hansel and Gretel” and “Tom Thumb”) and they often show parents abandoning their children. The parents are either trying to save their own lives or they are trying to save their children’s lives and hope someone else will find them and be able to take better care of them (Tatar 195). In most of these stories there are strangers who find the children and pretend to be nice and take them under their wing, and lure them into their home with promises of food or candy. These people always give the children a lot of food to eat and it looks as though they are saving the children from starvation and death but they are indeed trying to fatten them up so they can kill and eat them, because they themselves and starving. Thinking back at these stories it seems quite strange that these people spend their food on the children just so
they can eat them, this must mean that they wanted to practice cannibalism and not just because of necessity.

The events in both myths and fairy tales are very similar to daydreams, the fulfillment of wishes or destroying of enemies. But the difference between our dreams and fairy tales is that the fairy tales have been shaped by the conscious mind and not just by one person’s imagination. The events that occur in myths are very mythical and unique and could not happen to anyone else than the main character in the story, since unique events do not happen to ordinary people (Bettelheim 37). Fairy tales are fictional stories and they always happen “once a upon a time” rather than in actual time, in places that do not exist and are far away and very different from the real world. They also often include magic and mythical creatures such as trolls, fairies and witches. The adventures that are depicted in fairy tales can be reflections of actual challenges people face on their journeys through life, so people might find it easy to relate to these stories (Young). Stories can also be made up to make people afraid of the unknown, like the “barbaric” people of the “new world.”

In some societies myths are regarded as true stories about the far off past, seeing as they generally take place in a time when the world was very different from what it is now and it tells the story of how the world and universe became as they are. There are many different types of mythical creatures depicted in myths depending on the society they are told in. They can include primal gods such as Odin and Thor or animals such as unicorns. The characters in myths are often more exceptional than most people so they can be used as role models, and myths were also used in the olden days to establish taboos and uphold current social structures (“Mythology”). According to Roland Barthes myth is a type of speech, it matters in which way the message (which is the myth) is uttered and not what it is about, therefore according to him anything can be a myth (Barthes).
The Brothers Grimm collected oral stories from the German public and published a book called *Children’s and Household Tales* in the year 1812 (Ashliman). Many of the customs and beliefs of the people are approached in these kinds of folk and fairy tales, as in the case of Grýla in Icelandic folktales. Folklore is most often stories that have been passed down over the years by word of mouth (oral stories) from generation to generation (Sigurðsson).

Some stories tell of parents who eat their own children because of famine. The story “The Children of Famine” is about a mother who cannot provide for her two daughters and tells them she has to kill and eat them in order to stay alive (Tatar 193). Cronus also ate all his children after he found out that one of them would overthrow him (Tatar 202). It is dumbfounding that a parent could eat his or her own flesh and blood but many social factors, such as the fact that the parents find they cannot take care of their children, has an effect on their thinking. That can lead to a state of mental derangement in which a parent could and does eat his or her child.

Cannibalism has been the subject of children's books and fairy tales from time immemorial. In *Adventure on Christmas Eve* the Yule-lads have to move fast in order to get some food for their mother who is on her way to catch some naughty children.

She is actually renowned for being both mean and ugly!” Said Door Sniffer [ic. Gáttapefur]. "When Christmas is near she becomes very dangerous. If my brothers and I don’t act quickly and bring her food, she storms to town and brings the naughty children with her back home. And if she beats us to the cave she boils and eats the children! (Árnason 19)

The Grimm’s brothers involved cannibalism in many of their stories such as “Hansel and Gretel” and “Tom Thumb,” and it has also been used a great deal in cautionary tales.
Cannibalism is when a human being eats another human being or in other words when one species eats a member of the same species. Cannibalism is not thought of as being a social norm and is there for not accepted in most societies, in other words it is a taboo in many, if not all, modern societies (“What is Taboo?”). Looking at these things it seems strange to use the word *cannibalism* to describe the fact that Grýla eats children’s meat; she is not referred to as a human being so she cannot really be referred to as a cannibal. But on the other hand, cannibalism has mainly been used in stories as punishment so it is not unlikely that Grýla is punishing the children by eating them. It cannot be said that Grýla only eats the children because of famine or other societal things because she only eats the naughty ones and when the children stop being naughty she stops getting anything to eat and starves. The fact that Grýla was or is a cannibal might be both because she is far from being a part of the norm; she has hoofs and horns and is horribly mean. Also it might be because she is not a human being and there for the same things and taboos do not apply to her.

The word *cannibal* goes as far back as the year 1553 and it came about because of a misunderstanding. The word is a variation of the name Carib which was a tribe of warrior people and people were made to believe they ate human flesh, from that belief the word *cannibal* came to be used (“Cannibal”). Cannibalism is believed to be as old as all mankind, the fact that someone would eat their fellow men makes them less than human to those who do not agree with it, and people fear them and are disgusted by them (Nicholls). Cannibalism was not practiced during a major part of the 19th Century and it is believed that it was mainly practiced in isolated South Pacific cultures (Raffaele). There are signs of butchered human bones all over the world and genetic researchers suggest that many humans today carry a gene that worked as protection against brain diseases that spread by eating human flesh (Roach). In the Aztec culture cannibalism was not brought upon because of hunger but the belief that it was a way to communicate with the gods, only the upper class was allowed to
partake in the ritual but everyone wanted extra food and therefore everyone wanted to be a part of the upper class (Montenello). In some tribes in North America it was also believed that eating body parts of a brave warrior that had passed on would give you their braveness, eating the heart was thought to be the best part and only other warriors would eat that while the rest of the body could be eaten by the women and children (Bélanger).

When the Englishmen sailed to North America they were expecting savage and barbaric people but instead they found nice and welcoming tribes. When these tribes resisted the overtures of European traders and settlers they were suggested to eat human flesh to make them look more barbaric and evil (Nicholls). But the natives were not the only people who practiced cannibalism; the settlers in Jamestown were starving during the Starving time of 1609-1610 and had to turn to cannibalism in order to stay alive. George Percy wrote of the cannibalism that was going on in Jamestown and he suggested that it was not a willing act but very necessary in these extreme circumstances (Nicholls).
Conclusion

A lot has changed since the first books and poems about Grýla were published. The earliest poems and stories describe her as a child-eating monster. In some of the more modern stories Grýla has given up children’s meat all together and is a more normal, frustrated mother of thirteen extremely misbehaved boys. Many a mother can put herself in Grýla’s footsteps and it is not incomprehensible that she is as mean or frustrated as she seems to be. Her husband Leppalúði is an extremely lazy troll man, in many stories he is bed-ridden so Grýla has to take care of him as well as her sons. In other stories Leppalúði is a sorry excuse for a man and no woman (I know at least) wants to have to raise and take care of her grown husband.

Trolls have been living in Iceland for time immemorial and it is possible to find rocks in nature that resemble trolls and are actually believed to have been night trolls. A night troll is the more common type of a troll in Icelandic folktales but they are very different from the type of troll Grýla is. Night trolls turn to stone if they are outside during daylight; Grýla on the other hand can be outside both during the day and the night so in a sense she is much more dangerous than the night trolls. Even though Grýla has a lot in common with both Flumbra and the night troll (from The Go Between) she is one of a kind. She has many animalistic features and seems to behave more like a predator than a human or a troll. The fact that she is like an animal can help her whilst catching children, she must be extremely strong, and she is also described as very tall so she towers over all normal human beings. Children today are often told that Grýla has stopped eating them but it might just be something the adults tell them so they stop being afraid of her. There is really no reason for Grýla to stop eating naughty children if it is her favorite meal.

Grýla stories can be categorized as folktales, fairy tales and cautionary tales. Like Grýla stories, cautionary tales cover cannibalism and gruesome violence towards children.
Children are punished for being children; curiosity and other childlike characteristics are singled out as being bad things. Bad behavior is something the society does not like and it seems as though people try what they can to fight it. What these stories teach children is to be afraid, afraid of the dark, afraid of trolls and other monsters and afraid of misbehaving. Fear is a natural response and without it we could not figure out when we are in danger and when we are not. Within reason fear is normal and necessary but cautionary tales are likely to establish a higher degree of fear that can be bad for the child’s psychological health.

The brothers Grimm did a great job collecting folktales in their days; these stories often come upon things that were actually happening. By reading stories about things you can relate to makes the story much more believable and in a way it may be much easier to become afraid of whatever subject they cover. Cannibalism is an important theme in folktales. Poverty and famine can lead people to do incomprehensible things; such as eating each other. It does not matter whether the cannibal is of a troll race or lives in a tribe in South America, people are just as afraid of them. Therefore Grýla will always be a figure of terror, because you never know when she will crave the taste of a child again.
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