



Sons of Norway Mini Presentations

#301: TROLLS

Image: Theodor Kittelsen postcard depicting a scene from Soria Moria Castle (Soria Moria slott), a fairytale from the book, Norwegian Folktales.

Photo credit: Theodor Kittelsen, 1900. National Library of Norway, www.nb.no

ASBJØRNSEN OG MOE NORSKE FOLKE-EVENTYR



Cover art to 1914 edition by Theodor Kittelsen.

Trolls are the classic antagonists of Norwegian folklore. Famously depicted by Erik Werenskiold and Theodor Kittelsen in the illustrations of one of Norway's most culturally defining books, *Norwegian Folktales* by Peder Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe, trolls are an integral part of the Norwegian identity going back to Norse mythology. According to ancient myths, trolls were thought to have begun with the earth itself, sprouting from the feet of Ymir, a huge wild frost giant. These first trolls, which grew to a monstrous size, had six heads and six

arms. Supposedly, they arrived in the Nordic countries before the first humans, when the glaciers rescinded and land began appearing. When humans began arriving, trolls retreated into the mountains and forests so that they wouldn't be seen.

Rumors of their existence, along with beliefs of their great strength and magical powers, were widespread. They were thought to be hulking creatures with shaggy hair and course features, most with long noses covered in tufts of grass or pine bushes. Despite their rough appearance, trolls had the propensity to surround themselves with riches. Some were believed to live in castles filled with treasures while others favored mountain halls where they watch over their buckets of silver and gold.

Despite the size and strength of most trolls, it was believed that they had a few weaknesses. For instance, trolls were unable to be outside when the sun was shining. They would emerge from their homes to wander through the forests at night and return before dawn as sunlight would turn them into stone or cause them to burst. The many rock formations found in the Norwegian countryside are said to be the result of trolls being exposed to the sun.

It was also believed that trolls were not fond of symbols of Christianity like churches and the cross, and were rumored to become irritated at the smell of a Christian man's blood. According to folklore, trolls dislike the sound of church bells so much that they threw large stones at the church spires in an attempt to stop the ringing. But they had little success. The large stones near so many Norwegian churches are attributed to the trolls' poor aim.



Forest Troll by Theodor Kittelsen, 1906.

Because of their imposing size and naturalistic appearance, they were thought to be very powerful and dangerous creatures. In reality, they were believed to be more naïve than evil. Their misdeeds were due to envy, pride, greed, ignorance and stupidity—echoing the worst traits of human nature. Perhaps this is why trolls often abducted princesses and beautiful women in Norwegian folktales in an attempt to find some of the beauty and kindness that they themselves lacked.

Considered to be somewhat dimwitted, trolls could be outsmarted very easily, even by children. As a result, they were never defeated by



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Illustration of Askeladden and the troll from "The Ash Lad Who Had an Eating Match with the Troll" by Theodor Kittelsen.

physical strength alone in folktales. Instead, the protagonist (usually Askeladden, the "ash lad") relied on superior smarts or teamwork to outwit the troll. A few of the stories where trolls have been defeated in such a way include "The Boys Who Met the Trolls in the Hedal Woods" and "The Ash Lad who had an Eating Match with the Troll," both by Asbjørnsen and Moe.

While trolls are no longer widely believed to be real, their influence on Norwegian and non-Norwegian writers and artists continues to this day. In the end, trolls and their literary counterparts impart important lessons by showing us not only the consequences of bad behavior, but also by reminding us that we can overcome any great obstacle with some perseverance and intelligence.