

The German Fairytale (The „Märchen“): Looking-glass of Society



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Thematic structure:

There is probably no better way of becoming familiar with German cultural traditions than reading and analyzing folktales and fairytales. This course, therefore, will introduce to a very special sort of "oral" texts, to German folk- and fairytales. Although being sort of "global players", these folktales can clearly be seen as indicators of the cultural history of Germany. With their multilayered history and their timelessly appealing archetypes, they are one of the most important cultural and literary signifiers of the country.

Kassel is the ideal starting point for our passage to the world of "Once upon a time...": The brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, world famous fairytale collectors and linguists, spent the longest and most fruitful period of their lives in Kassel. It was here in Kassel that "Grimm's Fairy Tales" were compiled and edited.

In the seminar, we will follow the traces of the brothers Grimm in Kassel's museums, libraries, parks and woods. We will restrict ourselves neither to the classroom nor to the time of the brothers Grimm. We will also investigate the various impacts of their work and the development of the genre. The Fairy Tales (Märchen) reveal a good part of the social values and needs of a society. Therefore, we analyse the German Märchen as a reflection of German cultural and social history. We will, for example, take a closer look at the role of women in folktales and learn about the history of the disputed topic of cruelty in the Märchen. But with the famous German Fairy Tale Route (Märchenstraße) running directly through Kassel, we will also study the commercialisation of German Fairytales for tourism purpose and learn about the longings of our modern society.

In this seminar, students will be provided with insights into recent methods and aspects of international research of the German Fairytale. We will examine the current debate about the Folktales as part of Cultural Heritage – the manuscripts of the "Children's and Household Tales" by the Brothers Grimm are in Kassel and they have become World Document Heritage of the UNESCO since 2005.

The German Märchen is not only an ideal starting point to learn about German culture, history, literature, language and tradition. We will also find out why the themes and archetypes of Märchen are still so relevant and appealing in our modern society and media – in Germany and all over the world.



Tentative titles of lecture units:

▣ 'Fairy dust' versus scientific definitions and classifications

- What is a "Märchen", a myth, a legend?
- How old are the tales and where do they come from?
- Oral versus written traditions and why this is so important

▣ Grimms revisited

- Who were the Grimms and what do we know about their informants?
- How "German" are the German folk tales?
- "Nice to meet you" – we will visit "Dorothea Viehmann", the most important informant of the brothers Grimm in the Knallhütte in Kassel
- "Typisch deutsch": national stereotypes in folktales

▣ Mirror, mirror on the wall...

- Märchen as a mirror of the history of social conditions: Mothers, witches and stepmothers: The role of women in folktales
- Cruelty in Märchen – Retracing a 200-year-old debate
- Märchen as a mirror of the human soul: Archetypes and psychoanalytic approaches

▣ Grimms reloaded

- How do we perceive Märchen today? – The impact of modern media (films, computer games etc.) on our fantasy
- Motifs, themes and archetypes from German folktales in contemporary films
- Fairy tale woods, parks, and streets in and around Kassel : tourism and commercialisation

▣ "When *wishing* still helped..."

- Why are motifs of 'Fairy Tales' still so relevant in modern media and society?

Method:

The course will be taught as a mixture of lectures, seminar discussions, excursions, texts and films. The language of instruction will be English, but we will read some original texts and watch some films in German. Basic knowledge of German is therefore desirable. Texts will be made available in print or can be downloaded from the internet.

The seminar is accompanied by a special project about the brothers Grimm in the German language class (intermediate level) and the option to expand your knowledge by experiential learning in the workshop “Grimm-caching”.

Assessment:

Participants are expected to attend classes regularly, take part in at least two excursions and to actively engage in discussions. There will be a written exam and a short presentation at the end of the seminar.

Student profile:

Ideal for students of literature studies or of cultural, political, and social sciences interested in German culture, folklore, literature, and narrative theory.

Prerequisites:

German language skills at the A 2 / B1-level (or higher) of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

Lecturer:

Professor Dr. Sabine Wienker-Piepho is an international expert on Folk- and Fairytales. A folklore specialist with degrees in Volkskunde, German Studies and Anglo-American Studies, she is from the famous school of Narrative Studies (Erzählforschung) in the tradition of Lutz Röhrich. She has been Visiting Lecturer for Folklore Studies in many parts of the world (USA, Russia, Finland, Estonia). At present, she is President of the Board of Trustees of the Walter-Kahn-Märchen-Foundation, President of the Commission for Folk Poetry in the SIEF, UNESCO-cooperator (for ICH), and is Professor of Folklore Studies/Cultural History (Volkskunde/Kulturgeschichte) at the Friedrich-Schiller-University of Jena.