



University
of Glasgow

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Troll

An ancient, primeval monster and denizen of northern mountains and forests, the troll has a history as old as its home. As Scandinavian legend and folklore came with the Vikings and their forebears into what would become the English-speaking world, so did stories of trolls; today, their folkloric origins are revised and supplemented by novels, short stories, films, and television shows. The troll may be a creature of the past, but it has found a comfortable home in the present.

TROLLS IN FOLKLORE

Norwegian and northern Swedish folklore distinguishes between the large, brutal, and stupid troll and the smaller, cunning, human-like *huldfolk* or *vitterfolk*. In southern Sweden and Denmark, the term “troll” applied to the latter, while the former were known as **giants** (*jätte*). “Troll” can also be used as a generic term for any magical or supernatural being and, in more recent centuries, the terms “troll” and “**ogre**” are sometimes used interchangeably. The flexibility permitted by these varying conventions arguably has contributed to the survival of the troll as a literary and filmic figure but, for the most part, it is the troll of Norwegian legend—giant, brutish, destructive, and ferocious—that continues to carry the name.

In the best known of all troll fairy tales, “Three Billy Goats Gruff,” the troll antagonist threatens three goats who must cross the bridge under which he lives in order to graze on the other side. The tale was first collected in Asbjørnsen and Moe’s *Norske Folkeeventyr (Norse Fairytales)* in 1845, and translated into English by Sir George Webb Dasent in 1859. It has since become so well known as to create its own archetype, repeated

countless times in whole or part in later stories, with the predatory troll outwitted by his intended prey. In the original story collected by Asbjørnsen and Moe, the first and smallest goat convinces the troll to allow him to pass and instead to eat the plumper goat following him; the second goat does the same, leaving the third and largest goat to hurl the greedy troll into the river with his horns.

The fondness of trolls for meat in general, and human flesh in particular, is a common thread throughout stories of trolls, and their great strength is typically destructive in its focus. Folkloric trolls are most often depicted as being armed with axes or clubs, emphasizing the threat of the brutal, if unsophisticated, violence they pose. Fortunately, however, they are far from invincible. Most trolls are portrayed as animalistic and of limited intelligence, allowing a cunning hero easily to outwit them. Further, they are creatures of the night in the strictest sense, typically turning to stone when sunlight hits them.

TROLLS IN LITERATURE

In literature, trolls have an illustrious heritage, arguably reaching back to the Old English epic poem, *Beowulf*. While the appearance of the monstrous **Grendel** is never directly described other than a reference to his humanoid form, he is a malevolent and destructive being, attacking a mead hall and feeding on the warriors he finds there. Although the term “troll” does not appear in most English dialects until the nineteenth century, a number of modern translators have used the word to describe Grendel, suggesting a connection between Grendel and the trolls of Scandinavian folklore.

J. R. R. Tolkien, familiar as he was with Scandinavian and Old English folkloric tradition, would no doubt have been aware of the folkloric history of the trolls when he penned *The Hobbit* (1937; see **Tolkien, Monsters In**). Here, Bilbo Baggins narrowly escapes

Comment [JAW1]: Please provide one or two examples (such as X and Y)

being eaten by three trolls by tricking them into arguing until the sun rises turning them to stone. Tolkien's trolls are giant humanoid figures, stupid and vicious but strong and, at least in *The Hobbit*, capable of communicating in a thickly accented language; the trolls that appear in the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy (1954-1955) seem more animalistic in nature and serve the villain Sauron. In Tolkien's wider mythology, trolls are described as being created from stone or from lesser animals by the evil god-figure Melkor as a mockery of the tree-like Ents (*Morgoth's Ring*, 414).

Trolls are popular figures in the genre of Tolkien-esque fantasy that followed the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, and are typically portrayed with the great strength and low intelligence that Tolkien depicts. Some authors, however, do add variations. In Tad Williams's "Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn" trilogy (1988-1993), trolls are fairly small in stature, riding goats in their native mountains; their own name for themselves is the "Qanuc," and their society is a complex tribal one, resembling indigenous Arctic and sub-Arctic groups as much as anything from folklore.

Terry Pratchett's 1992 story, "Troll Bridge," echoes earlier folklore more directly. Pratchett's story, however, features not a protagonist outwitting the troll, but rather an aged hero seeking out bridge-dwelling trolls to defeat. Instead of fighting him, however, the troll he finds is overjoyed by such a well-known hero visiting his small and unremarkable bridge, and brings his wife and children out to be introduced. While the troll regales the hero concerning the bridge's illustrious history, his wife complains about the obvious poverty of the hero and describes various brothers-in-law who have left the bridge business and gone into various forms of industry. The confused hero hands over his own treasure to the troll and goes on his way.

Pratchett's "Troll Bridge" ostensibly takes place within the fictional universe of his comedic "Discworld" novels (1983 to present), a fantasy world in which magic coexists with

industrial technology. Pratchett's trolls are no more threatening than other species, with their great strength typically channeled into manual labor and working as bouncers at the city's inns. As stone-based creatures, they eat rocks and cannot digest living beings (although it is suggested that some try nevertheless); their silicon-based brains conduct poorly unless the temperature is very cold, leading to their general perception as intellectually challenged, but they have personalities and even occasionally appear as protagonists.

In Neil Gaiman's short story, also titled "Troll Bridge" (appearing in his 1998 collection of short stories, *Smoke and Mirrors*), the troll seeks not flesh but rather something more ephemeral: the life, measured in some indefinable sense, of the child who crosses his path. The boy convinces the troll to let him go, and eat him later once he has lived more fully, a scene repeated in the boy's teenage years. Finally, as a grown man, the protagonist returns to the bridge, mourning his life of lost chances and offering it to the troll. As the troll devours his life, the two exchange bodies, and the protagonist retreats from society under the bridge while the troll walks away into the world, whistling as it goes.

Urban fantasy and young adult literature have in recent years seen more inventive experimentations with the conventions of troll appearance and behavior. Sometimes they are still adversaries, abducting children in Ursula K. LeGuin's "A Ride on the Red Mare's Back" (1992), and exchanging a human baby for one of their own in Rose Estes' *Troll-Taken* (1993). More commonly, however, they are fully realized characters within a complex world. Nancy Farmer's fantasy trilogy, consisting of *Sea of Trolls* (2004), *The Land of the Silver Apples* (2007), and *The Islands of the Blessed* (2009), is set in a world of Norse mythology, where two young children are kidnapped by Vikings and taken to the kingdom of King Ivar the Boneless and his half-troll queen. Although the trolls might seem initially threatening, they are also members of a sophisticated society who play chess and throw banquets, and the troll queen herself two befriends the children.

Further, trolls in such literature need not be threatening at all. John Vornholt's *Troll King* (2002) features trolls that, while gigantic and ugly, are sympathetic and pitiful characters, slaves to the ogres and sorcerers who rule their world. In Holly Black's *Valiant: A Modern Tale of Faerie* (2005), a bridge-dwelling troll named Ravus is also a healer by trade and a fully textured character in his own right. Although Val, the heroine of the story, initially finds Ravus hideous in appearance, her views begin to change after she learns more about him. Ravus has been framed for murder, and Val, determined to prove his innocence, ends up falling in love with him before clearing his name. In Charles Coleman Finlay's *The Prodigal Troll* (2005), the protagonist is again human, but this time raised by trolls from infancy. The trolls themselves are and the trolls have a complex democratic society seemingly based on Neolithic practices. In J. K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" series (1997-2007; see **Harry Potter, Monsters In**), trolls are again large, violent, and stupid creatures who communicate with a series of grunts, but as a result are the subject of some debate regarding their proper treatment and rights in the wizarding world.

Modern trolls in addition no longer require a strictly fantastical setting. T. H. White's 1935 story, "The Troll," is set in northern Sweden, where his narrator is staying at a remote hotel while on a fishing holiday. After a terrifying dream involving blood pouring down a connecting door between his room and the next, the man wakes and investigates the room by peering through the keyhole, only to view a gigantic and grotesque troll eating a woman alive. The troll is described as eight feet tall, hideous in appearance, and possessing a fiery, infernal mouth that burns up any remaining traces of blood from his victim. The narrator's eyes meet those of the troll and the narrator quickly retreats to his bed.

Inquiring about the room's inhabitants the next day, he learns that they are a young professor and his wife, but that the wife has gone missing at some point in the night. The narrator begins to believe that the professor himself is a shapeshifting troll (see

shapeshifter)—an impression confirmed when he sees the man transform into a troll again in the hotel dining room. Although the other diners do not seem to notice, the narrator confirms his own suspicions by shaking the troll's hand, which burns and blisters his own. The troll threatens to eat him as well, and the narrator spends the day in a state of near-delirium in the remote and isolated town; eventually, he returns to his room, but keeps a set of rosary beads in the pocket of his pajamas. When the troll comes for him at night, its hands touches the rosary beads and it shrieks in pain, shrinks in size, and flees through the window. The next morning, the narrator hears that the professor's body has been found in a nearby lake. The story ends there, without any definite explanations, and with the narrator's own confusion and uncertainty lingering with the reader.

Björn Kurtén's novel, *Dance of the Tiger* (1980), removes even the supernatural context of trolls. The novel is set in the Ice Age, where the "trolls" are the Neanderthals living alongside the Cro-Magnon protagonists. Kurtén, a palaeontologist himself, subscribes to the theory that the trolls of folklore may be a distant ancestral memory of another human species, and his trolls as a result are no less human than his other protagonists. Kurtén's work is, however, an anomaly in this regard, and most literary trolls remain in a context at least somewhat fantastic in nature.

TROLLS IN FILM

Film and literature have also made liberal use of older folkloric conventions regarding trolls. Trolls' weakness to sunlight forms a significant point in one episode of the 1990s television series *The Outer Limits*, "Under the Bed" (Rene Bonniere, 1995), featuring a shape-shifting troll that steals children. Its nature is discovered by a police detective (Barbara Williams), who finds that its blood left on a broken window turns into a sand-like substance

when exposed to daylight; together with the father of one missing child, she finds the troll drags it into the daylight to be turned to stone.

The troll that appears in the BBC television series, *Merlin* (2008-present) is also a shapeshifter, although this time an intelligent one using magical trickery to deceive the king into falling in love with her (see the two-part episode, “Beauty and the Beast” [season 2, episodes 5-6, 2009; directed by David Moore and Metin Huseyin respectively]). A similar shapeshifting and deceptive troll and her father appear in an episode of Jim Henson’s series, *The Storyteller* (season 1, “The True Bride,” 1988; directed by Peter Smith), this time explicitly based in Germanic folklore.

Not all trolls in film and television are particularly threatening figures. The animated film *A Troll in Central Park* (Don Bluth, 1994) features a troll who is both friendly and sympathetic. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* features a troll transported from a parallel dimension in the episode entitled “Triangle,” which aired in 2001 (Season 5, episode 11; directed by Christopher Hibler). This troll (played by Abraham Benrubi) is also violent, destroying buildings with its hammer, although its mock-Viking speech patterns and its enquiries about where it can find babies to eat are played for comedic value. A 2008 BBC televisual adaptation (*Billy Goats Gruff*, directed by Jeremy Dyson) plays with the conventions of the earlier folktale, by transforming the setting into a contemporary landscape and presenting the troll itself as a pitiful and sympathetic figure.

The Norwegian film, *The Troll Hunter* (André Øvredal, 2010) takes the form of pretended “found footage” sent anonymously to a film company, telling the story of three students filming their unofficial investigation into a man they suspect to be killing bears (Hans, played by Otto Jespersen). He turns out to be a government-employed troll hunter, killing giant, violent, and sometimes multi-headed trolls whose existence has been concealed by the government. These trolls are animalistic and lacking in intelligence, with the film

emphasizing their natural behavior and providing a pseudo-scientific gloss for their intolerance of sunlight. As Hans warns the students, however, the trolls are angered by the Christian blood; at one point, he even uses a bucket of the substance to lure a troll closer.

With such a variety of troll appearances and behaviors, it is at times difficult to decide where trolls end and other supernatural creatures begin. However, this same adaptability ensures the troll's continued existence and relevancy. **Jenny Bann**

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