

Mining the Folktale

Leader: Justin Dainer-Best '09 (English, Psychology)

Advisor: Kim Benston (English)

Tom Carroll '10 (Classics)

Cara Curtis '10 (Religion/Gender & Sexuality Studies)

Ariella Foss '09 (Comparative Literature [German]/Music minor)

Sean Hughes '10 (English)

Sophie Taylor '10 (Linguistics)

Stephanie Wu '09 (English/East Asian Studies)

Why do we have folk tales? How do we recognize stories as folk tales? What are their *purposes* and *effects*? Why (and how) do these stories remain powerful and resonant in our culture, to us? In this seminar we will explore the power of the oral tradition, and consider the fairy tale as a means of social control and social mastery. Most importantly, we will look at the folk tale in a cross-cultural framework as a means of understanding the world, and developing a world-view.

Through the five meetings of the seminar, we will attempt to consider the folk tale's structure, history, and meaning, and to explore the transformations and contortions of story that occur trans-historically, as they are related from one generation to the next. We will begin by considering the position of the storyteller – a position of power that is fraught with danger. What is there to be gained from this position, and what lost? We will continue discussing these questions through consideration of two major archetypal figures and the stories that surround them, that of the trickster and the witch, treating them both as exemplary engines of the folk tale narrative and as springboards for considering psychological and philosophical views of folk tale interpretation. We will attempt to divine what theories, from psychoanalysis to structuralism, consider to be the meaning behind (and within) folk tales, while also interpreting folk tales for our own elucidative purposes. Finally, we will bring these approaches together, and eventually spill our discussion over into the modern world by considering modern adaptations/evolutions of these old stories, including feminist, (post)modern, and non-literary adaptations of them.

By thus addressing the folk tale's continued life in today's world, we will be able to conclude the seminar by asking questions that echo and extend that with which we began: In what way do these stories still speak to us, both as a culture and as individuals? How are they part of us, as adults? In the end, we will consider whether each story can stand on its own, or whether folk tales are only powerful as part of a literary – broadly "narrative" – tradition. What do folk tales mean to us, as individuals, as students – and how can we use that meaning to reimagine our views of literary and cultural expression?