

CHRISTMAS FOLKLORE: ICELAND'S YULE LADS AND THE DEVOURING CAT

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Iceland's Christmas folklore includes the Ogress Grýla, the thirteen Yule Lads, and a giant cat.

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*Once more, the ogre clan,
Has come upon Iceland:
Stealing pots, spoons and bread,
And leaving gifts in their stead.
For (though they steal) the lads are true—
So (boys and girls) leave out a shoe!*

“Why is he like that?”

Said a young boy about the old man who had lived across the street from his family his whole life. There’s something traumatic to a child in having the eruptive joy of his “Merry Christmas!” met by the cruel, intentional silence of a scrooge-ian gaze.

“Oh,” grandma began, waving a hand. “Don’t feel bad, lad. He got eaten by the Jólakötturinn.”

The *Jólakötturinn*, or Yule Cat, is a folkloric creature that, according to Icelanders, eats those who do not greet the end of Christmas and the coming of the new year by wearing new clothes. Like the [Italian Befana](#), [Russian Babushka](#), and [German Frau Holle](#), who sweep away the dross of the previous year, the Yule Cat has a purifying and renewing role.

“Him?” Said the boy incredulously, furrowing his brow, still looking across the street at the bent figure presently disappearing past its front door. “But grandma, first of all, he’s not eaten. He’s alive and in one piece.”

*You’ll seem just as before,
Its bite will leave no gore.*

*You'll look the same to all,
But inside there'll be a hole.
When the Yule Cat comes to eat
A soul, he leaves the meat.*

The boy paused, acknowledging that the Yule Cat-eating people must be one of those metee-phors he'd been told about. Fine. Still, he pressed on for clarification, "But ... he always wears new clothes!"

It was true that, for all his faults, the local scrooge was actually known for dressing well and was seldom seen in the same ensemble twice while going about his errands.

"Actually, he's been dressing the same year-in and year-out for a long time. He wasn't that way when we were young ... (*don't* furrow your brow at that, lad ... I'm not ancient). ... But at some point, he went astray. Anyway, yes, the same old thoughts, the same old worries, the same old anger. ... He's been in the same clothes, *in his mind*, you see?" Grandma explained, per her generation's habit of treating children like developing adults rather than stupid ones.

The lad *did* see. And he felt bad for the old scrooge. But for now, the boy had more pressing concerns to attend to. The Yule Cat is not alone and shares the season with the thirteen Yule Lads, the sons of the Yuletide Ogress, Grýla. Presently, the youngster was expecting the first Yule Lads visit with its accompanying prank and present.

Through frozen cavernous openings in Iceland's Dimmuborgir lava fields, dwells the Ogress Grýla with her husband Leppalúði, together with thirteen sons and a giant pet cat, which every year, at Christmas time, emerge to spread the season's cheer.

That is, in their own special way.

Just as the German Krampus is meant to scare children into behaving on pain of being

dragged away and eaten, so too was Grýla invoked by parents for her supposed habit of cooking naughty children on Christmas. Her true, benevolent guise as a manifestation of that archetypal category to which Germany's winter queen, Frau Holle, also belongs, however, has gained popularity in recent years. And with this change, the ogress' thirteen sons have likewise transformed into friendly, festive imps.

But to one like the scrooge, these thirteen may play a different kind of game entirely.

On the morning of the first day of Christmas, he was awakened by loud noises in his kitchen. "It's the townsfolk's boys, just as dirty and twice as hungry as swine! They've heard I stock good liquor and wine!"

But after running down the stairs, he saw that there was no one there. All his alcohol was gone, but not a soul was having fun. But then, when he turned to leave the room, for a moment he saw the reflection of a troll in the window, sneering at him.

And so it was; one day the clothes he'd bought for travel but never went were strung up in his closet, inexplicably.

One day his old phonebook, with the numbers of employees he had mistreated, was sitting by his telephone.

One day, a dog collar, dirty and gnawed at, was in the garden. And this one chilled him, for it had belonged to his wife's dog, whom he always refused to walk and eventually gave away.

His bank statement he dreamt about: a ghostly banner on his grave. And he himself, a pig with a snout, sniffing out what has no grace to save.

One day, he was locked out of his home. The keys were gone, and on account of his pride,

he would not speak to anyone.

The next day, he dreamt of himself struck by frostbite, but then the keys appeared in his pocket.

The next day, all his doors and windows were shut. And would not open, no matter what. And when he heard his neighbours outside, he wished for someone in whom to confide.

Church bells finally broke the spell, but the next day he caught a glimpse of hell. For when he went outside to shop, for a moment he was caught up in the illusion that the town was empty, and every soul disappeared “except me!”

The phone rang once, and he did hear the cracking voice of his late father. It turned out to be a telemarketer. But no, it was just the same as his father’s voice, “whose funeral I never went to ...”

On the last day, upon awakening, he saw the photograph of his wife, whom he had divorced a lifetime ago, or so it seemed. “But how has it gotten out of storage? And why is the frame so well polished?”

Finally, on the night of the twelfth day of Christmas, there came the thirteenth Yule Lad with an ominous candle, looking as though he might eat it at any moment and snuff the light out forever. This one he could see, though he spoke not, and came not into the scrooge’s house but stood silent and grave outside its property line. And with him, towering, was the frightful Yule Cat.

“Have we played this game long enough, good scrooge? Thirteen years, I think it’s been, eh?”

“Thirteen. ... Yes. I remember. Thirteen to the year since I spent my first Christmas alone

... after I ... after her. Why are you here? Have you come to eat me?"

The Yule Cat shook its head.

"No ... no. Nothing like that. I don't eat fleshy things. In truth, I don't really eat *souls* either." The monster patted its belly with one paw. "Very indigestive things, you know? Not like human regret, resentment, and the like. Those I burn right up. But a man's soul, well ... it just sits there. I've had yours in my belly since that first, lonely Christmas. Do you want it back?"

"Don't tease me, creature!"

"Well then. I'll take that as a yes. And all you have to do is give me something in return." It pointed a paw at him, "that which you've been using to plug the hole."

"I don't understand."

The thirteenth Yule Lad now spoke for the first time. "Perhaps I can shed some light," he said, extending the hand in which he held his candle, revealing a tar-like blackness where the scrooge's chest should have been.

"There isn't room enough for both," sighed the giant cat. "What do you say, good scrooge? Let's be done with our game. Your heart, for your hatred. Your soul for all that bitterness."

*And so it was that on that year,
Scrooge let go of bitter fear.
The Yule Cat ate up the man's hate,
And Scrooge's soul reversed its fate.*