

**Pagan Imagination in Popular Culture; the Relationship Between Elves, Ghosts and
Icelanders as Cultural Identity**

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INTRODUCTION

Elves, ghosts and prophetesses have been, and remain, a significant part of Icelandic belief, culture and national identity. In recent years, elves in particular have been used as a marketing ploy to spark interest in the country. The strategy has been designed by Icelanders themselves to promote tourism, and highlights the nation's unusual relationship with elves as an eccentricity worthy of interest (Edrub "For Icelanders, it pays to be weird"). The approach seems to have worked, according to the Australian short documentary, "You'll never guess what one in ten Icelandic people believe..." ("Journeyman Pictures"). The film centers on the oddness of these beliefs and alleged interaction between humans and elves. When David Letterman interviewed actress Emma Watson after filming in Iceland, he asked about the elves as a joke. Letterman claimed that these beliefs gave him the creeps and asked if Icelanders served elves on the menu (Ílhan – "Emma Watson in Iceland"). These representations all bear witness to something that is true: Icelandic culture and identity includes less visible inhabitants--the elves and ghosts. Such representations, however, fail to appreciate the profound historical, psychological, and mysterious bond between Icelanders and the "hidden ones."

The image of the Icelandic elf appeared among the first settlers in the ninth century (Gunnell "The Power" 9). They were either referred to as land spirits or nature spirits, and later as "álfar (elves) and "huldufólk" (or hidden folk, a term most commonly used beside "álfar"). In Norse mythology, more specifically in *Snorra Edda (The Prose Edda)*, elves appear as either light and dark elves, and are a part of the pagan godly race (Sturluson 32). Norse Mythology had been circulating orally until the thirteenth century when written down in Iceland under Christian influences, by authors such as Snorri Sturluson. The division between the light and the dark elves in *The Prose Edda* was then influenced by Christian ideas where these elves were equated

with angels and demons. In the Icelandic sagas, that describe the life of Icelanders in the Middle Ages, elves tend to appear through peoples' dreams, and resemble humans in most ways. This applies as well in Jón Árnason's Icelandic folklore collection, which was a compilation of tales that had been passed on orally between people and were often supernatural in nature. In these tales, elves either help humans in dire straits, or get particularly angry if humans interfere with their natural habitats, such as mounds, hillocks and rocks. These places are often referred to as *álagablettir* or cursed spots (Gunnell "The Power" 1- 10). These stories were accounts by people in the rural areas of Iceland that claimed to have been affected by those human-like creatures (Gunnell "Modern Legends in Iceland" 4).

In the 19th century, the romantic movement in Iceland was led by artists who strove for independence from the Danish rule. They utilized folklore material as a significant component of the nation's new identity (Gunnell "National Folklore" 303, 307). The elves became an important component to heighten that identity. Elves, however, are not the only creatures that have occupied the imagination of Icelanders. Icelandic folklore material also entails stories of ghosts who haunt humans. The tales focused on in this study are the ghosts of children who were left out to die and came back to haunt the living.

The idea of the prophetess, or female seer, is another important part of Icelandic culture. Accounts of female, divinatory figures and their pagan practices can be found in the Icelandic sagas and Norse Mythology. They play significant roles in their communities, especially in times of hardship, foreseeing the future or even influencing it. In Norse mythology, the seer-esses have knowledge and powers, superior even to the Gods, such as Óðinn.

Elves, ghosts and prophetesses are still strongly rooted in the imagination of the contemporary Icelander. In a survey conducted by the University of Iceland in 2006, that

explored modern day folk beliefs, 62% still believed or were willing to believe, in the existence of elves, and 69% believed in cursed elf spots. The survey also showed that 75% of Icelanders believed in ghost-haunting, and 49% had sought out services from prophetesses (Arnalds et.al. 52, 84, 88, 102).

As an Icelandic actor, writer and an image-maker, I seek to explore the presence and significance of elves, ghosts and the practices of Icelandic prophetesses in the enduringly pagan imagination of Icelanders, through the lens of five Icelandic works of art. The first work is the 19th century play *Nýársnóttin* (New years Eve) by theater-activist Indriði Einarsson. The play draws from various sources in Icelandic elf-lore. It incorporates elves as they appear in Jón Árnason's folklore collection, as well as from the *The Prose Edda*. In Einarsson's play, the elves mirror the nation's struggle towards independence in the romantic era. Through the elves, Einarsson depicts how Christianity and paganism have co-existed in Iceland in a living and ongoing tension, where elves represent the very soul of the nation, living inside rocks and hillocks.

The second work is Yrsa Sigurdardóttir's crime novel *Sér Grefur Gröf* (*My Soul to Take*, 2009). The story deals with the folklore surrounding children that come back to haunt the living. The chapter shows how ghosts continue to haunt the nation, and how their connection to the land, and their physical presence, serve as a constant reminder of unresolved wrongs and injustices, such as murders of innocents, in pre-and post-Christian era.

Three of Fridrik Thor Fridriksson's films will also be used as a frame of analysis. In *Börn Náttúrunnar* (*Children of Nature*, 1991) Fridriksson highlights the main characters' rebellion against urbanization and how their strong connection to the land brings them closer to it and it's less visible inhabitants during the characters' earthly existence as well as after their death.

In Fridriksson's film, *Á Köldum Klaka* (*Cold Fever*, 1995) the main character's spiritual connection to the land becomes so strong, that despite being a foreign tourist, he, like the first settlers in Iceland gets encompassed by Icelandic elves that can either rescue him or punish for interfering with the elves natural habitats.

The last film analyzed is Fridriksson's *Djöflaeyjan* (*Devil's Island*, 1996). In contrast to the other two, elves are not the central focus. Instead, the practices of the Icelandic prophetess or female seer are examined. The seer-ess is ancient and contemporary. She represents a pagan sensibility of the spiritual connection to the earth, in contrast to the traditional (male) role of the Christian priest. She is an honored priestess, ordained in the ongoing pagan imagination of the people.

The surprising consistency in how the images of elves and ghosts keep appearing in Icelandic literature, plays, films and in everyday life, depict a certain mentality within the Icelandic mind. When Iceland converted to Christianity in 1000 A.D., Icelanders embraced all deities, the Christian and the pagan ones, instead of choosing one over the other. Elves even became Christian later on in Icelandic folktales. These elements, that include a deep connection to land and its inhabitants (the elves and ghosts) correlates with the beliefs conveyed by *Ásatrúarfélagið* (the Icelandic neo-pagan movement). This does not necessarily mean that Icelanders are pagans, but have held onto elements rooted in paganism – referred to as a “pagan imagination” in this study. The pagan imagination has been essential to Icelandic people from the beginning, and remains so today. Far from being “eccentric” or “weird” as Icelanders have been alluded to in their promotional strategy, their beliefs are deeply rooted in spiritual connection to the land and the creatures that have been imagined to live in it. The resilience of this imagination is demonstrated through the recurring appearances of elves, ghosts and

prophetesses in Norse Mythology, the sagas, folktales, popular culture and in modern day accounts. Despite the Church's attempt to eradicate all pagan beliefs and practices they have prevailed and evolved among Icelanders to this day. It is now time to turn to a bit more detail on the history and scope of this "pagan imagination."

Chapter 1 Pagan Imagination in Iceland

The definition, “pagan imagination,” has been carefully chosen as it moves away from specific religious affiliations. The term is broad, and applies to Icelanders of various religious views and beliefs. It captures how elves and ghosts are “alive” in the human imagination. Pagan imagination avoids questions of the existence of elves and ghosts, or the validity of the practices performed by the prophetesses. Instead, the term captures a mindset that emerged in the pre-Christian era, and has remained for over 1100 years. It is not only extremely pervasive and powerful but has evolved from the customs and beliefs brought by the first settlers in the ninth century. Before exploring further details of pagan imagination and what it entails, it is important to clarify the meaning of the word “pagan.” What does this term imply and how is it relevant in the context of Icelandic cultural identity?

Pagan Imagination

According to Pierre Chuvin in his book *Chronicles of the Last Pagans*, the word “pagan” derives from the Latin word *paganus*, which means either “peasant” or “civilian” (7-8). *Paganus* is a person who inhabits a *pagus*; a district within any given country, and pagans, in its simplest sense, means “... “people of the place,” town or country, who preserved their local customs” (9). According to Chuvin “paganism” is a “...religion of the homeland...the city and its outlying countryside [that] predicts the diversity of pagan practices and beliefs” (9).

The first settlers came to Iceland in the ninth century from Norway, Ireland and Scotland (Gunnell “The Power” 9). It was a mixture of pagans and Christians that lived in Iceland with their separate beliefs until the country converted to Christianity in 1000 A.D. The attitude from authorities was relatively more relaxed toward pagans in Iceland, in contrast to the other

Scandinavian countries. In his book, *Myths of the Pagan North*, Christopher Abram points out how Icelanders obtained freedom to choose whom or what they believed in, and pagans were not considered a threat (182). When foreign Christian missionaries attempted to drive the pagan Gods out of the imagination of Icelanders, they resisted. The best compromise Icelanders were willing to live with was to incorporate the Christian God as *one of* their deities, but their old ones would remain strongly present in the culture (189). Who were these Gods in question and what messages did they convey?

When the first settlers came to Iceland, they brought with them local customs and beliefs, as noted by folklorist Terry Gunnell in his article “The Power in the Place” (9). Those customs included making sacrifices to certain mounds or hillocks in order to obtain better harvest (9). These settlers even made blood sacrifices in order for the Gods to cure their wounds. These natural spaces were believed to be inhabited by *landvættir* or ‘nature spirits’, (later referred to as *álfar* or elves). In later accounts, elves were also believed to live inside rocks and stones (2). The elves’ habitats might suggest their godly status. In his book *Man and His Symbols*, the Swiss psychiatrist C.G. Jung suggests that “...unhewn stones had a highly symbolic meaning for ancient and primitive societies [and] Rough, natural stones were often believed to be the dwelling places of spirits or gods” (232). Like Gods, elves have been understood to have the power to influence and even harm humans from afar (Gunnell “How Elvish are the Álfar” 121,129). These beings were believed to be the protectors of the land, and more importantly, the owners of it. Their habitats (the mounds, hillocks and rocks) have usually been referred to as *álagablettir* or enchanted spots (Gunnell “The Power” 1 -5, 8-10). According to the lore, some of those places were not supposed to be harvested, and the farmers who failed to comply paid the price. Elves were believed to ruin harvests, kill animals, and cause physical and mental ailments

(Gunnell 2-3). Icelandic modern-day construction workers have also claimed to be harassed by elves while building roads in alleged elf areas. They seem to have paid the price in a very similar way as their ancestors did. In some cases, these workers even built roads around elf rocks or averted projects all together. In Norse Mythology, elves were considered to be of the race of Gods, and even an "...individual godly race" (Gunnell "How Elvish" 121, 123). The light elves were believed to live in heaven in a place called *Álfheimar* or Elf-Cosmos and the dark elves lived deep inside the earth (Sturluson 32, translation of *Álfheimar* by author).

Although elves have obtained their powerful presence in the imagination of Icelanders, ghosts have also had an influential position. The ghosts focused on in this study were once children that were left out to die by their mothers who could not care for them. This custom dates back to the pre-Christian era and was one of two pagan customs allowed to be practiced after the country converted. The ghosts of those dead children were believed to live outside in nature, where they were left to die. Instead of being mere spirits, their form was physical which made them particularly earthy, thus having a strong connection to the land. Ghosts surface in the Icelandic sagas and folk tales and more often than not have some unfinished business with the living as in the case of murdered or unbaptized children, where they serve as reminders of peoples' wrongdoings.

The pagan imagination also includes the practices performed by the Icelandic prophetesses. These procedures were usually performed by women and include foreseeing the future, driving out alleged ghosts and evil spirits and act as mediators between the human and the spirit world. These methods are remnants from old pagan practices found in the sagas and Norse mythology. These figures were essential in their communities, especially during hardships, where they served as counterpoint to the traditional male role of the Christian priest.

These practices, beliefs, as well as the relationship Icelanders have with ghosts, elves, and other spirits, correlate with the philosophy presented by “Ásatrúarfélagið” or the Icelandic neo pagan movement. “Ásatrú” in its narrowest sense, means “Norse God religion,” although the members claim it to be a misnomer as it leaves out their broader philosophy and beliefs (“Ásatrúarfélagið”). They suggest respect for nature and the importance of living in harmony with it. To them it is a way of life rather than an organized religion and their beliefs include all Gods, spirits and deities found within Norse Mythology, Icelandic folklore and folk belief (“Ásatrúarfélagið”). These beings include elves, nature spirits and other powerful beings and each person can choose the one that makes sense to him or her. Their beliefs are not affiliated with any creed but are inclusive of many beliefs.

Despite that Christianity is the official state religion in Iceland, only 45% claim to believe in Christian God, whereas 62 % believe in elves and 75% in ghosts. Elves and ghosts have proven to be particularly influential in the imagination of Icelanders. One never hears of a construction work gone awry because Jesus was angry; rather misfortune is always attributed to unhappy elves who inhabit the spot being built upon. Elves, ghosts and prophetesses are integral part of the pagan imagination of Icelanders. This imagination has been influential in how Icelanders correspond with nature, how they deal with urban expansion as well as how Icelanders foresee the future. These pagan beliefs and practices have been fused with and been expanded on through Christianity.

Chapter 2
Elves, Paganism and Christianity in the 19th century Play *Nýársnóttin*
by Indriði Einarsson

Nýársnóttin is inspired by the folklore material found in Jón Árnason's collection (first published between the years 1862-64) concerning álfar (elves) and huldufólk (the hidden ones) that live in mounds, hillocks and rocks. Einarsson also drew from the elves found in the thirteenth century manuscript, *Snorra Edda* or *The Prose Edda* (Gunnell 319). As noted by Gunnell, Einarsson used the elves as a metaphor to highlight the nation's striving towards independence from the Danish rule. Einarsson did this by showing the Elf King (and his royal court) as pagan, thus something that belongs to the past and the Christian magical elf Áslaug as the embodiment of the new independent republic (Gunnell 320).

What Gunnell does not point out is how Einarsson uses the elves to show how Christianity and paganism have co-existed in Iceland and how the elves might even be imagined as converting to Christianity, to their great spiritual benefit. Einarsson does this by depicting the only Christian álfur, Áslaug, as kind and more powerful than all the pagan elves, (including the Elf King). When she becomes the new Elf ruler, the pagan elves do not get eliminated in the process. Instead, they support and follow Áslaug, alluding to the elves later conversion, mirroring how they appear in Árnason's folklore collection. By emphasizing the negative side of the pagan elves and the positive side of the Christian one, Einarsson could have been catering to his Christian audiences by showing that, despite the elves' pagan roots, they must remain a part of the nation's Christian future, even if they must be baptized Christian. The elves emerge from the people's imagination and represent the very soul of the nation, living inside the earth and the land.

The Play

The setting is a typical Icelandic farm in the 1800s and tells the story of Jón, the foster son of elderly farming couple. Jón is eager to get married to a young girl named Guðrún who is in immediate danger of an elf-spell, put forth by the pagan Elf King. The spell has plagued her family for two generations, due to an unfortunate interaction between her grandmother and the Elf King decades earlier. Both Guðrún and her future husband Jón are protected by Áslaug, a powerful Christian elf deity, who manages to put a stop to all the bad pagan elvish spells throughout the course of the play. The Elf King's subjects and his royal court are getting tired of the way the king rules his kingdom. Finally the magical elf deity, Áslaug, spearheads a revolution against the pagan Elf King so that new and better times can lie ahead for the Icelandic nation – for elves and humans alike.

Pagan Elves / Christian Elves

From the beginning of the play, Einarsson shows his appreciation of the various types of Icelandic elves, drawn from Árnason's folk tales and the elves found in Norse Mythology. Einarsson makes these distinctions clear for his audiences as the following example establishes. (This dialogue takes place among the daughters of the pagan Elf King):

HEIÐBLÁIN. Tonight the elves are out and about. (Yells) Come out, come out whoever wants out.

MJÖLL. Elves from elf cities.

LJÓSBJÖRT. The Hidden ones from hillocks

[...]

ALL. Come out, come out whoever wants out.

LJÓSBJÖRT. Except the Dark-Elves from the deep (Einarsson 1.1.- Translation by author).

In Icelandic folklore, elves (or hidden ones) are never divided into dark and light elves, as noted by Gunnell (“National Folklore” 302). The elves in folk tales resemble humans in most ways, except for their superior “godly” powers to harm or aid humans as mentioned in previous chapter. However, in the 13th century manuscript *The Prose Edda*, elves are divided in these categories. The Light-Elves are described as beautiful godly creatures that live among the “Æsir-kin” which is a plural of Ásar; a.k.a. the pagan Gods, (Sturluson 28-9). The Dark-Elves, however, are described to be “...blacker than pitch [and] dwell down in the earth...” (Sturluson 32). The fact that these pagan elves are divided up this way is a result of Christian influences. Christopher Abram notes this in his book *Myths of the Pagan North*. According to him, the author of *The Prose Edda*, Snorri Sturluson, was a Christian author and a significant contributor to a Norse myth collection renaissance that was taking place at the time (11, 23). Up until that point, the myths surrounding the Norse Gods had been circulating orally. Instead of merely regurgitating old pagan myths and poems, Sturluson created a “...a new mythology based partly upon inherited narrative traditions, and partly on contemporary Christian knowledge and attitudes” (11, 211). Apparently, Sturluson did this to make the material more accessible for his Christian audiences (211). Gunnell further elaborates on this fact, claiming that the Medieval Church deliberately equated “...all popular nature spirits with demons or fallen angels longing for salvation” (“How Elvish” 128).

It is never clearly established in Einarsson’s play who is a “Light-Elf” although the magical deity, Áslaug, is depicted as pure, powerful and kind. The dark elves in the play are, however, clearly established, as pagan and thus evil. One of them is even called Svartur or Black

and is the Elf King's henchman. The correlation between being a pagan elf and thus evil is established through Svartur, the Elf King, and his daughters. They pay homage to Norse gods such as Freyja, and Baldur (Einarsson 23-24.2, 45.2, 156.5) and they can cast (pagan) spells. In this way, Einarsson shows how a pagan elf is a bad specimen of an elf, whereas a converted one (such as Áslaug) is purer, kinder with superior magical powers to pagan spells. At one point, the young woman Guðrún is bound to be inflicted by the Elf King's spell that has plagued her family for decades. When Svartur (Black) comes in to carry out the spell on the King's behalf, Áslaug comes right in time to protect Guðrún. When Svartur tries to stab Áslaug with a blade, he cannot get through her magical veil (Einarsson 50. 2). The explanation is revealed later when the King orders Svartur to stab Áslaug again, to which Svartur immediately replies; "No Heathen blades will affect her" (Einarsson 141.4).

Áslaug's magical (Christian) powers are not the only features that can override the pagan elf spells. Christian relics also become important in the play as a powerful shield against the spells. When the young woman Guðrún discovers a letter from her deceased mother, she urges Guðrún to hang a picture of the Virgin Mary as a protective charm against the pagan elf spell. The mother continues in the letter, stating that, "...Many elves are threatened by this image [of Virgin Mary as the elves are] heathen..."(Einarsson 32.1. – Translation by author). Further indication of the negative aspects of pagan elves, with the hope that they will finally convert, is when Áslaug has a conversation with the Elf King's daughter, Mjöll. The two of them are bantering about the Elf King's poor governance and Áslaug is hinting at the fact that she will spearhead the new times that lie ahead:

MJÖLL. You practice Christian wizardry and can tolerate to hear the Church bells.

When the humans started ringing those bells, all nature spirits and elves fled to the

mountains. We ceased interfering with the humans; which is why things went the way that they did.

ÁSLAUG. I can teach you all the wizardry I know. It contains love to all that lives. I hope the King's daughter wants to be baptized. (Einarsson 24.1. – Translation by author).

Mjöll, is of course, referring to Iceland's conversion to Christianity and also is stating that elves were present and have remained pagan since then. Áslaug, however, underlines the beauty of Christian “wizardry” while referring to how the conversion in Iceland ought to be carried out, through baptism (Abram 190-91).

Although highlighting the tension between paganism and Christianity, Einarsson also focuses on the fusion between the two. When the young human, Jón, is first introduced to the Elf King and his royal court, he asks the King about their origins. The king replies, “We are the descendants of Eve's offspring that your God never got the chance to see” (Einarsson 156. 5. - Translation by author). The legend to which Einarsson is referring, is called “Genesis of the Hidden Ones” and can be found in Árnason’s folktale collection as well as in Gunnell’s folklore database at sagnagrunnur.com (“Huldumanna Genesis” 1001). The story revolves around Adam and Eve's children and how they were not properly washed when God came to visit. Due to their lack of hygiene, Adam and Eve decided to hide their children from God, which infuriated him. God then decided to condemn these children so that they would be forever hidden, along with all their descendants. He ordered that nobody would ever be able to see them, unless granted permission from him (Árnason 3: 4). In one version, God condemns the children to live in mounds and hillocks from then on (“Huldumanna Genesis” 1001). This could be Einarsson’s attempt to show elves as one of God's condemned creatures. More importantly, the author is also

showing certain reconciliation between Christian and the pagan stories, by situating the originally pagan elves within biblical narrative.

Towards the end of the play, it becomes clear that the Elf-King's subjects, and his royal court, are getting tired of how the King rules his kingdom (Einarsson 52-53.1.,107.4). Through Gunnell's lens, the metaphor is clear; the play proposes urgency to sever Iceland's ties with Denmark and become independent (320). The elves hope that better times lie ahead and the fact that the Christian elf deity Áslaug becomes their new queen, could indicate that elves will become Christened in the process. That is how the elves appear in Árnason's folklore collection at least (Árnason 3: 41-51). Other possible reason for Einarsson's religious concerns in the play, may be found within a postman named Gvendur. The character is an empathetic simpleton who roams around the rural areas, doing people favors for food and a place to sleep. At one point in the play, the dark elf Svartur, inflicts a curse upon Gvendur, that changes him into a dog. Svartur then alludes to that fact that the curse will not be lifted unless Áslaug releases Gvendur from it. When Gvendur fails to convince the human Jón that Gvendur is behind the dogs head, due to the pagan elf's curse, Gvendur says to himself "Oh my how the church's beliefs and Christianity has declined since I was young" (Einarsson 136.4. - Translation by author).

Whatever the reasons are for Einarsson's religious concerns, the elves are and have been integral part of the nation's pagan imagination. They were present when the land first rose from the sea (Gunnell "National Folklore" 319) and are here to stay, inside mounds, hillocks and rocks. At the end of the play, when the Icelandic nation is finally free from the cruel rule of the Elf King and the Christian elf deity Áslaug becomes the embodiment of the new independent Icelandic nation, she establishes the following:

We elves are the result of the people's imagination, and have always lived in this

country...Imagination is a powerful thing. The elves are the hidden soul and life of the nation, within the rocks and hillocks, that people create..." (Einarsson 182. 5. - Translation by author).

Einarsson clearly shows, in a poetic manner, how the pagan imagination manifests within Icelandic nation, through the elves. Not only do the elves reside in the peoples' powerful imagination, but are the hidden *soul*, residing within Icelandic nature and the landscape.

Chapter 3 Dead Children and Ghost Haunting in Iceland

In the 2006 survey, regarding modern folk beliefs in Iceland, a high percentage of those Icelanders who believe in elves also believe in the existence of ghosts. As a matter of fact, the percentage is subsequently higher for the latter. The survey reveals that 75% believe in the phenomenon of ghost haunting, ranging from “possible” to “certain” (Arnalds et.al. 84). The division of those interviewed was relatively even between genders and age, as well as equal in distribution between rural and the urban dwellers (Gunnell, “Modern Legends” 2). Gunnell also points out similarities between the modern day accounts of elves, ghosts and humans, and those documented in Árnason’s folklore collection from the 19th century and in the Icelandic sagas (Gunnell 4).

In the novel *My Soul to Take* (2009), Yrsa Sigurdardottir focuses on the side of the pagan imagination relating to ghosts and ghost haunting. She mirrors the current beliefs in Iceland, first by juxtaposing the rural believers in contrast to the urban skeptics and how the differences between the two become blurred. Sigurdardottir bases her novel on the Icelandic legend “Til Manns Var ég Ætluð” (“I Was Meant for Marrying”, found in Árnason’s collection). The particular tale, revolves around an infant that, left out to die by its mother, comes back to haunt the living. The motif goes back to the pre-Christian era in Iceland and became the basis of folk tales such as “I Was Meant for Marrying.” The chapter focuses on how ghosts continue to haunt the nation, and how the ghosts’ connection to the land and their physical presence serve as a constant reminder of unresolved wrongs and injustices, such as the absence of baptism and murders.

My Soul to Take

The novel is a part of Sigurdardottir's crime series featuring the lawyer and pseudo detective Thóra and her German boyfriend, Mathew. Together they embark on a journey to investigate "paranormal activities" in a New Age Hotel located in the rural areas in the Western part of Iceland. The hotel owner (Jónas) hires Thóra to gather evidence against the former owners of the farmstead, on which the hotel is built. Jónas complains about a "hidden fault" which he claims is hurting his business – namely the presence of ghosts and ghost haunting (Sigurdardottir 13). The haunting comes in the form of the whining of dead children outside the hotel at night, as well as through visual ghost sightings. While Thóra tries to build a case based around these unusual accusations, a body of the hotel's female architect, Birna, is found mutilated and sexually assaulted on the cliffs near the hotel. While Thóra starts to work on the murder case in secret, (given that her client is now one of the police's main suspects) she finds out a gruesome family history relating to the farmstead on which the hotel is built.

In the 1940s, a four-year-old girl named Kristín was murdered at the farmstead by her uncle (Grímur) over ownership of the land. Originally, Grímur and his brother (Bjarni) had owned the two farms and the land on which it stood. When Bjarni and his daughter Guðný, die due to TB, the only person standing in the way of Grímur becoming the rightful owner of both farms, is Bjarni's four-year-old granddaughter Kristín. As a result, Grímur placed Kristín in a bunker underneath the farm where she eventually died of hypothermia and she was not to be found for over sixty-five years. Eventually, Grímur and his family became the legal owners of both farms. His grandchildren, the siblings Elín and Börkur, later sold it to the hotel owner Jónas, after Grímur's death.

Fast forward to present day, when Thóra finds the skeleton of Kristín in the secret bunker beneath the second farm, she accidentally solves this sixty-five year old crime. At the end of the novel the readers find out that it was the great grandchild of Grímur, Berta, (daughter of the second sibling Elín) who murdered the architect Birna. The reason for the murder was that Birna was becoming aware of this old murder mystery, and, if the truth came out, Berta's family would have lost the farm.

The Dead Child Tradition

Throughout this novel, Sigurdardottir juxtaposes the alleged difference between rural and urban beliefs surrounding the supernatural. That disparity becomes apparent in the recurring statements from the hotel staff that claim to be familiar with hotel's haunting. When Thóra interrogates a local hotel employee named Jökull, he cannot conceal his resentment against the skepticism conveyed by the city people. He says: "There is no point talking about ghosts to people from the city... they don't get it. If something's not made of tarmac and concrete [they] can't take it seriously" (152). Earlier, Thóra interrogates another rural area employee named Soldis, who explains to Thóra the reason for the alleged whining of the dead children outside the hotel's windows. According to Soldis, the local women in the old days left their children out to die in the lava field surrounding the hotel. It was the women's only option, since they couldn't provide for their children. According to Soldis, those dead children are whining outside the hotel's windows. At that point Thóra sarcastically retorts, "Are you telling me that you've heard crying babies who were left out here to die hundreds of years ago?" (Sigurdardottir 65).

The author draws from historical facts regarding child abandonment in old Nordic societies, combined with old folklore tradition. In the book *The Nordic Dead-Child Tradition*, Juha Pentikäinen explains how the only pagan practices allowed after the conversion in Iceland,

was to eat horsemeat *and* abandon unwanted children (68). The latter is referred to in Icelandic as *Barna útburður* or to “carry out a child” (68). Pentikäinen explains that “...útburdr [merely] means “dead child”...” without specifying an age range (196). In that context, it can be argued that the four year-old Kristín was an “útburður” of sorts, since her uncle, Grímur, “carried her out” and left to die. These “customs” were left in place in the post-Christian era in Iceland due to economic reasons. Because of the scarce, tillable land available in Iceland, it was considered highly economic (and efficient) to abandon a child that could not be cared for (70). The main Icelandic lawmaker at the time, who left those old pagan laws in place, did so as a compromise so that the conversion to Christianity would be easier (70). Based on *The Book of the Icelanders, The Story of the Conversion* his estimate was accurate, as the conversion went very smoothly and conflicts were avoided (*Íslendingabók-Kristni Saga*, Xxvii, xxxviii).

In the pre-Christian era in Iceland “Abandoning a child with a name was already regarded as murder [which] *Harðar saga ok Holmverja* [dating] from the c. 950 A.D., affirms” (Pentikäinen 74). As most of the sagas “...were written in the 12th century at the earliest, at least 100 years after the advent of Christianity” according to Pentikäinen, the apparent condemnation of child abandonment is correlated with Christian morals and the laws at the time (70). King St. Olaf, eventually abolished this custom in 1018 and as a result, “útburður” was thereafter considered a murder. An exception applied if a child had some kind of physical deformation as noted by Pentikäinen et.al. (69,78-80).

Ghost stories surrounding child abandoning, might have been fabricated to deter people from doing so. In the introduction to the book *Hildur, Queen of the Elves: And Other Icelandic Legends*, Gunnell talks about how many of the legends told in the old Icelandic turf huts, were not for mere entertainment only, using legends of “útburðir” as an example. According to him,

some of the legends were rooted “...in sermons [and] moral tales [and many of them] designed to educate people about how to behave [as well as warning about various dangers, such as]...having unwanted children” (Gunnell 22). In *Scandinavian Folk Belief and Legend*, Kvideland et.al. argue that “In dealing with the dead...respect and caution were called for, and analogous devices and rituals were applied to “lay” the dead and protect the living against unwanted intrusions” such as haunting (11).

When Thóra is investigating the property’s alleged haunting, she accidentally reveals Kristín’s murder and is able to connect it to the most recent murders. Even though she remains skeptical throughout the story regarding the haunting, she is willing to look into Jón Árnason’s Icelandic folklore collection to help shine a light on the several factors surrounding the ghostly myth (Sigurdardottir 235, 298). When Thóra stumbles upon a webpage with some of Árnason’s tales, she discovers the following:

...the cries of unbaptized babies who were left outside to die of exposure can be heard when the wind blows in the place where they died. Also that the ghosts of these babies can move around by lifting themselves on to one knee and dragging themselves along by one hand (Sigurdardottir 235).

Thóra jokes about it later, saying that if someone should encounter a being of this sort, it should not get a chance to crawl three circles around that person, since he or she might go insane (235). That correlates with Pentikäinen’s argument regarding *útburðir*, how they follow people and move quickly, strangely and turn “...in a circle... supporting [themselves] on one knee and elbow.... “ (198-99). Icelandic ghosts stand out from other ghosts in the Medieval era because of their tangible physicality. This is noted by Jakob Ármannsson in his article “Vampires and Watchmen: Categorizing the Mediaeval Icelandic Undead.” Instead of being mere spirits,

Icelandic ghosts have certain physical form (Ármansson). As a result, they can pose a real physical threat towards those they haunt and are a strong reminder of the guilt surrounding their murder. The ghosts physicality also show their earthiness and therefor their strong connection to the land.

There are various reasons and circumstances that propel dead children to wander after death according to Pentikäinen. These instances include murder, execution or if the child is not baptized (52-3). These children face certain “placelessness” in the world, as they have not been properly prepared for “...the land of death” (51-2, 57). Útburðir in Iceland usually haunt places near the hiding place of the body and the encounters usually take place during the evening or the night (56,194-196). This shows the ghost’s strong connection to the land on which it was killed. During Thóra’s investigation, she follows the encrypted clues found in Birna’s diary (that Thóra stole from her bedroom before the police could get to it). One of the clues mentions something about a stone on the meadow where a plan to build a hotel expansion was to be carried out. The stone is located on the plot near the other farm (the one that Grímur used to live on). Thóra and her German friend Matthew manage to locate this almost hidden stone with the following inscription;

Kerns I should have cast,

A farm was meant for me,

I should have been wed,

Just like thee (Sigurdardottir 206)

Thóra later finds out that the stone's inscription derives from an old Icelandic legend called “Til Manns Var ég Ætluð” (“I Was Meant For Marrying”) which Thóra retells to Matthew:

It's the story of a mother who left her infant outside to die. Some years later she had another daughter, whom she raised. When the girl reached marriageable age, a young man asked for her hand and they were betrothed. In the midst of the wedding ceremony, there was a banging at the window, and the guests heard this verse chanted (Sigurdardottir 298).

Thóra then explains to Matthew that the dead child was speaking directly to her sister and Matthew then wonders if the verse implies "...that the sister is enjoying what should have been the lot of the child left to die..." (298). There are striking similarities between the folklore and the novel's plot. As previously stated, the four year-old Kristín and her descendants were the rightful owners of both farms. It almost seems as though Kristín "wants" to be found, as the following examples suggest. The series of events that lead Thóra and Matthew to Birna's diary, with clues surrounding the engraved stone, are mystical. The folklore (and the verse) helps them discover the skeleton in the bunker underneath the stone and thus solve the murder. As noted by Pentikäinen, murder is not the only propelling factors for a dead child haunting. The other component has to do with baptism, or its absence.

When Thóra and Mathew try to find any traces of Kristín's existence in the local church books (without any luck) they notice that a couple of pages have been ripped out. Thóra then states, "If you erase the birth records of a child born in that era, you've pretty much succeeded in wiping out every trace of it [and its] christening..." (Sigurdardottir 137-8). If a child is not baptized, as argued by Pentikäinen, or has been un-baptized as in the case of Kristín, it can also motivate a child to haunt (192-4). This is an example of how the Icelandic pagan imagination surrounding ghosts has been fused with Christianity. Since the child has been murdered (which

was illegal after conversion) and de-baptized, it is restless and unhappy, until matters are set straight.

There are certain similarities regarding the lore around haunting amongst the Nordic countries where some apply to specific places and others do not. One of the components related to the Finnish dead child tradition, concerns the haunter or the "...lingering...[of one] who has made an unfulfilled promise...or someone who has left a task undone..." (54). Jakobsson talks about some of the specificities regarding haunting in Iceland and how ghosts appear when following up on "...some business", as he puts it (Jakobsson). In that context, the author refers to one of the protagonists in the Icelandic *Laxdæla Saga*, Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir and her granddaughter, who are visited by two ghosts. One of the ghosts is there specifically to bring forth some unidentified news, most likely fulfilling an unfinished task or a business (Jakobsson).

In the novel, when Grímur throws little Kristín down in the bunker, her foremost worries are that she will not be able to deliver a letter that her mother gave to her before she passed away (6). The letter was addressed to her mother's childhood friend, Lára, who later in the novel gets ahold of the letter, which was found on Kristín's skeleton. Lára reveals the contents of the letter to Thóra, regarding how Kristín's mother (Guðný, daughter of Bjarni) was asking Lára if she could take care of young Kristín. Guðný knew she was dying of TB and tried to save Kristín from being raised by Grímur (Sigurdardóttir 341-343). The fact the letter finally got delivered (although sixty five years later) correlates with Pentikäinen and Jakobsson's arguments regarding how the one who has died under unusual circumstances (like being murdered, not being baptized or having had unfinished business) wants to be discovered and finish its task.

At the end of the novel, Thóra discovers that the "dead children" whining seems to have been the farm cat all along. The "ghost girl" that the hotel owner Jónas claims to have seen in

one of the mirrors, was the murderess Berta sneaking around. At the very last page, after the remains of Kristín have finally been laid in holy ground, Thóra hears a "...faint cry from the lava field..." and starts cursing the cat. She then remembers that she spotted the cat so far away from the churchyard that it should be physically impossible for the cat to have made it all this way to the cemetery (346). The "crying" in the churchyard then becomes louder, propelling Thóra to exit the cemetery in a hurry. Thóra ends by saying "This place gives me the creeps" and leaves. As mentioned at the beginning, the juxtaposition of rural and urban beliefs is established in the interaction between the hotel staff and the urban skeptic Thóra. However, Thóra is obviously not willing to rule out the possibility that something supernatural might be at stake. Earlier in the novel, when Thóra is looking for evidence in an abandoned farmhouse, she claims to feel something breathing down her neck. She also believes to hear the alleged whining of the children outside her window along with her boyfriend Matthew, who also is a skeptic. The difference between the beliefs of rural and urban dwellers depicted in the novel then becomes blurred. It correlates with the 2006 survey where a relatively small difference seems to be between the urban and rural areas (Arnalds et.al. 84).

The author manages to pay homage to the Icelandic literary heritage, both the folk tales and the sagas, while painting an accurate picture of modern beliefs in Iceland. She shows how the pagan imagination shows a strong connection to the land and its less visible inhabitants, the ghosts that represent a certain guilt correlating to the ancient wrongdoing towards them when living, whether it was the absence of baptism, a murder or both.

Chapter 4 Children of Nature – The Film

In folktales and modern day accounts, elves are depicted as majestic, graceful and compassionate, almost like nature itself. Elves have also been depicted as dangerous, spiteful and vindictive – as nature can also present itself. As a result, a deep sense of being embedded in, and dependent upon, nature is integral to the pagan imagination in Icelandic culture. What happens when this relationship is disrupted? What happens when someone is propelled to move from a rural area to an urban environment? How do the consequences of this disconnection manifest within the pagan imagination? Those questions are addressed when observing Fridrikson's film *Börn Náttúrnar (Children of Nature, 1991)*. Before these questions can be addressed, a short synopsis of the film is in order.

Storyline and mysterious elements

This story revolves around two elderly people named Geiri and Stella. When Geiri retires as a farmer and moves to the city, he first moves in with his daughter and later into a retirement home. At this institution, he meets an old lady friend called Stella. They know each other from growing up in the vicinity of each other in the Icelandic countryside. The nostalgic longing for the old home turf, and the prison-like atmosphere at the institution, motivates Stella and Geiri to flee from the retirement home. They sneak out one night and embark on a journey towards the places where they grew up. After a long and treacherous journey through the mystical landscape of Iceland, they end up on Stella's old farm where she dies shortly after. Complying with her last wishes, Geiri buries her on site. Afterwards, Geiri walks his final journey, barefoot up the top of a mountain, where he is blessed by an angel and then vanishes into thin air.

In the book *Kúreki Norðursins*, film theorist, Guðni Elísson, discusses a common thread through most of Fridrikson's works, which is the idea of a protagonist's battle with institutions (3). Another prevalent motif is the loss of life's meaning and an urge to return to one's roots by severing the ties to the oppressive environment, in whatever form that is (4, 14). A theme revolving around rural people that are out of their elements, in the midst of urban setting, is also present, such as in *Children of Nature* (6).

Tying in mystic and poetic elements with natural elements, as Fridriksson so often does, is a clear manifestation of the pagan imagination. When the director was asked about his preoccupation with the supernatural, (another known theme in his films) he replied, "Well, it's so natural. I've sensed it so many times. Supernatural things are so natural to me, because I believe that dimension takes place in reality..." (Sipl "The Ghostly tales"). Before exploring the supernatural (or natural) elements surrounding the spirits of the land in the film, the disconnection between man and nature might be an appropriate place to start. Fridriksson begins the film with a romantically idyllic picture of a typical Icelandic nature scene, filled with mossy rocks and grassy mounds. Soon the camera pans over a group of Icelandic farmers (among them is Geiri) singing and shepherding in the midnight sun. Adding to the rural atmosphere, many are dressed up in Icelandic wool sweaters, as one might see in a romantic tourist ad. In this context, people are depicted in contentment with nature. It is idyllic, romantic, and natural. The sudden contrast in the next scene is then very stark when Geiri starts ambivalently severing his ties with the farm on which he lives. He starts by burning his old family photos, depicting a rural life of the past where former inhabitants were milking cows and spinning wool. Shortly after, Geiri melancholically brings his dog outside the farmstead, where he puts him down with a single gunshot. Geiri then lays the dog respectfully to his final rest on a grassy mound close by.

The ambivalence and the melancholy in the protagonist eyes and gestures seem to indicate the downside of separating himself from the farm, and thus nature.

When Geiri heads to the city, the cold and hostile atmosphere of the urban environment is highlighted by the city's darkness and a gloomy non-diegetic music in the background. A further indication of this urban hostility is depicted at the home of Geiri's daughter, where he is planning to stay. Cinematically, Geiri is situated in a chair in clear opposition to his daughter, her husband and his granddaughter who are all sitting together on the sofa. The opposing stance in this scene can be read like a metaphor for the rural versus urban conflict. Those indications are further alluded to at the breakfast table, the next morning. Geiri sits quietly eating, while his family swirls around him at a fast pace, commonly known to the city folk, barely eating breakfast on their way out the door. The racket from his granddaughter's stereo, which Geiri finally turns off, emphasizes the urban disturbance. It is a situation in which he seems to be in control, until another urban disturbance occurs outside, with construction workers drilling – a metaphor for urbanization about which Geiri can do nothing. After a domestic conflict between Geiri and his granddaughter, it is suggested that he go to a retirement home.

These scenes do not only depict a classic example of the clash between the rural and the urban, but they also show the unnatural elements following the Icelandic farmer's immediate disconnect from nature. This detachment becomes even clearer when Geiri settles in at the retirement home and meets his old lady friend Stella. At the lunch table, she explains to Geiri why she has been attempting to flee the institution on several occasions. Stella reveals to Geiri how unhappy she is and shows a strong longing to go back to the old farm where she grew up. In a nostalgic manner, she tells Geiri how they will all one day, return to their home turfs, just like elves. Her last statement indicates for the audience what lies ahead when the two of them embark

on their treacherous journey to the rural areas of Iceland. After Geiri becomes more discontent and seemingly out of place at the institution, he takes the plunge with Stella and sneaks out with her.

In the middle of the night, they start driving through the vibrant landscape of Iceland. Fridriksson is aware of the potential of the landscape, by romantically depicting the waterfalls, grassy mounds and rocky mountains, while surrounding it with mystical elements at the same time. That he does by adding mist and spooky non-diegetic music in the background. When the pair is on the road, re-uniting with nature, they become more content than before. Shortly after their escape, a police notice is sent out and roadblocks are set up in their route's area. When Geiri and Stella are face to face with the police at the roadblock, they make eye contact with one of the construction workers nearby. The man behaves and looks peculiar. He stares eerily in the eyes of Geiri and makes imperceptible head gestures. After their brief eye contact and the head gestures, Geiri suddenly steps on the accelerator and passes the police, who start chasing him and Stella. Geiri heads straight towards a rocky mountain, and moments before they are about to crash into the mountain, the jeep evaporates mysteriously in thin air, and the police officer is left in perplexity.

In the context of pagan imagination, the construction worker could be perceived as an elf, especially given their human form in Icelandic folklore.¹ His eerie gaze and imperceptible gestures could indicate a kind of telepathic rapport between him and Geiri, ensuring the couple that they are welcomed to hide at the elves' habitats. Therefore nature, in the form of an elf came

¹ Look at Árnason's folklore collection, volume 1, page 4, where elves are believed to resemble humans in every aspect.

to rescue, helping the humans flee their urban oppression that is manifested in the police and in the institution.

Jón Árnason's folklore collection has a special section on the topic of elves aiding humans or showing them kindness in various ways (Árnason 1: 24 – 31). Elves either aid people that have gotten lost in the midst of nature or are saved from treacherous weather. Other tales in this section show how elves interfere when authoritative figures oppress other humans or inflict violence upon them.² Although these tales do not show oppression put forth by urban authoritative figures (as in the case of Stella and Geiri), nature comes to rescue, in the form of elves.

Stella's earlier remarks about how she and Geiri will all return to their old home turfs, just like elves, is of significance when looking through the lens of pagan imagination. Stella could either be implying that she and Geiri will be among elves (as the folk tales depict) *or* the two of them will become elves. The latter correlates with the accounts found in the Icelandic sagas. In *Landnámabók* (The Book of Icelandic Settlement – Translation by author) a man named Þórólfur is keen on protecting a mountain called Helgafell. He believes it to be sacred, and he also believes that everybody will eventually “die into the mountain” (Benediktsson 125). In the articles “The Power of the Place” and “How Elvish are the Álfar”, Gunnell suggests that those who “die into a mountain” become nature spirits, (or elves), after death (“Power” 9, “How Elvish” 118-19). A particular example can be found in *Eyrbyggja Saga*, when a shepherd walks by the previously mentioned Helgafell.³ Mysteriously, the mountain opens up before him and, inside, he sees a big bonfire and hears noisy merriment. At one point, the shepherd hears

² See Árnason's folklore collection, Vol. 1, p.26, 28- 29

³ For English versions, look at *The Book of Settlements: Landnamabok (U of M Icelandic Series)* from 2007, by Hermann Pálsson.

someone from the mountain party, welcoming the shepherd's boss and his pals. The shepherd goes on his way and does not think much of this incident, but has a hunch it might be an omen of some sort. The day after, the shepherd learns that his boss has drowned along with all his men when out fishing earlier (Sveinsson et.al. 19). The mountain party can be perceived as a welcoming ceremony for the deceased men – thus implying that they died “into” the mountain, as the lore suggests.

In the film, when Stella dies, Geiri buries her near her old farm, thus “...returning her to the gentle earth...” as noted by Peter Cowie in the book *Icelandic films* (45). Shortly after, Geiri walks barefoot towards the top of a mountain. In the dissertation “Icelandic cinema; A national practice in global context”, Björn Nordfjord claims Geiri’s journey to be an obvious Christ metaphor (176). He supports that claim, by pointing out the entrance of an angel, played by the German actor, Bruno Ganz, which blesses Geiri by touching his bloody heels (176). After the incident, Geiri evaporates in thin air. Cowie disagrees with Nordfjord, stating Geiri’s journey to be “...spiritual encounter with nature rather than any reference to the Road to Calvary” (46). In that context, Cowie points out how in real life, Fridriksson’s father prepared himself for death by “...walking barefoot over the jagged lava in the Icelandic wilderness” (45-6). Either way, both interpretations fit in with the pagan imagination, considering how it has been synthesized with Christianity. The angel could have been blessing Geiri to prepare him for his journey to heaven, or Geiri “died into the mountain” and thus became an elf.

Guilt Trapped Elves

There is an Icelandic expression that refers to a person’s placelessness in any given situation. It says; “Eins og álfur út úr hól,” which roughly translates to “Like an elf out of a mound.” If someone does not fit within a certain social group or even a social situation, that

person is referred to as an “elf out of a mound.” The same can be said about Geiri and Stella, as they clearly do not belong in the city. They are truly like two elves out of a mound, giving Stella’s nostalgic rant about returning to the home turf like elves more depth. In his article “The Elves’ Point of View,” folklorist Valdimar Hafstein claims that elves “...represent nature in the heart of culture [or a] wilderness in the midst of cultivation” (89). Other than the obvious fact that Stella and Geiri come from the rural areas, why do they feel they do not, or cannot, belong in the urban areas of Iceland? What does their separation from nature imply?

As discussed by Hafstein, a certain anxiety and guilt for leaving the rural areas of Iceland goes back to the 1900s. In her book *Hinn Sanni Íslendingur* (The True Icelander), Matthíasdóttir discusses how crucial the years between 1900 and 1930 were in regard to identity formation for Icelanders. Iceland had always been a farming community where most lived in the rural areas until the turn of the twentieth century (118). According to Matthíasdóttir, the “true” identity was always considered to be the farmer and the common peasant (143). Her argument correlates with Kristen Hastrup’s claims in her book, *Island of Anthropology*, where a farmer is described as “... the paradigmatic Icelander...” (133). With the increased numbers of people moving to the urban areas in the early 1900s, anxiety was manifesting among scholars and politicians alike. They tried to reverse this development with romantic, rural area propaganda, where they urged for a new pastoral society (Matthíasdóttir 128). The politicians emphasized the romantic factors of urbanization and the negative effects the city life would have, particularly on young people (Ásgeirsson, *Iðnbylting hugarfarsins*, 52).

The rural versus urban struggle that took place during those years obviously persists within Geiri and Stella. Their discomfort in midst of urbanization drives them back to the

countryside where their love for the land, urges them to merge with it and the hidden creatures that reside within it.

Chapter 5 Cold Fever and Social Anxiety

In the film *Á Köldum Klaka* (*Cold Fever*, 1995), Fridriksson continues with the theme of elves aiding humans in the midst of nature, with the addition of elves avenging them. The latter is a well-known phenomenon in Icelandic folk tales, and modern day accounts, particularly when humans interfere with alleged elf spots. The idea of elf images appearing in people's dreams, as Icelandic farmers, might be a form of guilt. These dream images might also have more mysterious origins. The pagan imagination where elves and ghosts appear is a phenomenon that everyone can tap into, including foreign visitors, as long as they are on Icelandic soil.

Storyline and Natural elements

The storyline revolves around a Japanese businessman named Hirata, who reluctantly takes a trip to Iceland to perform a traditional Japanese burial ceremony in the memory of his late parents. Apparently, they had visited Iceland several years prior, and were killed in an avalanche. On his journey, Hirata has to overcome several obstacles, including quirky characters that either aid him or stall him, the biggest obstacle being the harsh weather and the treacherous icy landscape. In *Children of Nature*, Stella and Geiri are in alignment with nature, and feel depressed when separated from it. In *Cold Fever*, however, Hirata has to fight through the cold Icelandic nature, venturing on foot or driving through the unknown, blizzardous countryside. This contrast is powerful, considering how Hirata is fighting with the same natural environment that killed his parents. That environment, and its less visual inhabitants, later saves Hirata.

In one scene, when Hirata is driving in the middle of the icy nowhere, the car breaks down completely. Hirata seems bound to freeze to death inside, without any form of communication or repair skills. After having screamed in agony due to hunger and hypothermia,

he finally falls asleep. When he wakes up the morning after, a mysterious girl appears outside his car. She is dressed in colorful wool like clothing, from an unidentifiable place and era, with a hair that resembles a bird's nest. All of a sudden she starts screaming in a high pitch voice towards the surrounding glaciers, propelling them to break into the river. The girl then turns her scream towards Hirata's car, causing it to jump start, and then she mysteriously evaporates in front of him. The perplexed Hirata has seemingly been aided by an Icelandic elf and is now able to continue his journey.

Elves have been known for aiding humans that are either fleeing oppressors, or fighting their way through treacherous weather conditions (Árnason 1: 24-5). However, elves have not always been depicted as these kind, almost guardian angel-like figures, as the film and Árnason's lore proposes. After Hirata's car is stolen and he has miraculously survived his journey on foot, he finds his way to an elderly horse farmer named Siggi. The elderly gentleman agrees to help Hirata get to his destination and the two of them venture off to a remote cabin where they rest during the night. Siggi starts telling Hirata about the mystical beings hidden in the Icelandic nature. He claims that "ghosts and hidden people" come in all shapes and sizes to help people who are in trouble, but for the most part they are just causing trouble. The latter statement is further elaborated on by another character Hirata encounters on his way. An American hitchhiker named Jack starts explaining the elf-belief of Icelanders to Hirata when the two of them drive by a big rock, which Jack refers to as a "fairy stone." He talks about how afraid Icelandic construction workers are to "fuck around with those fairies" propelling them to build roads around them to avoid disturbing the elves (*Cold Fever*).

The hitchhiker is referring to well-known phenomena in Iceland surrounding elves interfering with construction work. In the article, "The Elves' Point of View", folklorist Valdimar

Hafstein conducted more than thirty-five interviews between 1995 and 1996, with Icelandic construction workers. All of them claimed to have been negatively affected by elves (88). These disturbances included dream warnings, technical malfunctions, unexplained accidents and ill fortune upon those workers involved (90-91). It seemed clear to those workers that the alleged elves wanted the work to be abandoned. More often than not, those in charge of the projects were willing to comply with the elves' wishes (90). In one of those instances, a road was built around elf habitats, due to series of unexplained accidents surrounding the construction site (91). In another case, a clairvoyant was called in to cut a deal with the elves, thus serving as a mediator between the human world and the non-human world. This resembles the old pagan practices performed by shamans that also served as mediators between the spirit world and the human one for the greater good of their communities.

When browsing through online news media in Iceland, it is relatively easy to find articles of these modern day accounts. In 2006, a reporter for the local paper *Vikurfréttir* in the small town of Keflavík, described series of disturbances that occurred within first couple weeks after construction work began on the renowned Icelandic spa "The Blue Lagoon." Consistent malfunctions in the machines, without apparent explanations, were attributed to the elves, believed to live in the area. As a result, 12 peace candles were lit to pay the "hidden inhabitants" respect and shortly after, the disturbances came to a halt (*Vikurfréttir*, "Friðmælst við álfana")

Hafstein suggests that the overall image of elves might have something to do with these disturbances. Instead of the typical pointy ears and fair hair, the images of elves have been described as Icelandic farmers from two to three hundred years ago. Apparently, they resemble them in clothing and farming techniques (89, 95). Elves thus not only mirror the old idyllic times when Icelanders lived in the rural areas and farmed, but defend those areas viciously

(94). Hafstein's main claim is that the appearance of the elves as old Icelandic farmers is a manifestation of certain guilt amongst Icelanders. Hafstein describes it as a social anxiety of sorts regarding the rapid change from the old farming community towards urbanization (96). The question remains, why do the images of elves appear in Hirata's imagination? Given that he is a foreigner, with no affiliation with the Icelandic farming community, how can that be explained? There is a common thread that runs through how the elf images have manifested within the imagination of Hirata, in folk tales, the sagas and among the construction workers. First of all, the elves appear in time of despair. People are either aided by elves, or elves are blamed for various misfortunes. Secondly, of significance, is that these images appear, for the most part, in people's dreams.

Elves and Dream Motifs

When reviewing the instances of how the elves (or ghosts) present themselves in Hirata's imagination, they are all affiliated with Hirata going to sleep or waking up from a dream. For example, when Hirata falls asleep in the car, he seemingly wakes up the morning after encountering the mysterious girl elf figure outside his car. It does not seem clear though if Hirata did indeed wake up, or if this was a part of his dream. Another example is found when Hirata and his Icelandic companion, Siggi, fall asleep on the remote farm. Hirata apparently wakes up during the night and steps outside, to the middle of the lava field. All of a sudden, hundreds of unidentified figures in white veils hover around him and by him, while spooky background music escalates. When Hirata and Siggi wake up the morning after, Siggi claims to have had a strange dream, but neither he, nor Hirata, discuss their encounters.

In the article "Power of the Place," Gunnell claims 'the Icelandic dream motif' to be known from the Icelandic sagas, where elves figure usually appears in a dream of a farmer (or

his wife) who is in some stages of harvesting a crop. The dream contains a “firm request” from the elves that the activities on a particular site should to be discontinued, (Gunnell 3). In one particular elf tale, found in Árnason’s folklore collection, a young boy is throwing pebbles towards a particular mound near his farm. The boy’s father had been ill for a while and when the old man goes to sleep one night, an elf figure appears in his dream, urging the father to give his son a proper beating for throwing stones at his habitats. The elf then adds, that if the farmer complies, his illness will be eradicated. When the father wakes up, he beats up his son and soon regains his health (Árnason 1: 32). In both instances, elves seem particularly concerned about any disturbances put forth on their habitats, which correlates with the accounts of Hafstein’s construction workers.

Why do elves present themselves solemnly in people’s dreams? The Swiss psychiatrist, Carl. G. Jung theorized about the significance of dreams and dream images in the book *Man and His Symbols*. He discussed how an image can arise spontaneously from the unconscious; usually in a person's dream (21,22, 23) and how a particular image might symbolize something other than what it presents itself to be (20, 23). He emphasized the importance of taking dreams seriously and their symbolic meaning (25). According to Jung, dreams can be a manifestation of “...conscious thoughts and problems [possibly something that someone is avoiding or an] unpleasant thought or experience [someone] is suppressing” (26). He also claimed that the main purpose of dreams were to rectify some kind of psychological imbalance and present warnings if a particular problem would not be addressed (50). These theories correlate with Hafsteins argument regarding the urban guilt, seemingly plaguing the construction workers.

Someone might think that his ideas are “too psychological” or rational to be of interest when creating a story surrounding an image of elves. However, Jung’s claims that dream images

derive from a man's psyche might help bring mysticism back into mix. Jung argued that the human psyche could not be explained in itself, describing it as being part of nature, thus enigmatic and "...limitless" (23). He talked about how, throughout history, images often appear out of nowhere, offering a solution or an inspiration to artists, philosophers and scientists that were not there before (38). These images seem to come from a place that is un-human, a "breath of nature" as Jung referred to it, emphasizing the idea that God talks to people mainly through dreams (52, 102). For an image-maker and a storyteller, these ideas could be of significance. Since these images manifest through some form of discomfort or despair, it does not seem to matter if the recipient of those elf images is a native Icelander or a foreign traveler. As long as the receiver is on Icelandic soil, he can channel into this more than millennium-old Icelandic imagination. Just like the first settlers were able to tap into the pagan imagination where elves could provide a better harvest, so can anyone who is either in dire straits in the middle of Icelandic nature or merely wants to connect to it.

Chapter 6
The Modern Day Völva in Fridriksson's *Devil's Island*

Pagan imagination includes modern day practices with pagan roots. In today's society, prophetesses are a significant part of Icelandic culture. Icelandic prophetesses have even drawn international attention, through the renowned Icelandic magazine *Vikan (The Week)* according to former editor Þórarinn J. Magnússon ("Leyndardómar Viku-Völvunnar"). The most popular issue of the year is the New Year's Eve issue, which can be attributed to the magazine's global (and local) prophecy for the year to come, called "Völvuspá." The name is a pun, deriving from the famous tenth century Icelandic Eddic poem *Völuspá* where the female seer, Völva, gives Óðinn, the pagan all father, the knowledge of "...the first complete history of the Norse mythological world [as well prophesying] the pagan hell and end of the world" as noted by Christopher Abram in *Myths of the Pagan North* (158,162). The seer-ess and prophetess are pervasive in Icelandic folktales and the sagas and those "positions," mostly held by women, were highly respected in Icelandic communities.

One of the central character in Fridriksson's film *Djöflaeyjan (Devil's Island, 1996)*, is Karolina, who is a self-proclaimed prophetess or a "spae-woman" in an underprivileged Icelandic 1960's household. Karolina represents the part of national identity that deals with the archetypal Icelandic prophetess or a female seer. A correlation between her practices, the "seidr-workers" (and) the "spae-women" can be found in the Icelandic sagas and Norse Mythology as discussed by Blain, Kress et.al. The role of the Icelandic prophetess in Icelandic culture is essential, serving as a respected medium between humans and the spirits, whether these spirits have pagan or Christian roots. Her central, spiritual role, in the time of hardships in her community, contrasts the traditional role of the Christian (male) priest. She utilizes pagan practices that have evolved from pre-Christian era, and have been fused with Christianity.

The story

Fridriksson's film, *Devil's Island* (1996), is based on two novels by the Icelandic author Einar Kárason, called *Par Sem Djöflaeyjan Rís* (1983) and *Gulleyjan* (1985). The movie takes place in Iceland in the 1960's. It tells the story of a family of seven that, due to lack of housing options in the city, are bound to live together in one of the barracks left behind by the American Army after WWII. One of the main characters, Baddi, is a young boy that is left behind by his mother to live with his grandparents, along with his younger brother Danni. The grandmother, Karolina, stays at home most days, foretelling the future for the people in her household, along with exorcising alleged ghosts and demons. Her "tools of the trade" in her prophesying are playing cards, general hunches, as well as utilizing the Bible as a shield against "evil" spirits.

Karolina is the unofficial central character of the film that foresees some of the story's most tragic events. These events include the death of a young boy in the next barrack, as well as the sudden death of Danni (Baddi's younger brother). Even Baddi's excessive drinking, that causes a huge turmoil in the household, is attributed to a botched exorcism performed by Karolina years earlier. According to her, she exorcised the alcoholic demon out of her husband, Tomas, (Baddi's grandfather), while Baddi (then an infant) lay close by. Karolina then claims she does not have a clue where the alcoholic demon landed, alluding to the fact that it did indeed land in Baddi.

Connection and Similarities

The prophetess Karolina is referred to in Icelandic as "spákona" or a prophecy-woman. According to Blain, the word "...Spá (or spae, as in the Scottish 'spawife') refers to foretelling, or prophesying" (59). Blain usually refers to those oracular figures (past and present) as "seidworkers," although the boundaries between "spae" and "seiðr" do not seem clear in the old

sagas (17). In these accounts, Seer-esses and sorcerers were often treated with ambivalence, opposed to a spákona (or a female prophetess) that was usually treated with respect (59). The modern day “seidworkers” that Blain interviews in her book, adhere closely to the rituals practiced by the heathen female “seidworkers” or “spae-women” in the Icelandic sagas (3). Some prefer the latter term, as it indicates, “...one who sees what is to come” (1). The practitioners “...combine ‘lore’ with their personal experiences of deity and cosmology. They seek answers, not only for their own questions, but those of the community, concerning direction” (14). Those deities range from the classical Nordic gods, to elves and other nature spirits (13).

Blain’s description, correlates directly with Karolina’s practices in *Devils Island*, which indeed seeks answers for others in her community. In contrast to the modern day spae-women in Blain’s book, Karolina’s deities are not “heathen” in the classical sense of the term. In a true spirit of Icelandic pagan imagination, Karolina engages in pagan practices, while relying on the spirits of her choosing (from Christianity) using the Bible as her protective shield. A part of her “spae” or “seiðworking” is to ward off alleged evil spirits or ghosts as mentioned earlier. At the beginning of the movie she wakes up in the middle of the night when she smells something in the air. She brings her Bible with and starts mumbling, only to find out that there is a fire in the living room. Thus she wakes everybody up so they can put out the fire. That scene gives the audience the sense that Karolina is not just eccentric, or simply crazy, but might actually “sense” something that others do not. Later in the film, Karolina wakes up again, but now the mysterious atmosphere is heightened when she brings her Bible to the door and sees the ghost of the young boy that was tragically killed earlier in the film. In this scene, the ghost is trying to entice the only living boy in the barrack, outside the house. Karolina manages to ward the ghost away with her version of “seidr” practices and thus “saves” the living boy. With the mysterious background

music score, that has become one of Fridriksson's main tools to create a mystic mood, with an addition of ghostly lighting and a fog, it is not clearly established if this was a dream or some form of reality.

It would be easy to attribute Karolina's practices to Christian (or preferably Catholic) practices when it comes to her exorcising methods. On the contrary, her means can be found within pagan practices as well. The modern pagan seiðworkers, Blain interviews in her book, claim that "...seiðr comes also in other non-oracular forms [such as] protection [and] un-haunt houses [or what is called] 'De-ghosting' ...". Their practices can be utilized to ward off any harm inflicted by unwanted spirits (Blain 15-16). As previously stated, the modern day, pagan seiðworkers or spae-women, draw from the practices as they appear in the "old literature" or the sagas. What might be worth exploring is who those sibyls were that seiðworkers hold in such high regard?

Who were they and what did they do?

Blain argues "...most of the accounts of seiðr or magical practice, from the sagas, are of women... They appear as part of the action, *influencing events, sometimes as central figures*" (90, italics mine). The last statement correlates with Karolina's role in the household. As stated previously, she foresees the death of the two young men in her community, saves the family from burning down and allegedly exorcised an alcoholic demon from her husband years earlier (although it seems to have landed in her grandson, Baddi). Karolina then serves as a prophetess, female priestess, a matriarch and as the unofficial head of the family instead of her husband Tomas, (Baddi's grandfather). Even Tomas himself alludes to his particular place in the household when asked if he is the man of the house by the friends of his American son-in-law. To that Tomas replies, "No, I only pay" (*Devil's Island* 3.11 – 3.14). Tomas is referring to the

ongoing theme throughout the film where he, as the breadwinner, spends much of his money on the things Karolina tells him to.

Karolina is highly respected by most members of the family. She obtains respect and power in a man's world by being the households priestess, 'prophetess' or "seiðworker." There are several accounts in which women in the sagas obtained their power in a similar way. In *Egils saga*, *Njáls saga* and *Heimskringla*, the story of Gunnhildr is told, who was the queen of York and Norway during the tenth century and had learned the art of seiðr. She was a historical figure who at the time was a well known - "...woman, who exercised power in a man's world" (Blain 93-94). The importance of a woman practicing the art, at the time, is further established by Blain in the following paragraph:

...seiðr used for community construction or protection was acceptable when done by a woman [and] can be seen as a means of strength or a weapon [and] 'seeking for knowledge' in Iceland remained part of the complex of activities that were appropriate for and performed by women" (99, 108).

In contrast to the traditional male role of the male Christian priest, the female seer or seer-ess served as mediator between spirits and humans. According to Helga Kress in her book *Máttugar Meyjar* (Powerful Maidens), it was considered problematic when men tried to engage in seiðr or spae-working and when they did, they were considered "ergi" a derogatory term at the time, that referred to their sexuality (Kress 19, 34, Blain 17). In Norse Mythology, the superior power of the female goddess Freyja is clearly depicted as being the one who taught the Æsir (The Norse Gods) the art of seiðr, the most prominent one being the all father Óðinn (Blain 16, Kress 34). According to Blain, Óðinn used his newfound knowledge from Freyja, "...not only to forecast future possibilities but...to manipulate them" (16). Other accounts of Óðinn seeking

knowledge from a superior seeress or prophetess can be found in the old Eddic poem *Völuspá* considered to be written around 1000 A.D. in Iceland (Abram 166). *Völuspá* deals with “...the first complete history of the Norse mythological world [as well describing] the pagan hell and the end of the world “ (Abram 158,162). Blain elaborates on this issue, claiming that “Knowledge and power are linked, and in the poem *Völuspá* the [female] Völva’s power is clearly demonstrated: Óðinn will know only as much as she tells him, while she knows all” (18). According to these sources, other male pagan Gods seem inferior to the goddesses and seeresses (Blain 107). Thor who was considered the most powerful of the gods, depends on the Völva’s magic as well as “healing powers” (Kress 39).

The (human) prophetesses found in the sagas were considered especially essential to communities during hard times, such as famines (Blain 46-7). Even though the 1960’s military barrack household in *Devil’s Island* is not plagued by famine per se, it definitely goes through hard times and Karolina’s presence and position is essential as the community’s “priestess” “prophetess” or “seidworker.” The similarities between the modern day practices of Karolina and the divinatory figures in the sagas and Norse mythology is further elaborated on by Blain. She claims that “...the practice of vólva...did not die out in Iceland, becoming instead modified within changing conditions of daily life” (108). One of Blain’s interviewees, Jörmundur Ingi, was the former chieftain of Ásatrúarfélagið (the Icelandic neo pagan movement). He reflects on his childhood back in Iceland when growing up in the rural areas, claiming that the practices, performed by the women in the small farm kitchens, can be related to the old seiðr. These practices included prophesying marriage arrangements for other women among other things (109). In *Devil’s Island*, Karolina usually sits at the kitchen tables with her playing cards, predicting the future, only surrounded by the women of the household.

These practices, performed mostly by women, are a significant part of Icelandic culture, and represent the pagan roots that have remained and evolved over time. It has become clear that these practices are not limited to prophesying, but also warding off (Icelandic) ghosts, where the seiðworkers in question, can seek help from their higher power. In Karolina's case, she prefers the Christian deities, depicting the pagan and Christian fusion that has prevailed in Iceland since the nation converted. These women are essential figures in their communities, establishing their power and presence in a man's world.

CONCLUSION

“We elves are the result of the people's imagination, and have always lived in this country... The elves are the hidden soul and life of the nation, within the rocks and hillocks, that people create...” (Einarsson 182. 5. - Translation by author). The quote from Einarsson’s play summons up the heart of pagan imagination. It acknowledges how elves have appeared, within the imagination of Icelanders and how they are intrinsically tied to the landscape. The elves are known for being the protectors of the land as well as its defenders. They reward those who connect with the land, as well as rescue those who get lost in the midst of it. Elves have also been known to punish humans who interfere with their habitats, especially without their consent.

Icelandic ghosts have their own unique connection with the landscape and the nation. The ghosts’ powerful and physical presence, continues to serve as a reminder of Icelanders past wrongdoings and remain as a constant warning to those who embark on the treacherous, immoral road. The female seers preserve the pagan customs of Icelanders, and maintain an honorable position as spiritual mediators in their communities. They can foresee, protect and mediate between humans and the spirits directly tied with the magnificent landscape of Iceland. When the country converted to Christianity the church attempted to eradicate all these pagan beliefs and practices. Not only did the elves, the ghosts and the female seers survive Christianity, but they found a way to co-exist in the imagination of Icelanders.

The artistic works in this study portray and illuminate persistent pagan aspects of the nation’s spiritual, natural and cultural identity. As an Icelandic actor, writer and a filmmaker, I have attempted to illuminate these aspects of cultural identity through historical, psychological, folkloristic, religious, and literary lenses; as well as the lens of film studies. Obviously, the study has merely touched on these facets, and each one of them deserves deeper exploration. On the

issue of elves appearing as dream images, is a field that is particularly worth investigating further, through the lens of psychology. It can bring to light deeper aspects of the pagan imagination as it relates to this study. The elves, the ghosts and the practices of Icelandic prophetesses persist, prevail and continue to flourish – within the enduringly pagan imagination of Icelanders.

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