

German Literature and Anti-Semitism: The Jewish Villain

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Introduction

Historic Germany is known for its anti-Semitic ideas and culture. Scholars know how socioeconomic issues, political interest, and scapegoating played a crucial role in the Holocaust and other anti-Semitic efforts, but how did literature and folklore play into the anti-Semitic ideology? Folklore plays an important part in all cultures, many people having their own set of gods/goddesses, mythological heroes, and legends. Whether conscious or subconscious, these stories influence societal ideology.

Brothers Grimm were notable German authors, having produced some of the most influential works in German folklore and even the world.¹ Some of their stories were turned into Disney classics, like Cinderella, Rapunzel, and Rumpelstiltskin, but their stories were not made for their children.² Something not well known about Brothers Grimm were the themes of anti-Semitism found in their folklores. Several stories by them contain explicit anti-Semitic themes. This was not the only anti-Semitic folklore, however. The cult of Anderl Von Rinn is another story containing explicit anti-Semitic themes.

Germany and Anti-Semitic Folklore

The book, *Folklore as a Political Tool in Nazi Germany*, discusses the importance of anti-Semitisms in aiding in the rise of Hitler and the Nazi regimen. It addresses how the Nazi's used publication of folklore to instill ideas of anti-Semitism. It asks not only

¹ Zipes, Jack. "How the Grimm Brothers Saved the Fairy Tale." HUMANITIES, March/April 2015, Volume 36, Number 2.

² Morfin, Marcelina. "13 Twisted Fairy Tales By the Brothers Grimm." Culture Trip. October 28, 2016.

how this type of literature was used but also why, suggesting it appealed to many Germans by creating unity between different religions and ethnicities by creating a common enemy. Additionally, folklores address issues pertaining to peasants, an important social group in Germany.³

Folklore emerged as a field of central importance within the context of Nationalist Socialist Ideology. The Nazi Party sponsored a large amount of publications of folklore. As the Nazi's were concerned with cultural identity and unity, they found folklore to be a powerful tool. The Nazi's not only supported the publication of folklore but the study and investigation of it as well. They knew how powerful folklore can be in creating cultural and societal unity, which they worked hard for, as noted in our class sessions. Moreover, folklore had a powerful peasant lore. In fact, it was unthinkable without the peasant cult that supported it. Folklore paid a lot of attention to the peasant and peasants acted as a natural source of traditional heritage. Folklore followed the life of that of the peasant as well. This, in turn, was a powerful tool for the Nazi party.⁴

The Cult of Anderl Von Rinn

³ Kamenetsky, Christa. "Folklore as a Political Tool in Nazi Germany" *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 85, No. 337 (Jul. - Sep., 1972), 221-222.

⁴ *Ibid*, 228-229.



The picture seen above illustrates the story of the cult of Anderl Von Rinn. The text says "Sie schneiden dem Marterer, die Gurgel ab und nemen alles Blut von ihm." A literal translation is "they cut [the] throat of the martyr and take all blood from him" or in other words, "They cut the martyr's throat and drain all his blood."⁵ This image follows the story of that of the Blood Libel Legend. In 1462, in the village of Rinn, a group of Jews convinced a poor farmer to sell his child to them for some money. He agrees and the Jews take the child into the woods where they martyred him to death "in the most unspeakable manner."⁶ Afterwards, they hanged his mutilated body from a birch tree. The stone they martyred the boy on was known as the Jews' stone.⁷

The boy was speculated to be a Christian. A story written by the Brothers Grimm later accompanied this image, the Jewry Stone (or the Jew's Stone), explicitly anti-Semitic. The Jewish people in this story engaged in one of the most heinous crimes in a heinous manner, preying on children and killing them. Moreover, they preyed on one of the most innocent people they could have, a Christian boy. Any German at the time of the rise of the Nazi's would relate to this story, whether a Catholic or a Protestant, viewing the Jewish people as the enemy. Moreover, since the story is based hundreds

⁵ "Medieval Sourcebook: A Blood Libel Cult: Anderl von Rinn, d. 1462" Fordham University.

⁶ Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm. "The Jews' Stone." 1816/1818.

⁷ Ibid.

of years early, this story can be seen as 'traditional,' which can hold more validity to an individual reading it. This story has been analyzed by different scholars, looking at the origin of the story, the child abuse aspect, and analyzing the legend from a different theoretical perspective. Some scholars suggest the legend came from a Christian misunderstanding of the Jewish festival, Purim. This article explicitly states the falsehood of the Blood Libel Cult.⁸

Anti-Semitic Folklore

The Brothers Grimm wrote other stories containing anti-Semitic themes like "*The Girl Killed by Jews*" (Das von des Juden getotete Magdlein) and "*The Jew in the Thorns*" (Der Jude im Dron). Moreover, other German folklorist wrote stories containing anti-Semitic themes including "*Pfefferkor the Jew at Halle*," "*The Expulsion of the Jews from Prussia*," and others. Some of these stories were passed by word of mouth from generation to generation and later written down and published in the 1800's and 1900's to ensure they would not be forgotten. Many other folklores was written with anti-Semitic themes, however these few will be looked at.

"*The Girl Killed by Jews*" is based in 1267. An old woman, driven by greed, sold an innocent seven-year-old girl to "the Jews." The Jews gagged her to keep her from crying out, cut open her veins, and caught her blood. The girl died and the Jews weighed her body down with a stone and tossed her body into the river. The girl's body was soon discovered, and the greedy women and Jews admitted to their wrongdoing. The women and the Jews were executed.

⁸ Bar-Itzhak, Haya "Review: The Blood Libel Legend: A CaseBook in Anti-Semitic Folklore by Alan Dundes." *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 95, No. 1 (Mar., 1993), 176.

This follows the same idea as the story of Anderl Von Rinn. The Jewish people buy a young girl, kill her, then take her blood. The antagonist (the Jewish people) attacked an innocent girl and killed her. They are seen as blood lusting, fiendish people- the lowest of the low who hunt the most innocent. This story manages to make the Jewish people the ultimate villain both to the Christian religion and innocent people.

“The Jew in the Thorns” is an interesting twist to the typical Jews-kill-a-child story. Rather than the Jewish antagonist killing someone, a young boy tortures a Jewish person instead. A rich man had a servant who worked “honestly and diligently.” Each year, the rich man did not pay the young man for his work. One day the young man asked the rich man to pay him an honest wage so he could find new work. The rich man gives him a few coins and since the young man knows nothing about money, he goes away happily. He meets a dwarf in the woods who asks him for some money. The young man gives the dwarf what he has and in turn the dwarf grants him three wishes. The young man walks away with a fowling gun that never misses, a fiddle that, when played, compels anyone listening to dance, and the power to have no request he makes turned down.⁹

The young man then comes across a Jewish man. He forces the Jewish man to dance to his fiddle in a thorn bush. The young man says ‘you’ve abused people enough with your slave-driving ways. Now the thorn bushes will abuse you.’ The Jewish man eventually gives the young man a large amount of money to get him to stop. Later, the Jewish man tries to get the young man hanged for his crime, but the young man escapes with his magical fiddle and the Jewish man is instead hanged. This story

⁹ Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm “The Jew in the Thorns.” 1857.

places the anti-Semitic theme in a different perspective, showing the young man rise up against the Jewish man, and escaping as a rich man. Though it is from a different perspective, it still paints the Jewish man as the villain.

Pfefferkor the Jew at Halle brings back the traditional anti-Semitic theme with the Jewish person being the traditional bad guy. In this story, a Jewish man was chained to a column and roasted alive, having confessed to eight wrongdoings. A few of these were he poisoned wells, served as a priest, though he never was ordained, stole two children and sold one to the Jews, and pretended to be a physician where, instead of helping patients, he poisoned them. Similar to the other folklore stories, the Jewish person is presented as the villain, preying on innocent people and hurting or killing them while helping his Jewish brethren.¹⁰ This shows the reader that they are not only a villain to the innocent but place their Jewish identity above anything else.

The Expulsion of the Jews is a story about why the Jews were expelled from Prussia. According to this folklore, a fisherman who was having trouble catching fish was taught by a Jewish person how to catch a fish in the most fiendish of ways. When engaging in the sacrament of the Lord's supper, instead of swallowing the Lord's flesh, one would take it from their mouth and use it to fish. About a year later, this was found out and the Jewish man who taught this was executed and the rest of the Jews were expelled from Prussia.¹¹

Each of these stories follow a similar theme, the Jew preying on or killing an innocent person or people. Another similarity these stories have is the idea of the

¹⁰ Th, J. G. "Pfefferkorn the Jew at Halle" Grässe, Sagenbuch des Preußischen Staats, vol. 1 (Glogau: Verlag von Carl Flemming, 1868), no. 339

¹¹ W. A. J. von Tettau and J. D. H. Temme. "The Expulsion of the Jews from Prussia." Die Volkssagen Ostpreußens, Litthauens und Westpreußens (Berlin: In der Nikolaischen Buchhandlung, 1837), no. 71

Jewish people against the Christian people. These kinds of ideas allowed the German people to gain a more collective ideology, using the Jewish people as a common villain. With this kind of anti-Semitic folklore circulating around Germany, it was not difficult for the Nazi's to convince the German people to follow suit. Moreover, this folklore was nothing new. It had been around long before the Nazi's came to power. It was seen as traditional stories passed down from generation to generation. The stories laid the groundwork early and later were used to reinforce anti-Semitic ideas.

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