My painting was inspired by my recent fascination with the culture and folklore of Scandinavian countries. I researched the intricacies of the Scandinavian culture, looking for the commonalities and differences across countries. I explored: the Christianity that has been woven into the fabric of the culture; the morality of the tales; how this morality is affected by Christian values; and how those belief sets fluctuate across countries.

This oil painting depicts a creature—the "huldra"—common to Scandinavian folklore. She is featured in many different stories; and in each country, she has slightly different features and descriptions. Each panel of this painting reflects a different version of the huldra. The disparate pieces come together to create a larger picture.

I have always felt drawn to mythologies from around the world. Being from Scandinavia myself, I decided to use this opportunity to indulge my interest and dig deeper to understand the morals and practices tied within the histories.

Clara

The Oral Histories of Scandinavia

Clara

This paper explores the fluctuations of folklore across the countries of Scandinavia. It examines the different sets of values implanted into the folklore that give the stories and creatures hidden morals, and looks at the positive and negative aspects of Christianity that have leached their way into the formerly pagan folklore.

When I was really little, only four or five, I loved the few books we had of illustrated fairy tales. I lived in a city at the time I read them, and even at such a young age, knew that fairies wouldn't be hiding amongst the skyscrapers. So whenever we drove up to Connecticut to see my grandmother, I would look for the signs of little, winged people in the trees and cracked sidewalks of my grandmother's neighborhood. I remember fashioning a little house out of leaves and sticks, using grass and balanced twigs to hold it together. I left it outside overnight as an invitation to the fairies I thought would see it. I read the Brother's Grimm stories at eleven, and later Hans Christian Anderson's collection of fairy tales. Those were what fueled my early love for myths, folktales, fairy tales, and everything in between. Then I started looking into different mythologies. I had loved Greek mythology as a preteen, and later delved into Roman, Norse, and Hindu mythologies and stories.

My family is from Sweden, and so a couple years ago, at the start of high school, I started researching different parts of Swedish myths and legends. As that continued, it grew into researching the folklore of the larger region of Scandinavia, as I quickly discovered that Swedish culture and lore was closely linked to the culture of Norway, Denmark and sometimes Finland. I was always enamoured by the creatures and the gods of Norse mythology, and I wished that I had been brought up believing in them, that I could know when I died that I would go to Valhalla instead of the crippling uncertainty of the great philosophical questions I found people posing about life after death. I never really tried to go deeper into it than what I could find on Wikipedia, for both lack of time and lack of drive. I was satisfied with the barest hints of the culture I could draw from easily-accessible sources. When presented with the opportunity of this project, I knew this was my chance to really understand and discover the different parts of Scandinavian folklore and use them to craft what will become my own story that hopefully ties together different versions of creatures from all the countries and integrates the now-common Christian aspects of the folklore.

Scandinavia is the region of northern Europe that is comprised mainly of the three countries of Sweden, Denmark and Norway. The common misconception is that the three countries are Sweden, Norway and Finland, seeing as they share the Scandinavian Peninsula. Though Sweden, Denmark and Norway all have various territories, including the large one of Greenland for Denmark, they are usually not enveloped under the broader term "Scandinavia". The only territory associated with the term is the Danish territory of the Faroe Islands. For the purposes of the folklore of Scandinavia, the Faroe Islands and Iceland are included

in with the original three, as the folklore from there is closely linked with Sweden's, Denmark's and Norway's. Though it shares the aforementioned Scandinavian Peninsula with two of the Scandinavian countries, Finland's oral traditions are closer to those of Estonia and Russia.

When the beliefs of Norway are mentioned, what usually comes to mind is Norse mythology. Though it is an important part of Scandinavian life, the difference between mythology and folklore is subtle but something that should be touched upon.

Folklore, noun: The traditional beliefs, customs, and stories of a community, passed through the generations by word of mouth.
Mythology, noun: A collection of myths, especially one belonging to a particular religious or cultural tradition.

So mythology is more collective, more formal. They are more associated with a religion or culture than folklore, which is the relation of oral stories and tends to be closer to a community. The creatures in Scandinavian folklore aren't like the gods or the highly-regarded figures of Norse mythology, but the hidden people who live in the mounds and barrows of the Icelandic landscape, the tiny creatures who live in family farms in the Swedish towns, the elves who seduce humans into coming to dance with them, the humans eventually dancing themselves to death. The folklore of these countries differs within the region, as the oral histories have been adapted in each country to best fit the people telling them. Though there are major commonalities, each country has a few variations of certain creatures, each one tailored to fit into the everyday lives and explain everyday phenomena among the inhabitants. What is it, then, in the collective area of Scandinavian mythology, that differs between countries, and is there any significance to it?

One thing that all of Scandinavian folklore has in common, be it from Sweden or Norway or any other region, is the deep roots of Christianity that have slowly wormed its way into the traditional and original paganism thanks to the Christianization of Scandinavia, something that began somewhere between the 8th and 12th centuries (Keightley 167). The religion has infiltrated each corner of the folklore, from the story of the creation of the Danish *Elle-folk* and of the *Huldufolk*, to the way most beings are thought of as fallen angels, to the wards thought to be effective when used against them. All the places in which Christianity has been added to the folklore are negatively portraying the creatures by using the religion as a deterrent. This effectively puts Christianity above the folklore in a moral standing.

The *huldufolk*, or elves, are the most common race of beings in Scandinavian folklore. *Huldu-* in Icelandic means "covered" or "hidden", and *-folk* in both Swedish and Icelandic translates to "people". Back when elves were a commonly believed to exist, they were thought to have littered the countryside of Scandinavia. Whenever something goes missing in the house, or the cow's tails are tied together in the barn, the *huldufolk* are blamed. They are said to live in holts (animal dens), heaths (overgrown wasteland), knolls and stones (Craigie, 130).

It is said the *huldufolk* were created when God went to visit Adam and Eve, and they showed him all their household possessions, including their children. God asked if the children they'd shown him were all they had, and they said they had no more. However, Eve had not washed her other children and was ashamed to present them to God. God knew this and said, "That which has been hidden from me shall also be hid from men." And so the unwashed children became invisible to humans and went to live in the knolls and mounds and stones, and

from these children the elves were descended, invisible to men unless they wish to be seen (Craigie 142).

Of course this explanation for where elves came from is not formally accepted by the church or in the Bible, as this was most likely only a story meant to associate God and the already-accepted beliefs of the Scandinavians. This version paints the elves to be seen as something quite literally dirty, something God didn't see or give his blessing. The dirty children were pushed to the background and punished, while mortal men lived on.

To ward off unwanted creatures, crosses are used heavily used. The Danish *Elle-folk*, the equivalent of elves, are said to disappear around crosses, and if one chases you, they must stop when they reach a crossroads. In the Færöes, the *Nykur*, a shape shifting horse with its hooves on backwards that lives in rivers and lakes, will lure people onto his back only to drown them. Again the crosses come into play, as he can be tamed and controlled by cutting a cross into his back. When ice cracks loudly in the winter, it is said to be the *Nykur* neighing.

It is said that when a woman wants to escape the pain of childbirth, she must go out at daybreak with either a horse skeleton or a horse placenta and "creep through it" naked three times in the Devil's name (William 267). She will not feel pain, but her first born child will become a werewolf if a boy, and if a girl, she will become a nightmare- the girl version who sits on men's chests at night and can kill them if she pries open their mouths to count their teeth. The message in that legend is clear- taking the easy way out, the way of a coward, costs you and makes you associate with the Devil.

In Icelandic myths, ghosts and other creatures cannot say the word God, or "Gúd" in Icelandic. Since many Icelandic names contain that word, the ghosts and spirits can be identified when they mispronounce a person's name (SigmundsdoÌ ttir, 14). These instances interested me because it is not a positive thing when spirits cannot speak god, and it promotes the idea that they are considered unholy, something that is not approved of by God. And yet almost all accounts of people seeing these creatures, and all the times I'd imagined seeing them as a little girl had been distinctly positive experience instead of what Christianity is trying to make these tales into.

Another negatively portrayed creature, the *myling* is the ghost of an un-baptized child. They are said to jump on the backs of travelers at night, and won't let go until the man promises to bury them properly. They go hand in hand with the *Nidagrísur*, a little, thick, rounded creature that looks like a child in swaddling clothes and appears where new-born illegitimate (un-baptized) children have been killed and buried without a name. They are said to roll between men's feet in the dark, trying to lead them astray from the road. If they get between someone's legs, it is a sign that he will not live to see another year (Craigie, 266). These creatures lead people to see the benefits of baptizing their children, as all good Christians should in order to get rid of the sin already in a child's soul.

And yet, though the even the Devil takes form in some of these stories, and some creatures both lead to and forebode death and sin, the reception of elves and other commonplace creatures in folklore is hardly negative. It is considered a good thing to see elves and *huldufolk* that have made homes in the surrounding mounds and mires. It is helpful to have a *nisse,* or a tomato, in your house and farm, and sweet things are laid out for those hidden people who help humans every Christmas eve. Though there are the creatures who steal and lie and pillage and seduce and kill and sin, and others who exist to promote traits of good Christians among people, the church has not tainted every aspect of these creatures for the people who carry on these traditions and tell these stories.

Though the previously mentioned *huldufolk* were predominantly spoken of in Iceland and Sweden, the Færöes have their own stories. The *huldufolk* in the Færöes are synonymous with and commonly called elves, and people there describe them as tall and dressed all in gray with dark hair. They live in mounds in the countryside, but they live as humans do, and can make themselves and their property invisible to humans (Craigie, 158). Little children who go out alone and disappear were taken by the *huldufolk*. *Huldu*-girls will come out of their barrows to seduce men.

The elves of the Færöes, however, aren't the only variation of the *huldufolk* in Scandinavia. The people of Denmark also have their *huldufolk*- the Danish *elle-folk*. In the name, "elle" is synonymous with the word for alder tree in Danish- *elletræ.* The alder tree comes up frequently in the description of these people. In these, the *elle-folk* are said to be the children of Adam and his first wife Lillis, who could "fly and swim". The *elle-folk* live in mosses, banks and mounds, under alder-trees and in alder-thickets (Craigie, 175). They wear white clothes and always turn their backs to the wind. Like the Færoese elves, they carry off children and entice and seduce mortals into coming with them. They can often be found dancing in alder-thickets or mounds, and it is said that their singing is so beautiful it will entice both humans and horses to try and find the source. The women from behind are said to be "hollow as a dough-trough," and the male's backs "resemble the stump of an alder-tree" (Keightley, 81).

The fact that *the elle-folk* have backs that are hollow and tree-like was very interesting to me, since it is extremely reminiscent of the *huldres* of Norway and Sweden. The female *huldra* and the male *huldrekall* are said to live in the forests of the deep north, where usually the *huldra* is said to lure men into the forest with her sweet voice and her beauty. *Huldras* have long hair and hollow backs like a rotting tree trunk. They can appear either naked or dressed as a simple farm girl, in which the only way to tell her apart from a human is her hollow back and her tail, which switches between a fox's in Sweden and a cow's in Norway (Craigie, 165). There are many aspects of the *elle-folk* that are tied together from the *huldufolk* and elves and the *huldre*.

The *huldra* could serve as a warning to men to not be so easily seduced. The stories of the *huldra* work as a moral check on men, promising danger to those who allow themselves to be promiscuous.

The other set of creatures that have similar characteristics while being spread across separate countries of Scandinavia are water beings. There are a vast number of creatures associated with the water, given the large amount of lakes and rivers around Scandinavia and the fact that the Scandinavian Peninsula is surrounded by the sea. Mermaids and Mermen, called *havfrue* (water lady) and *havmund* in Danish, are commonly spoken of in the folklore. Mermaids are said to have long golden hair and mostly appear to young men in an attempt to lure them into the water. In the Færöes, the *menman* (called a *marmennil*), is like a human from the waist up, but smaller and with very long fingers. He lives at the bottom of the sea and teases fishermen by biting the bait off their hooks and attaching them to things so the fishermen must cut the line. If they are caught, they can be kept from escaping by placing a cross on them. Mermaids in the Færöes have long brown hair and shorter arms than a human woman. If when she is seen, she turns towards the boat when she comes out of the water, a storm is sure to come, but if a merman comes up beside her, there will be fair weather (Craigie, 223). It is said that she sings so sweetly that men must plug their ears to keep from jumping into the sea to her. In Norway, mermen are "of a dusky hue" and have long beards and dark hair. Mermaids are beautiful and young, with long hair. They are usually seen in calm weather, but if they are, that is foretelling of a storm or tempest. Sometimes fisherman catch their children- *marmaeler.* When they are caught, fishermen

take them home, for they tell the future (Craigie, 225). It is also said that seals come from humans who killed themselves at sea. Once every year, they can take off their skins and dance in the caves and on the flat rocks by the beach.

Also falling under the category of water beings, the previously-mentioned Nykur holds close resemblance to other water beings in the folklore. The *Nök* is a creature that is spoken of all across Scandinavia, though it has many different names and small variations from place to place. *Nök*, *Nek*, and *Nøkken* are all terms used to describe the different versions of this creature. The *Nök* is a water-troll who lives in rivers, lakes and fjords, and who requires a human sacrifice every year. That's why in every town near a river or lake where there is a *Nök*, at least one person is lost each year. Some say if a person is drowning they will hear the *Nök* shouting "cross over." In some places, those cries are called "water shrieks". It is said that the *Nök* can shapeshift into many things, including valuables, trying to entice people to touch them and fall under his power. The Nek is said to appear in various forms- a little boy with golden ringlets, a centaur-like horse-man, or an old man sitting on the cliffs wringing out his beard (Keightley, 148). He is said to play his harp beautifully. The *Nøkken* of Sweden and Norway is described as a young man, who stands in his lake and plays his fiddle to try and lure people onto thin ice or leaky boats (Craigie, 238). He is a shapeshifter, and can change into a horse or a man, much like a *Nykur*. It is said that if you give him an offering, he will tune your fiddle so that it will play beautifully, but if you touch the waterlilies that dot his lake, you will anger him. This is why waterlilies are called *nøkkerose* in Norwegian. In Denmark, there is a being called a River-Man, who is a shapeshifter and plays beautiful music- often described as an "elf-dance"- in rivers and streams (Keightley 151). Both qualities are reminiscent of the *Nøkken* and the *Nök*.

Furthermore, in Norway the Fossegrimen (*fosse* means waterfall in Norwegian) is a neutral creature who lives in waterfalls and plays the fiddle amazingly. It is said that if you give him a sacrifice- a black lamb that you must present with an averted gaze on Thursday evening, he will teach you how to play the fiddle so well "the trees dance and waterfalls stop" (Keightley, 152). If the meat isn't good enough, he will only show you how to tune your fiddle. There are very clear resemblances between the Nykur, Nök, Nøkken, Nek, and Fossegrimen. These creatures all originated from similar stories and as they were relayed throughout the entirety of Scandinavia, they were modified and adapted to fit the different people and different generations who both heard and told them.

In all these creatures there is a theme of seduction or allure, be it romantically as the mermaids did, or for more malicious purposes, as the Nykur, Nök, Nøkken, and Nek did, or simply for relaying their talent as the *Fossegrimen* did. When trying to lure people to their deaths, some of the creatures would turn into young men, intending to use the form to lure girls into the water. This could be used as a warning to young women- don't trust men, don't engage in any sort of romantic actions as they could lead you to your death, or more realistically in society, your shame. However, not all the interactions with these creatures are portrayed as bad by the stories. If you went to the *Nøkken* or the *Fossegrimen*, you were rewarded with enough skill on the fiddle to make "trees dance and waterfalls stop". The portrayal of these creatures isn't all bad, however, like sightings of mermaids and mermen, their presence could be a warning of danger to come. With that, the creatures are associated both negatively with the danger and positively with how they warn humans of it. The creatures are not simply bad or good, but instead a combination of perceived good and bad moral qualities that reflect the social norms of the people telling the stories.

While reading all these old stories, the strength of the folklore became apparent to me when I read articles that attested that the belief in these creatures still lives on today. Modern-day Iceland is still widely dominated by the belief that *huldufolk* and elves live on in the surrounding boulders, thickets, and mounds. Construction projects are either halted or redirected for fear of hurting or angering the hidden people in the area. Large boulders believed to be the homes of elves are moved before they are demolished, and the use of explosives is sometimes disbanded (Jacobs). There are countless stories of construction projects that, after ignoring the signs of the huldufolk, experienced sprained ankles and sudden and unexplained breaking down of equipment (Wainwright).

The elves are a constant presence in the modern-day lives of Icelanders, and there are many who would attest to seeing little men and women, or hearing music coming from the trolls deep under the mountains or the elves who live in the barrow hills. The hidden folk are deeply associated with harmony with the environment. If these stories have survived this long without fading, then I felt confident in my ability to tie all these pieces of the folklore together in order to write a my own story based on the centuries-old styles of the oral histories.

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There once was a boy who lived on a farm with his parents. They loved him dearly, and when the time came, wanted him to be happily married. The boy, however, wasn't satisfied with any of the town girls, and put off marriage for a long time. One day when he was working in the fields, he was surprised to see a mound open up and a *huldu*-girl step out of it, smiling, her long hair unbound. He knew she wasn't human because of the barest hint of a cow's tail sticking out from under her skirt.[1] She held a cup of milk in one hand, and bade him come and take a break from his work. [2]

The boy was smart, however, and blew the foam off the top of the milk before accepting it, thereby protecting himself from falling under the *huldu*-girl's charm. Instead, when he handed her back the glass, he pressed his cross to her and she couldn't leave.[3] He brought her home and the next day she was baptized, after which her tail fell off, and they were married[4]. His parents didn't approve at first, but soon saw that she was as calm and helpful as a human wife, and since she was baptized they had no problems.

The people of the town, however, soon became suspicious of the boy's new bride. She was different, and attracted whispers when she'd go into town, with long golden hair left down like an unmarried woman's and dresses not quite long enough to hide her perpetually bare feet, but worn so that if she were hollow in back they couldn't tell.[5] *Long enough, however, to hide a tail,* some of the people would say. They could see that the boy loved her, but they couldn't understand who she was or where she had appeared from, and they were uneasy.

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[1] The Huldras of Sweden and Norway- have hollow backs and cow's tails in Sweden and fox-tails in Norway.

[2] From Danish elle-folk: mounds open up and they step out to appear to farmers. If they offer a glass of milk or beer, one must blow off the foam before drinking.

[3] In many accounts, crosses are used to contain and hold huldufolk or elves of every country.

[4] There are accounts of Huldras who converted to Christianity and were baptized. As soon as they were, their tales fell off but they retained their inhuman strength and skill.

[5] Both elle-folk and huldras are described as having a hollow back. "Hollow as a dough trough" for elle folk and hollow like a "rotting trunk" for huldras.
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The *huldu*-girl and the boy had many children, none of whom inherited much of their mother's eccentricities, only the barest bump of flesh on their tailbone where there would've been a tail. The farm did well every harvest since the two were married, and with every touch of good fortune, the people in the village became more and more suspicious and sour. There was one man in the village, an outlaw[6] who couldn't stand the idea of the boy and his gifted wife. He appealed to the townspeople and told them he would solve their problem- he would go out into the forest and find the *huldu*-girl's family. Surely they would want to bring the girl home and away from the boy and his farm. They could rid themselves of the problem, he told the townspeople, without really doing any work themselves. The people were pleased with the plan, and bid the outlaw a fond farewell as he ventured out into the forest.

The outlaw was slow to find the *huldufolk*, though he stood underneath every alder tree in the forest and called up to the branches, hoping the *huldufolk* would answer.[7] There was no response, no matter how long or hard he knocked on trees or how many barrow hills he spoke to, hoping the *huldufolk* inside would come out. He had nearly given up when he came upon a lake and fell to his knees to drink from the water, for he had been walking all day. By the time he had finished, a small black horse had appeared at the edge of the water, nickering softly and looking quite tame. The outlaw, his mind muddled from the exhaustion of the day, thought only of the rest the horse could provide him, should it be docile enough to ride through the forest. In his forgetfulness, the outlaw failed to notice that the horse had hooves facing backwards.[8] He approached the horse, who looked nothing but gentle, and the moment the outlaw had swung his leg over the horse's back, the animal took off, dragging the outlaw with him down to the bottom of the lake. And so ended the first stage of the outlaw's plan.

The people of the town, as the outlaw failed to come through with his end of the plan, became restless and impatient. They wanted a solution that would actually work, and so the most angry of them decided to go to the boy's farm and confront the boy and his wife, hoping to drive them out of the town. The group of townspeople grabbed pitchforks (lest it be unclear that this was a violent sort of raid), and stormed out to the boy's farm. The boy and his wife were confused and anxious as the group of people gathered outside their door. The children, they made sure, were all tucked away inside. The boy stepped outside, against the wishes of his wife, to try and talk to them.

The townspeople were adamant when asked why they were gathered. *Your wife,* they insisted, *she's unnatural. Doesn't belong here.* The boy tried to reason with them, but they were unable to be placated, and tried to force their way past the boy and into the house. Before they could, the boy's wife appeared in the doorway, an iron horseshoe in her hands. The townspeople watched in fear as she took the horseshoe, her expression icy, and bent the curve of it into a perfectly straight line, as easily as if the iron were cloth.[9]

Don't make the mistake, she spoke then, *of trying to get rid of me.*

From then on, the family lived peacefully and happily on their farm, never bothered by the townspeople again.

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[6] The Outlaw is a common repeating theme and character in Icelandic folklore.

[7] The Danish equivalent to huldufolk are the elle-folk, which translates to "alder-tree people". They are said to live in alder trees and alder thickets.

[8] The Nykur appears at the edge of his lake as a horse, only distinguishable by his backwards hooves.

[9] There are stories of the huldra of Norway, who, after married and losing their tale, still retain their unnatural strength. In a few stories, a huldra is beaten by her husband and bends a horseshoe to show him that she is not weak.

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In conclusion, the creatures of the folklore of Scandinavia are similar and different across countries, and almost every corner of the folklore has been touched by Christianity, no matter how obscure the way. Christianity and the morals associated with it, along with the creatures' many vices, serve as a warning for people who hear these stories and of these creatures not to fall into the trap of the *huldra* or the neck or the *nykur* by being promiscuous or greedy. The folklore is biased towards a set of values in which you get rewarded for hard work (finding and giving an offering to a *fossegrimen* or a *nøkken*), and punished for bad or unchristian actions (the *myling*, who is created if you don't baptize your dying child). Dug into the folklore are those morals, the less extreme ones that maybe, in this day and age, we can make use of ourselves.
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