

Background Information: Norse Mythology

There are six topics to cover as background information. The third is Norse mythology.

Teaching Norse mythology in fourth grade is a sacred nothing that is an ossified responsible innovation (see chapter 2.1 #2). Recall that teaching Norse mythology originated with Hutchins, not Steiner (see chapter 3.1 #3). It is a change to the Waldorf curriculum that has become a fixed tradition, but it is not mandatory.

Why did Hutchins recommend Norse mythology?

When Hutchins was translating Von Heydebrand's work, she was looking for English equivalents to what the first Waldorf teachers were doing. She never intended that her changes be the final word. In her Translator's Note from 1944, Hutchins says:

I should like to make it clear to chance readers that even in the original school at Stuttgart this [i.e., Von Heydebrand's *Vom Lehrplan der Freien Waldorfschule*, translated as *The Curriculum of the First Waldorf School*] was not regarded as a complete or ideal curriculum and that for an English school many adaptations may be necessary.... I have tried as far as possible to give themes corresponding to those given for German literature. (Von Heydebrand 1989., vii)

Note that Hutchins acknowledges that what the first Waldorf teachers were doing is neither a complete curriculum nor an ideal one. She further acknowledges that changes are necessary for different cultures. Hutchins' intent was to create a responsible innovation for English students, which for the most part she did.

However, over the years, Hutchins' recommendation for Norse mythology in fourth grade has become a fixed tradition. It is regarded as the final word. It is regarded as a complete and ideal curriculum. In reality, it is none of those things, and to claim otherwise is to perpetuate a sacred nothing. There is nothing that says that Waldorf teachers must teach Norse mythology in fourth grade. They are quite free to follow Steiner's original indication (i.e., scenes from ancient history), and there are many reasons why they should.

Let's consider some of the pros and cons of teaching Norse mythology and the pros and cons of teaching scenes from ancient history so that a conscious choice is possible. This level of consciousness can return Norse mythology to a responsible innovation—a choice free Waldorf teachers make to improve upon the Waldorf curriculum presented by Steiner rather than a change to the Waldorf curriculum teachers feel compelled to teach because that is what they were taught.

Benefits of Norse Mythology

1. Telling scenes from Norse mythology can benefit the class. This point is especially true for classes that fear the future. Norse mythology ends with an apocalypse, death, and destruction, but the world returns anew. These myths also bring laughter into the curriculum. Finally, Norse mythology is especially beneficial for boys because it allows them to confront certain archetypes of male behavior and get it out of their system, metaphorically speaking.
2. You can compare mythology in fifth grade when you teach Greek mythology. (Note: It is not necessary to use Norse mythology. It is also possible to compare Greek mythology and the stories from the Old Testament taught in third grade.)

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3. The students like Norse mythology. (Note: You cannot judge whether something is appropriate to teach based on whether students are interested in it or like it—see “Note: Whether the Innovation Meets the Students is *Not* a Deciding Factor” in chapter 2.1 #4.)

Drawbacks to Teaching Norse Mythology

1. Norse mythology is not important enough to justify three English blocks (i.e., 11–12 weeks).
2. Norse mythology throws the Waldorf curriculum out of balance. Consider this: By teaching Norse mythology instead of scenes from ancient history, Waldorf students get 11–12 weeks of Loki and Thor but only six weeks of Buddha, Socrates, and Homer. Buddhism is a major world religion that has shaped Asian history for centuries and continues to influence political, economic, and cultural life today. Ancient Greece is relevant to almost every aspect of life today: government, art, literature, warfare, philosophy, mathematics, etc. In contrast, Norse mythology’s contributions are limited to the cultural realm, primarily popular culture. The characters Loki, Thor, and Odin appear in graphic novels, films, and television shows.
3. Teaching Norse myths instead of scenes from ancient history negatively impacts the fifth-grade history curriculum. It creates a backlog of stories to cover in fifth grade: Troy (i.e., *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*), The Epic of Gilgamesh, multiple stories from ancient India, legends of Zarathustra, etc. These stories compete with historical narratives that also need to be told: Hammurabi, Socrates, Plato, Leonidas, etc.
4. Norse mythology represents a barren branch in the Waldorf curriculum. No new subject grows out of the study of Norse mythology. Two hallmarks of Steiner’s curriculum are economy in teaching and planting seeds. Norse mythology does neither one. It is not essential for the study of any future subject.
5. Norse mythology contains minimal academic value. There is little academic value in knowing the Norse myths, particularly when you consider the academic value of scenes from ancient history. Knowing about Troy and Buddha is more important than knowing stories about Loki and Thor.

Benefits of Scenes from Ancient History

1. It uses economy in teaching: it covers the maximum amount of academic material in the minimal amount of time.
2. Teaching scenes from ancient history (e.g., stories from ancient history) would take the pressure off the fifth-grade history curriculum. Teachers could focus on teaching history and narratives from history because the bulk of the stories from ancient cultures were told in fourth grade as scenes from ancient history in English blocks.
3. It makes it possible to teach the ambitious curriculum outlined in the book *Teaching History: Suggested Themes for the Curriculum in Waldorf Schools* by Christoph Lindenberg. Lindenberg suggests that teachers try to teach India, Iran (Persia), the culture of Mesopotamia (Ur, Assur, and Babylon), Egypt, and Greek culture all in fifth grade history (74–85). It is not practical to try to do all these topics in six short weeks in fifth grade history blocks. The only way to cover it all is to divide and conquer: teach the stories from ancient history in fourth grade English blocks and the actual history in fifth grade history blocks. (For more about teaching history, see chapter 5.3.)

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4. This change is in alignment with child development. The students are in the descriptive period of the authority stage in both fourth and fifth grade (see chapter 1.2 #4). Therefore, the stories from the storytelling curriculum could work well in either year.

5. It is a sensible way to teach ancient India. Ancient India is largely a pre-historic culture that has negligible influence on the modern world. Its importance is contained in its stories, not its history. It is much easier to show how humans of those ancient times are different from people of today through their stories than through their history (see chapter 5.3 #11).

Drawbacks to Scenes from Ancient History

1. Parents and mentor teachers expect Norse mythology. It would be necessary to explain a change.
2. It asks more of Waldorf teachers and students. Norse mythology is highly entertaining. It is not difficult to teach or learn and there are numerous resources available to the Waldorf teacher.

In conclusion, Norse mythology is a good choice for fourth grade storytelling—it just is not the only option, nor necessarily the best option. In many ways, Steiner’s original indication is better. Consider both the developmental and academic needs of your class when you make the choice.