

## Background Information

### Background to *Hansel and Gretel*

1. The folk tale *Hansel and Gretel* is a peasant tale of Germanic origin that the Brothers Grimm wrote for middle-class readers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Their folk tales reflected the European worldview and some of the cultural norms of that period.
2. It is likely that the original tale described the hardships of medieval life. Famine, war and plagues were commonplace during the Middle Ages. Abandoning children in the woods to die or leaving them to fend for themselves was not unknown during the Late Middle Ages. The tale likely stems from historical instances of abandonment caused by famine. The children are starving when they discover the gingerbread house.
3. The forest is "the Wald" that German rural society depended upon. Farmers grazed their pigs there, royals hunted deer, and woodcutters selected beams for half-timbered barns and houses. However, the forest was not regarded as a safe place. In the time of the Brothers Grimm, it contained outlaws, illegal hunters and wolves. Huge gnarly oak trees added to the threatening qualities of the forest.
4. In *Hansel and Gretel*, the mother and father turn on the children when economic hardship hits and there is no food to feed them. This family breakdown causes problems in the story; only by sticking together can the children persevere.
5. Ultimately, wealth brings this family back together. The children were reunited with their father and "they lived together in utmost joy" only after Gretel and Hansel brought back the old woman's pearls and jewels.
6. The witch's death by burning in an oven parallels the practice during the Middle Ages. In 1500 to 1660, between 50 000 and 80 000 suspected witches were executed in Europe. About 80% of those killed were women. Execution rates varied greatly by country, from a high of about 26 000 in Germany to about 10 000 in France and 1000 in England. The last public witch burning was held in Germany in 1775.
7. The oven in the fairy tale may also be symbolic of relegating persons to the fires of hell for their sins, which would have been a widespread belief at the time of this folk tale.

The story is also about how people can survive oppression with pride and a sense of their own dignity. In a sense it is a survival story to give young people a sense of hope.