The Burning of Njal Short Guide

The Burning of Njal by Henry Treece

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Overview

The Burning of Njal is a very close retelling of one of the greatest heroic stories of the Middle Ages, Njal's Saga, written by an anonymous Icelandic sagaman, or storyteller, in approximately 1280. An action-packed, fast-moving tale in the original, Treece's version accentuates these elements without sacrificing others. The result is a tale of jealousy, extreme courage and heroism, the lust for revenge, and the coming of Christianity to a pagan country. The saga is also noteworthy for its depiction of a unique political situation; the fierce and independent Vikings struggle to abide by the laws of their democratic society, essentially the first of its kind since the democratic city-states of ancient Greece.

About the Author

Henry Treece was born in Wednesbury, Staffordshire, England, in 1911. He graduated from Birmingham University in 1933 with a bachelor's degree and in 1934 began a twenty-five-year career as an English teacher. For the last twenty of those years he taught at The Grammar School in Barton-on-Humber, although between 1941 and 1946 he served in Britain's Royal Air Force and became a flight lieutenant.

Treece's first notable success as a writer followed the 1952 publication of The Dark Island, the first of many historical novels he would write. He had earlier published several volumes of original poetry and some criticism, including a book on the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas.

An extremely prolific writer, Treece also published many historical novels for adults, including The Rebels (1953), The Golden Strangers (1956), The Great Captains (1956), Red Queen, White Queen (1958), The Master of Badger's Hall (1959), A Fighting Man (1960), Jason (1961), Electra (1963), Oedipus (1964), The Queen's Brooch (1966), The Green Man (1966), Vinland the Good (1967), and The Dream Time (1968). He also wrote several mysteries: Desperate Journey (1954), Ask for King Billy (1955), Hunter Hunted (1957), Don't Expect Any Mercy (1958), The Jet Beads (1961), Killer in Dark Glasses (1965), and Bang, You're Dead! (1965).

Treece wrote plays, television scripts, radio plays, and a collection of short stories, but it is clear that his preferred genre was the historical novel. Perhaps because of his teaching experience, Treece had a gift for relating historical tales in a way that captured the interest of young readers without compromising historical accuracy. He died on June 10, 1966.

Setting

Even those students already familiar with other aspects of the Middle Ages will probably be surprised by the barbarity and bleakness of Iceland during the tenth and eleventh centuries. The Burning of Njal is a tale set primarily on the farms and homesteads of the Icelandic people. As such, it explores the often violent domestic sphere of those same Vikings who, sailing their longships, terrorized less warlike civilizations and discovered Greenland, America, and other new lands.

Geographically, the Iceland of the Middle Ages resembled the Iceland of today.

Stony and volcanic, with glaciers and hot streams, it was then and remains now a treeless land of short summers and long, dark winters. Against this desolate backdrop, the fierce emotions that drive the characters in The Burning of Njal stand out in particularly striking contrast.

Social Sensitivity

A few teachers and parents who are unfamiliar with the saga may be concerned about the high level of violence in the work. Yet, like any work of art, The Burning of Njal must be considered as a whole. All the good characters in the book put their faith in the law first. Even Kari does not embark on his desperate plan of private vengeance until the Althing fails to settle the dispute over the burning fairly. And ultimately it is not the law that settles the feud and provides the unraveling of the plot—it is the ideal of forgiveness. This concept, together with the book's implicit acknowledgement that all people are amalgamations of good and bad qualities, makes The Burning of Njal a work that values human life and human kindness rather than one that glamorizes violence and vengeance.

Literary Qualities

The saga upon which this book is based, like the other great Icelandic sagas, is told in simple yet vivid language. Treece reproduces the saga style remarkably well, capturing the sense of doom pervasive in the original. As in a Greek tragedy, the progress of fate seems inexorable; once a feud has begun, over no matter how trivial an insult, the retributions are bound to escalate until finally even the good and innocent—such as Old Njal, his wife, and Karl's little son—are caught up and killed.

Some readers will enjoy the grim humor in Treece's book, also carefully preserved from the original saga. Characters often display great wit, even when faced with death. When, for example, one of Gunnar's forty adversaries returns from battle with a split skull, his companions ask him whether or not Gunnar is at home. "That is for you to find out," he replies. "But I certainly know where his halberd-point has been."

Themes and Characters

There are three main characters in the saga: Gunnar, Njal, and Kari, each the focus of one of the story's three sections.

One of the greatest fighters Iceland has ever known, Gunnar is an adventurer turned farmer who becomes Njal's closest friend and who is admired and loved by Njal's three sons. Yet Gunnar is a man who lives and therefore dies by the sword—or, rather, the halberd—and his heroic death is an important element in the fatal web of circumstances leading to the novel's central episode—the burning alive of Njal and his family.

Wise, second-sighted Njal, who cannot grow a beard and whose temperament differs so greatly from that of his best friend, is the real hero of the novel to modern readers. He is slow to anger and reluctant to shed blood, although when his time to die comes, he is as brave in his own way as Gunnar was in his.

Kari, Njal's son-in-law, combines the best qualities of Njal and Gunnar, making him a kind of ideal for Icelandic society at the time of the saga's composition. A splendid fighter and athlete, he escapes from Njal's burning house by dashing up a fallen, flaming timber and leaping to safety. Obsessed by a desire for revenge, he tracks the Burners to distant places such as Wales and the Orkney Islands. Kari's thirst for violence is rendered more understandable to modern readers because his young son Thord was among those who died in the fire at Njal's house. But when Kari feels he has satisfactorily avenged Njal and his family, he stops killing. Toward the end of the story, Kari makes a pilgrimage to Rome and is ultimately reconciled with Flosi, the leader of the Burners. The violence and bloodshed of the saga give way at last to the Christian ideal of forgiveness.

The two important women in the saga will also fascinate most readers.

Bergthora, Njal's wife, is brave and grim, a strong-willed woman determined to raise three praiseworthy Viking sons. It is she, and not Njal, who encourages her sons to defend the family when Njal is called "Old Beardless" and the sons themselves "Little Dung-beards." In contrast to Njal, who is filled with foreboding, Bergthora laughs herself to sleep when the rattle of axes signals that her children are arming themselves in the middle of the night. As an old woman, Bergthora chooses to die beside her husband even though Flosi offers the women and children an opportunity to leave the house before the Burners set fire to it.

Hallgerd the Beautiful, Gunnar's wife, is the only totally disagreeable character in the work. She deliberately stirs up trouble with Njal's family, but the bond between Gunnar and Njal is strong enough to withstand her schemes. A holder of grudges, she never forgets that Gunnar once slapped her for stealing from a neighbor's larder. Many years later, as Gunnar single-handedly fights forty men in his final battle, Hallgerd refuses to give him two locks of her hair to replace a broken bowstring: "Let me remind you of the

blow you once gave me in the face, before a crowded hall. No, I shall keep my hair, whether you live or die, dear husband," she says.

One of the most interesting elements of the book is its portrayal of almost every character as a mixture of good and bad. The better-known adventure tales of the Middle Ages—including great masterpieces such as Beowulf and the chivalric romances centering on King Arthur—typically pit good heroes against wicked villains (or even monsters). In The Burning of Njal, even the worst characters (with the exception of Hallgerd) have some admirable characteristics. "Liar Mord," a character driven by jealousy, is, in the end, true to his word. Flosi, who leads the Burners, sympathizes with Kari's need for vengeance and also makes a pilgrimage to Rome in expiation for his own acts. On the other hand, even a "good" character such as Njal is not above using his knowledge of the fine points of the law to help Gunnar trick a kinswoman's husband into giving back her dowry.

Overall, however, Njal has a deep respect for the law, and such respect is one of the primary values of the novel.

"With the law is our country built up; without it the country will be destroyed," Njal says. But ultimately the law itself fails to preserve peace. At the yearly meeting of the Althing, Iceland's lawmaking body, Flosi—like Njal before him—resorts to legal trickery to avoid the censure, punishment, and fines that should be dealt him and the other Burners. A battle takes place at Thingvellir, the very spot consecrated to the making of laws and settling of disputes.

Thus the novel makes it clear that laws alone cannot control men's bloodier impulses. When Christianity came to Iceland, it came in a very unusual way: it was voted in by the Althing in the year 1000. The Burning of Njal demonstrates the difficulty of adapting either Christian or democratic precepts to a society as inherently violent as that of the Vikings. Nonetheless, the book leaves the reader with a sense that loyalty to one's family and the laws of one's society are, in the end, mutually dependent impulses.

Topics for Discussion

1. How does the portrayal of Icelandic society in The Burning of Njal compare with popular images of Vikings in films and other books?

2. How does Christianity affect the behavior of the characters in this novel?

3. After he is outlawed by the Althing, Gunnar decides to stay at home in Iceland, knowing he will probably be killed. Why does he do this?

4. The major characters in this story are apparently based on real settlers in Iceland's early history. In fact, modern Icelanders can show you the very foundations of the house in which Njal and his family were burnt up. What parts of the story cannot possibly be true unless you believe in ghosts and other aspects of the supernatural?

5. Ancient sagas such as Njal's Saga form an important part of a modern Icelander's cultural background. What stories, if any, form a similar background for you?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. As evidenced in The Burning of Njal, how would you describe the position of women in Icelandic society during the Middle Ages? Research the role of women in Icelandic society today. How have things changed?

2. The original language of the sagas is called Old Icelandic, or Old Norse. It is most closely related to the other Scandinavian languages—Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian—and is the ancestor of modern Icelandic. How are these languages related to English? To German?

To the Romance languages— French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Rumanian?

3. What were the Vikings doing in the tenth and eleventh centuries elsewhere in Europe?

4. The Battle of Clontarf, fought between the Irish and the Vikings near Dublin in 1016, receives a small mention near the end of the book. Why is it an important battle in Irish history?

5. The Icelanders and other Vikings were undoubtedly the most adventurous and successful seafarers of their age. What can you find out about Viking ships and sailing methods?

6. Most people today agree that the Vikings reached and settled America before Columbus. What do we know about these Viking settlements? Why were they established? What happened to them? Why did Columbus get credit for the discovery of America for so long?

7. The Icelanders first settled Iceland in 874 A.D. Why did these people come to such an inhospitable place? What happened to Icelandic democracy after the time period chronicled in The Burning of Njal and other sagas?

8. What do we know about the pagan religion of the Icelanders before they became Christian? (An Icelander, Snorri Sturluson, recorded practically everything we know about their religion in a work called The Prose Edda.) What remnants of this religion are still with us?

See what you can discover about the origins of our names of days of the week, or about the myths behind Richard Wagner's great opera cycle The Ring of the Nibelungs.

9. Many students feel that The Burning of Njal would make a good movie. Do you agree? What actors and actresses would you cast in some of the leading roles?

Rewrite a scene from the saga as a movie script.

For Further Reference

Bulfinch, Thomas. Mythology. New York: Crowell, 1970. Includes three chapters that relay basic information about the pagan religion of the preChristian Germanic peoples, including the Icelanders.

Fisher, Margery. Henry Treece. London: The Bodley Head, 1970. This is the standard biography of Treece.

Tonnelat, E. "Teutonic Mythology." In The New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology, edited by Felix Guirand.

London and New York: Hamlyn Publishers, 1968. This article is a slightly more modern discussion of Germanic mythology than that found in Bulfinch.

Wernick, Robert. "Sagas Are Still Alive and Kicking for Icelanders." Smithsonian 16 (January 1986): 114-125. A fascinating article that covers the major sagas, their composition, and their importance in modern Icelandic life.

Related Titles

Readers who are drawn to Treece's retelling of Njal's Saga may wish to read the original saga; the translation by Magnusson and Paulsson in the Penguin Classics series is widely available.

Other popular Viking sagas include The Laxdaela Saga, a love story, and The Vinland Saga and Erik the Red's Saga, about the discovery and settlement of the New World. Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda is a record of Iceland's pagan religion before the coming of Christianity. Other Icelandic sagas relate Germanic myths and legends. The greatest of these is the Volsunga Saga, a story of a dragon's gold, its curse, and the downfall of the great clan of heroes, the Volsungs.

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