

The Greenlanders Short Guide

The Greenlanders by Jane Smiley

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

The Greenlanders Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Themes.....	6
Adaptations.....	7
Key Questions.....	8
Literary Precedents.....	9
Related Titles.....	10
Copyright Information.....	11



Characters

The Greenlanders, an epic historical novel set in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century, has a vast cast of supporting characters to whom Gunnar Asgeirsson relates in the course of his sixty plus years. Gunnar however, is crucial because he is the one who records current events in writing, acts or does not act at important turning points, and tells tales of the ancestors' exploits. It is Gunnar who most fully comprehends the slow collapse of his family's and society's fortunes as natural and social disaster after disaster strikes himself, his relatives, his neighbors, and his friends. It is he whom Smiley depicts weeping at the end of the novel.

Family members who play important roles in developing the themes are Gunnar's sister Margret Asgeirsdottir, a skilled weaver, herb gatherer, and housekeeper, who is banished to a life of transient service after being found to be an adulteress; Gunnar's son Kollgrim Gunnarsson, a skilled hunter but ineffective farmer and lover, who is burned at the stake after being convicted of adultery and witchcraft; and Gunnar's son-in-law Jon Andres Erlendsson, a man who abandons his wild ways and reconciles his family and Gunnar's, too late, however, to revive either family's fortunes.

Clergy, especially Sira Jon and Sira Pall Hallvardsson, also play crucial roles in developing the central theme of The Greenlanders. The survival of Roman Catholic religious life in the community depends on the provision of replacement bishops and priests from Norway. However, as contacts with Norway and Europe decrease, Alf, the last bishop, dies and no successor arrives to train and ordain priests.

Gradually the cadre of foreign-born or properly ordained Greenlander priests, with their fairly sophisticated knowledge of law and liturgy dies or becomes insane. The local clergy receive neither proper schooling nor ordination, and religious practice and knowledge become corrupted. Sira Jon and Sir Pall, both of whom have been trained in Europe, recognize the declining fortunes of the Gardar, and see and despair for themselves and their charges.

A third group providing perspective on the plight of the Greenlanders are the owners and crews of ships who either purposefully or accidentally reach the Eastern Settlements. Initially those who arrive come as traders who bring supplies and personnel from Norway and Iceland and take away furs, ivory, and other commodities.

They are welcomed into the Greenlanders' homes and pay for this hospitality with news of Europe. Later arrivals, however, come unwillingly, blown off course; they bring neither needed personnel nor supplies and place a heavy burden on the community's limited resources, especially when they decide to stay the winter. The last arrivals, brigands from Bristol, England, make no pretense of being guests and plunder the weakened community before departing.

Social Concerns

In *The Greenlanders*, Smiley relates the gradual collapse of a Norse society that has tenuously survived on the outskirts of medieval Europe since its founding by Eric the Red five centuries earlier. A combination of factors — changing climatic conditions that decreased agricultural production, the failure of the Scandinavian countries, especially Norway, to maintain contact and provide crucial supplies and personnel, the lack of indigenous resources, especially timber, for ship building and repair, and an unwillingness to adapt the skills and lifestyle of the Skraelings, the local Arctic people — all contribute to the steady decline in the material, political, and spiritual well being of the colony over its last half century.

Through, primarily, the character of Gunnar Asgeirsson, Smiley chronicles the series of crises in Gunnar's family and in the larger community that increasingly lessen the Greenlanders' ability to survive, much less recover their former prosperity and cohesion.

Families abandon their hard-won homesteads as the population declines; ecclesiastical and farm buildings fall into disrepair for lack of building supplies and motivation; governmental institutions lose their power to impose order and justice; survivors retreat into isolation and despair as their future appears increasingly hopeless.

For modern readers Smiley's depiction of this microcosm of decline and fall arouses concerns about the longterm implications for human society of overpopulation, pollution, global warming, and genocidal wars. In many ways the predicament of the Greenlanders resembles that of minority cultures attempting to maintain ways of life threatened by modernization, environmental despoliation, and imperialism.

Techniques

The Greenlanders follows the structural pattern of the Scandinavian epic chronicle novel as practiced by writers such as Knut Hamsun or Sigrid Undset.

Covering a half century, TheGreenlanders combines detailed accounts of seasonal activities such as seal and reindeer hunts, crucial religious celebrations, trials at the annual Thing, feuds, courtships, starvation, epidemics, and tale-telling with sketchy accounts that cover several years in a few sentences.

Consequently, as the novel progresses Smiley can use less detail for repetitive events because of the incremental growth of the reader's frame of reference.

Point of view shifts repeatedly from character to character before returning to Gunnar Asgeirsson, with the result that the reader knows more than any of the characters what is transpiring. This means the reader realizes both how one or more characters have experienced an event and how each understands the others' experience.

Diction plays an important role in creating a sense of fourteenth-century reality. Using a vocabulary rich in Germanic words and avoiding modern Latin and Greek-derived words and concepts, Smiley creates a sense of linguistic claustrophobia that turns the community increasingly inward, unable to conceptualize a world beyond their rocky mountains, iceberg-covered fjords, snowbound winters, and relentless hunger. The consequences of forgetting the past rational vocabulary of law and religion and failing to develop a new vocabulary to order their lives means the population is increasingly prey to religious hallucination and vigilante justice based on half-remembered concepts. Ironically, few words in the Skraelings' vocabulary enter the Greenlanders'.

Themes

Like much of Smiley's fiction, *The Greenlanders* focuses on social collapse which occurs because those involved — through ignorance, stubbornness, or chance — are incapable of changing to meet new conditions. While the descendants of Asgeir Gunnarsson are Smiley's main concern, she introduces a large cast of characters — farmers, clergy, outlaws, sailors, and Skraelings — to develop her theme of social collapse.

Nevertheless, all is not doom-ridden.

In the midst of long-term decline individual people and families rejoice at the birth of children, pass the winters telling tales, weaving and knitting clothes and playing games, labor through the nightless summers harvesting hay, making cheeses, drying meat, and shearing sheep, arrange and celebrate weddings, and journey to the annual Thing to conduct business and renew acquaintances. Only those who live long and have good memories sense the general pattern of community decline.

Nonetheless, *The Greenlanders* suggests how fragile human beings can be when natural and social forces beyond their control withdraw the sustenance needed to maintain community life.

Denied the means, namely ships to seek help or to flee, the increasingly isolated community abandons its outposts, suffers starvation, and contracts diseases. Ironically, their belief system and cultural pride make most unwilling to adopt the technologies and lifestyle of the Skraelings, the Asian-descended people who have mastered the skills and developed the technologies crucial to survival in the Greenland wastes. By contrast, the Skraelings eagerly adopt useful Norse technologies like iron weapons, when available.

Only occasionally does Smiley indicate unions between the two peoples that go beyond occasional trading. However, those who learn from the Skraelings often suffer at the hands of their Norse compatriots, who see them as devil-controlled.

Adaptations

Although not an adaptation, the NOVA documentary *The Vikings in America*, Thomas Friedman, producer (Boston: WGBH, 1995), offers insight into the places and historical persons described by Smiley in *The Greenlanders*.



Key Questions

Connections between *The Greenlanders* and either the modern world or Smiley's other works may seem initially tenuous. However, once one lifts the barrier between a fourteenth-century community and the twentieth-century world, one finds many parallels exist both in the dilemmas characters face and the circumstances in which they find themselves.

1. How does the plight of the Greenlanders resemble that of marginal minority cultures in the contemporary world? Does their inability to adapt to changing circumstances doom them?
2. In what ways is *The Greenlanders* a critique of medieval Western Christianity? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Church?
3. What qualities does Smiley imply are crucial for a human culture to survive over many centuries?
4. How do the diminished expectations of the Greenlanders find parallels in Smiley's novella *Good Will* (1989) or the novel *A Thousand Acres*?
5. In what ways do conflicts between parents and children in *The Greenlanders* find similarities in *Barn Blind*, *At Paradise Gate*, and *A Thousand Acres*?

What tends to be the basis for such conflicts?

6. Critics have often commented on Smiley's use of food as a means of developing and reflecting her characters' personalities and lifestyles. In what ways does the food consumed by the Greenlanders suggest Smiley's attitude toward their way of life?
7. Smiley is well known for her depiction of strong-willed modern women who control their lives and families. Do the female characters of *The Greenlanders* exhibit any of these same qualities? How do the women deal with men in a culture in which patriarchal values are deeply seated?
8. How does Smiley's use of language create a sense of historical accuracy?
9. If you have read Sigrid Undset's *Kristen Lauransdatter*, discuss how the way of life depicted in medieval Norway resembles that in *The Greenlanders*.

Literary Precedents

The Greenlanders continues the Scandinavian epic saga. Smiley is well acquainted with this tradition through her doctoral research in Iceland. Many passages in *The Greenlanders* draw upon fourteenth- and fifteenth-century accounts. Like Knut Hamsun's *Growth of the Soil* (1917), Smiley's novel shows a hardy people's struggle to gain a livelihood from unpromising circumstances.

Unlike previous and later generations of Scandinavians, the Greenlanders lacked the means to flee westward from their harsh situation to Vinland and the more hospitable climate of North America, or even to return to the barren shores their ancestors had departed. Yet in many ways they resemble characters depicted in Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* (1867) or Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth* (1927).

Related Titles

Nothing in Smiley's other work obviously resembles *The Greenlanders*, a work of historical fiction. However, *The Greenlanders* does have thematic similarities to her works placed in contemporary settings. Many of her modern characters are Midwesterners of Norwegian ancestry who share qualities in common — a hunger for land or wealth, a patriarchal social structure, a disciplined work ethic, an inhibited sexuality, and a tendency to explosive violence. These qualities appear in early novels such as *Barn Blind* (1980), *At Paradise Gate* (1981), and *Duplicate Keys* (1984) as well as in the later novel *A Thousand Acres* (1991).

Structurally many of her works tend to have a single point-of-view character who experiences events over a short period. Except for *Barn Blind*, which uses multiple points of view, only *MOO* (1995) attempts as complex a structure or as large a cast of characters as *The Greenlanders*. However, *MOO* differs radically in its satirical, comic tone. None of her other novels covers so extended a period nor depicts so strong and sympathetic a group of masculine characters.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994