

# Land of Heroes: A Retelling of the Kalevala Short Guide

## Land of Heroes: A Retelling of the Kalevala by Ursula Sygne

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## Overview

The Kalevala is an example of an epic written in modern times that captures much of the flavor of ancient oral narrative. Elias Lonnrot (1802-1884), a gifted Finnish poet-scholar, compiled the materials for his poem from old ballads, lyrical songs, and incantations that were a part of a disappearing Finnish oral tradition. He first published these reworked folk materials in 1835 and later enlarged the work to fifty "cantos" in 1849. "Kalevala" is the name of the homeland of the poem's chief characters and is actually a poetic name for Finland itself. It translates roughly as "Land of the Heroes." The poem has been adopted as the Finnish national epic.

While collecting folklore, Lonnrot noticed that certain characters and episodes were frequently repeated, and he surmised that these materials were the fragments of a larger and very ancient Finnish epic. He organized the stories according to themes and characters in order to reproduce this ancient epic, as he imagined it to be. Although he followed a "scientific" approach in organizing the materials, there is no guarantee that his arrangement of the stories is identical to the original oral tale. Nevertheless, Lonnrot's Kalevala is coherent and powerful in its conception.

Many of the stories and episodes contained in the Kalevala are thought to date back to the eighth century A.D.

During this century, groups of Nordic warriors wandered across Europe to conquer and colonize new lands. The Saxon tribes are mentioned repeatedly in the narrative, and these peoples were prominent in Europe at the time and fought against the Finnish invaders. The fact that many of the stories have been handed down across the centuries in relatively coherent form is a tribute to the Finnish tradition of runo singers.

These were individuals who were trained to remember, recite, and sing the ancient lore.

As the "Northmen" pushed southward into continental Europe, England, and Ireland, they were exposed to many new peoples, customs, and religions, which stimulated a questioning of their own customs and beliefs. Many scholars feel that the tales of the Kalevala were told to counter the influence of the strange beliefs the invaders discovered. Among these were the ideas of Christianity that were penetrating northern Europe during this century.

The confrontation between the untamed, magical heroes of the Finns and the new "gods" of Christianity reshaped the face of religion in Finland. A heavily mythologized image of Christ's birth is a crucial element in the climax of the poem.

Synge's version of the Kalevala, retold as Land of Heroes, offers the reader an opportunity to return to the world of the ancient Finns. She skillfully presents the exciting adventures of magical characters moving through a strange land where the incredible suddenly becomes possible.

## About the Author

Born April 8, 1930, in Somersetshire, England, Phyllis Ursula Synge received a traditional English country education and eventually became a bookseller, specializing in literature and art for children. In 1979, Synge attended the University of Bristol as a "mature student," an experience she notes contributed to the composition of *Swan's Wing*, the story of a man whose unusual appendage and the awkwardness he feels in "normal" society lead him to a new understanding of himself.

From childhood, Ursula Synge has had a keen interest in myths and legends. She has said that myths and legends offer a kind of poetic truth— truth that logic alone cannot reveal.

Synge relies on these ancient stories in much of her writing but undertakes extensive historical research to broaden her understanding of the original context of the stories.

Critics respect Synge for her ability to simplify difficult mythological concepts into readable, enjoyable prose that retains all of the subtlety of the original text.

## Setting

The stories of the Kalevala are set in Finland. The three heroes—Vainamoinen, Lemminkainen, and Ilmarinen—dwell in southern Finland, where the climate is far more hospitable than in northern Finland, where the rugged mountainous land is often snowbound for six months of the year. The forbidding northern latitudes—the lands of the "midnight sun"—were thought to be the home of Mistress Louhi, an evil sorceress of darkness. Her kingdom was called Pohjola. This popular belief is understandable, considering that some parts of the country are steeped in night for nearly two months in the winter.

Such strange cosmological occurrences were not understood in any scientific way but were explained in terms of mysterious forces wielded by powerful magicians.



## Social Sensitivity

One of the most interesting aspects of this book is how these ancient stories are still able to force the reader to confront the natures of good and evil: What makes people act the way they do? How do they decide right and wrong? Are traditions always good? There is little violent confrontation in the book; after all, the heroes are not warriors but magicians. Still, their use of magic to solve problems could give rise to discussions on coping with life's troubles. In the world of the heroes, magic was a tool; in the real world, people must depend upon discerning right and wrong and acting accordingly. The heroes of the epic usually act for the good, sometimes in spite of themselves. When they do not, they are punished. With or without magic, good and evil are forces in the world that must be reckoned with, and readers, like the mythical characters of the Kalevala, must choose which path to follow and learn to accept the consequences of their actions.

As in most works originating in ancient times, the Kalevala gives women characters short shrift. These tales were most often devised to meet the needs of a male audience in male-dominated societies. Like the Greek Pandora or the Hebrew Eve, women are portrayed as a major source of evil in the world. The evil Mistress Louhi deceives and abuses others seemingly for the enjoyment it brings. Women characters who lack magical powers are shown as foolish or as the pleasure-giving playthings of men. When Kyllikki refuses to submit to the marriage demands of Lemminkainen, the people of the village scorn her and cast her out. When Aino, who is betrothed to Vainamoinen by her brother, refuses to marry the old hero, she is carried to her death by the gods.

The character of Marjatta, however, gives birth to a new king and raises him to change the world in spite of the disapproval and active opposition of traditional society. Marjatta eventually emerges as an active force for good in the world and provides a telling contrast with Mistress Louhi.

# Literary Qualities

Synge's adaptation of the Kalevala relies heavily upon Lonnrot's arrangement, which may indeed be an artificial structure. The stories, which were composed by numerous authors at various times, were collected from different parts of the country after being passed down orally, in some cases, for as long as twelve hundred years. In many ways, the parts of the saga fit nicely together, but the mixed origins of the stories introduce many conflicting elements of character and plot.

For example, the heroes first claim that they are struggling to recover the sampo because they are bored with inaction and eager to undertake a new adventure. This is a more ancient notion of heroic character than that revealed by later statements that they are retrieving the sampo to aid the suffering people in Finland. This latter rationale is more of a Christian motive that may have been tacked onto the story in later years.

There is really no way to rectify such inconsistencies.

Although uniquely Finnish in style and conception, the Kalevala offers parallels with the myths of other cultures. For example, its heroes are as addicted to adventure as Jason, Odysseus, and Aeneas are in the ancient Greek and Roman epics. The Finnish heroes, too, show similarities to the classical deities—Vainamoinen has been compared with Apollo, and Ilmarinen with Vulcan, for example. They are capricious and apt to act on whim, lack a clear moral sense, and are more concerned with avenging honor than with establishing justice in the world. The Kalevala may be profitably studied in conjunction with classical myths and epic tales.

In her retelling of the Kalevala, Synge provides skillful depictions of customs and beliefs that are foreign to the modern reader. Even when events delve into the supernatural or involve fantastic creatures, Synge's descriptions seem natural and believable. At the same time, she is true to the metaphorical and lyrical qualities of Lonnrot's original text.



# Themes and Characters

Vainamoinen is the oldest and wisest of the three heroes of the tale, a mighty seer and a master of the kantele, the Finnish lyre. Through the potency of his music, Vainamoinen is responsible for "singing" the world into being. This creation myth is featured prominently at the beginning of the epic.

Vainamoinen's great power of creation comes from his knowledge of the origins of the universe. Through this knowledge he is able to control and even alter reality. As the primary force for good in the epic, he strives to see the harmony of the natural world triumph over the chaos of evil. Even so, Vainamoinen has his flaws. In one episode, he uses magic to trick his faithful friend, Ilmarinen, into going to the evil land of Mistress Louhi. This deception leads to tragedy in the form of a plague that descends upon Vainamoinen's homeland. At the close of the tale, as a new god comes to rule Finland, Vainamoinen sadly relinquishes his magic. He is old, weary, and lonely. At his passing, the reader senses the loss of a magical and poetic force in the world.

Vainamoinen's loyal companion, Ilmarinen, is a smith who fashions wonderful works of art at his forge.

Through his abilities, he creates the miraculous sampo, a "horn of plenty" from which springs an endless bounty of salt, meal, and gold. Ilmarinen, however, is hopelessly in love with the beautiful but arrogant daughter of Mistress Louhi, and uses the sampo to woo her.

Under Louhi's control, the sampo transforms Pohjola into a paradise. But the people of Kalevala suffer horrendously as the bounty of their land seems to drain away.

Ilmarinen does many other foolish things for the love of Mistress Louhi's daughter. Yet, when Finland is overcome by plague and darkness, Ilmarinen rallies to Vainamoinen's side as they struggle to retrieve the sampo from the hands of evil.

The third of the great heroes of the tale is Lemminkainen, a brash young adventurer who boasts of his powers and relentlessly pursues his aims. His rashness often gets him into serious trouble and at one point even costs him his life.

When he rudely insults Mistress Louhi's servant, the man causes Lemminkainen to be bitten by a serpent on the shore of the river bordering Tuonela, the land of the dead. Through the passionate cries of Lemminkainen's mother and the magical powers of nature, he is brought back to life. Yet even his brush with death does not seem to lessen Lemminkainen's conceit. He continues to rush headlong into trouble, always acting before considering the consequences.

Mistress Louhi, the powerful sorceress of darkness, personifies the force of evil in Land of Heroes. She is deceptive and greedy, and delights in sending the three great heroes to perform dangerous deeds. Her evil is so complete that when Vainamoinen asks her





to share the wondrous bounty of the sampo with Finland, she laughs in his face, even though she believes that her refusal dooms Finland to continued sorrow, darkness, and death. Despite Mistress Louhi's immorality, the three heroes fear and respect her for the awesome power of her magic.

Although Vainamoinen, Lemminkainen, Ilmarinen, and Mistress Louhi cannot be considered "gods" in any classical sense, their magical powers allow them to move in and out of the supernatural realm. They routinely perform amazing feats, such as changing people to animals, altering the weather, creating amazing machines, or journeying to mystical lands. Their use of magic, and their relations with one another and with the common people, provide the dramatic energy that animates Land of Heroes.

On one level, Land of Heroes is a fable about the struggle between good and evil. Yet the three heroes cannot depend upon their goodness alone to triumph over Mistress Louhi. They must draw upon every ounce of their strength and ingenuity, which in many ways drains them and contributes to their passing.

This leads to another important theme of the tale—the dying of the old ways and the coming of the new. The heroes often mourn the fact that the world no longer abides by the old rules. At the time when these stories were conceived, the old, pagan world of magical heroes was indeed passing away from Finland, soon to be replaced by the growing powers of Christianity. In the final canto of Land of Heroes, the maid Marjatta gives birth to a Christ-like son who is baptized king, and Vainamoinen lays aside his kantele and his songs to make way for the new king. The reader is struck with an underlying sorrow that this ancient world of magical beauty and marvelous adventure is passing away forever.



# Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Vainamoinen trick his friend, Ilmarinen, into going to Pohjola?

Why does he honor a promise to an evil sorceress over his honesty to his closest friend?

2. Magic is held in the power of song.

Through song, creatures come into being, people change appearances, and even the dead are brought back to life.

The tellers of legends were often called singers. What is the connection between the magical songs of the heroes and the songs of storytellers?

3. How does the Finnish legend of creation compare with the biblical story of creation found in Genesis?

4. In Land of Heroes, youth is often identified with brashness and ignorance. Old age, on the other hand, brings wisdom and patience. Discuss the ways in which the errors of youth lead to the downfall of the younger characters.

5. Often, when an old story is adapted to a new culture, the new version will have elements of both systems of belief.

Compare the story of the king's birth in "Marjatta" with that of Jesus' birth in the Bible.

6. Lemminkainen woos Kyllikki, a maiden from a village near his home.

Although Lemminkainen is a great hero with wondrous magical powers, Kyllikki shuns him because she considers him a peasant. What does this tell us about the place of heroes in society at that time?

About the place of magic?

7. Often the beliefs of a culture come directly from the environment the people live in and contend with. How have the climate and character of Finland contributed to the legends of the Kalevala?

8. Discuss why it is better for all people that the sampo is broken and its pieces scattered across the earth.



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In discussing her work, Synge stated that "if you were to ask me if these stories are true, I could only reply that if they are not, then they should be."

What type of truth do the legends in *Land of Heroes* hold? How does that truth help to make the stories come to life so long after they were first told?

2. One phrase that turns up several times in the book is "this is how things were done in the old times." How is the idea of new ways meeting traditions important to the stories? Does the ending of the book help to resolve that confrontation?

3. Each culture develops its own unique version of the hero. Based on the three heroes who appear in *Land of Heroes*—Vainamoinen, Lemminkäinen, and Ilmarinen—discuss the characteristics of a Finnish hero. What makes these characteristics "heroic"? Do these characters fit your own definition of the word "hero"?

4. On one level, *Land of Heroes* is a story about the confrontation between good and evil. Many people argue that a good work of literature will contain characters who are not always virtuous or always cruel, because people in real life are inconsistent. Discuss the characters in *Land of Heroes* in light of this argument. Are they always good or always bad? Do they show variations of character by their actions and emotions?

5. One issue that society is struggling with today is the redefinition of the relationship of women and men. How are the women in *Land of Heroes* treated? What is their accepted role in the culture portrayed in the book? Do you see a change in the opinion about women between the beginning and the end of the work?

## For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something about the Author*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1976.

The article on Synge provides the most insightful biographical commentary on her approach to writing and the value of myth.

Deutsch, Babette. *Heroes of the "Kalevala," Finland's Saga*. New York: Messner, 1940. The only other English version of the Kalevala still in print, Deutsch's poetic adaptation provides a useful comparison for analyzing Synge's techniques and goals.

Gillies, Eva. "Twilight of the Gods."

*Times Literary Supplement* (December 2, 1977): 1410. Gillies discusses the confusing moral attitudes presented by the heroes of the Kalevala.

Gordon, Mary. "Adventures in a Charmed Universe." *New York Times Book Review* (April 17, 1980): 45, 67.

Although this is a review of Synge's *The Giant at the Ford*, Gordon's analysis of the author's use of magic and legend is helpful in understanding *Land of Heroes*.

Guirand, Felix. "Finno-Ugric Mythology." In *Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, edited by Felix Guirand.

London: Paul Hamlyn, 1962.

Guirand's examination of the Kalevala and the culture which produced it is the most useful for the study of the history and symbolism of the work.

Works of art depicting scenes from the legends are included.

Robinson, Herbert Spencer, and Knox Wilson. "Myths and Legends of the Finns." In *The Encyclopedia of Myths and Legends of All Nations*, edited by Barbara Leonie Picard. London: Kaye and Ward, 1974. An overview of the deities and heroes of Finnish myths, with a discussion of the Kalevala's place in Finnish literature.

## Related Titles

Two additional books by Synge deal with the themes of myth and magic.

*Weland: Smith of the Gods* is an adaptation of a Norse myth that tells the story of Weland and his two brothers, Slagfid and Eigel. All three are heroic characters who encounter mysterious, magical forces in lands beyond their own. Like *Land of Heroes*, *Weland* is an exciting adventure story that ponders the meaning of human existence. *Weland* also leaves the reader feeling sorrowful that the wonder of ancient times is gone.

*The Giant at the Ford* is Synge's retelling of the legendary stories of heroic saints who contributed to England's mythic history. Included here are the stories of St. George and the dragon, St.

Jerome, St. Christopher, and many others.



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