

# Laxdaela Saga Study Guide

## Laxdaela Saga

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

<a href="#">Laxdaela Saga Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 1-10.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 11 - 20.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 21-30.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 31-40.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 41 - 50.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 51 - 60.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 61 - 70.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 71 - 78.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">33</a>



## Plot Summary

The Laxdaela Saga is one of the most famous Icelandic Sagas of the Middle Ages. The work is an early piece of romantic writing, with a passionate lovers' quarrel lying deep at its center, something unusual for the literature preceding it. The saga ranges over a two-hundred year period, between about 870 and 1073 A.D. in medieval Iceland and (to a much lesser extent) Norway. It follows two family lineages throughout this time, both descending from an early Norwegian chieftain named Ketil Flat-Nose, who emigrates from Norway in 890 A.D. Through his daughter, Unn the Deep-Minded and his son Bjorn the Easterner, nearly all of the major characters are sired.

Around eighty years into the saga, the three main characters are born, Kjartan Olafsson, Bolli Thorleiksson, and Gudrun Osvifur's-daughter. Kjartan is the brilliant and talented illegitimate son of Olaf the Peacock and his concubine Melkorka, the daughter of a Irish King. Bolli Thorleiksson is Kjartan's cousin, also brilliant strong and talented; his father, Olaf the Peacock's half-brother, allows Olaf to raise him, so Bolli and Kjartan grows up with Olaf the Peacock, and are the best of friends. In their youth, Kjartan and Gudrun meet and fall in love, but Kjartan is a rising star and leaves to go on a grand voyage to Norway and Ireland in order to claim prestige, riches and honor for himself. He asks Gudrun to marry him and tells her that he will be gone for three years; Bolli goes with him. However, due to King Olaf Tryggvason, then King of Norway's attempts to convince the Icelandic chieftains to convert to Christianity, Kjartan is held captive in Norway, while Bolli is allowed to return to Iceland. While there, Bolli and Gudrun fall in love and marry. When Kjartan is finally allowed to return (after Iceland converts to Christianity), he finds his best friend and betrothed married and shows little anger. He then soon marries Hrefna Asgeir's-daughter, and a feud quickly erupts between the two families, leading Gudrun, in a jealous rage, to pressure Bolli into leading an ambush on Kjartan; Bolli kills him in cold blood. Kjartan's brothers and two other men take revenge on Bolli, killing him, and then Bolli's two sons and another troop of men kill Bolli's killer, Helgi Hardbeinsson. After this series of deaths and blood feud, the feud is ended by Gudrun's mentor, Snorri the priest and the book ends by tracing the development of the remaining lineages of the Thorleiksson and Olafsson families.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part of the saga, Chapters 1-31, lays out all the necessary history, genealogical and cultural background needed for an intricate understanding of the setting, times and place of the characters. Chapters 32-56 takes the reader through the rise and fall of Kjartan and Bolli, covering the main plot line of the book. The last part of the saga, Chapters 57-78, wraps the story up by following the remaining conflicts in the Olafsson-Thorleiksson blood-feud, ending the blood-feud and playing out the stories of the descendants and relations of these families.



# Chapters 1-10

## Chapters 1-10 Summary

The Laxdaela Saga begins in the Kingdom of Norway in the late 9th century; the Scandinavian nations have experienced a high-tide of heroic tales, and this period of time is largely regarded as a period of pagan heroism, largely pre-dating Christianization. The current king of Norway is King Harald Fine-Hair. Before King Harald consolidates power and unifies Norway, the country side is divided into principalities ruled by chieftains. However, when it becomes clear that the chieftains must submit to King Harald, some of them decide to settle the new Iceland territory rather than submit to Harald's rule. The beginning of the lineages of the Laxdaela Saga is initiated by one of these chieftains, Ketil Flat-Nose. Ketil initially desires to live in Scotland, believing himself able to claim good land there. He perceives Iceland to be mainly a wild land of plentiful resources. However, his family decides to go to Iceland, including soon-to-be patriarch and Ketil's daughter, Unn the Deep-Minded. There will be two main lineages that run throughout the saga, and Unn is the progenitor of both. These matters are covered in Chapters 1-5.

Unn lives for some time during this period. She is unusual because she is not a submissive woman but powerful and unyielding. She quickly achieves the status of matriarch, and her children not only establish powerful families in Iceland but in Scotland as well. She marries her children off well. After arriving in Iceland, Unn stakes out a broad swath of land throughout the unsettled Breidafjord, which runs along Iceland's west coast. She then splits the land among her family and other followers, and awards the land in accord with a complex series of factors, including heritage, character and class. By this time, Unn has a grandson, Olaf Feilan; she favors him and bequeaths her own land Hvamm to him after his death. Afterwards, Feilan plays little role in the story, but after three generations, his descendants will rise in prominence, with his great-grandson, Thorkel Eyjolfsson taking his place as Gudrun Osvifur's daughter's fourth husband; Gundrun is one of the three main characters of the saga.

The saga begins to watch the descendants of Thorgerd, one of Unn's granddaughters. Thorgerd marries Dala-Koll in Chapter 5. The entire Laxriverdale estate comes with her into the marriage. Thus begins the Laxriverdale dynasty, referred to in the saga's title. All the key events in the book will be connected to this dynasty; it will produce two of the main characters of the entire saga, Kjartan Olafsson and his father, Olaf the Peacock. We hear little of Dala-Koll, save that he begets Hoskuld Dala-Kollsson in Chapter 7. Hoskuld becomes a chieftain of great significance and Hoskuld's mother leaves for Norway; she will marry once more, and give birth to Hrut Herjolfsson, the half-brother of Hoskuld. This takes place in Chapter 8. Hoskuld takes his half-brother's part of Thorgerd's estate when she dies.

The saga continues to focus on Hoskuld, whose ambition expands when he begins to search for a wife. In Chapter 9, he marries Jorunn, whose father is a wealthy farmer to



the north. However, Jorunn has a rough and venomous personality; despite having many offspring, the marriage is a failure, although it does not end. The reader, however, has Thorleik Hoskuldsson and bard Hoskuldsson to deal with now, Hoskuld's sons. Thorleik's personality is that of Jorunn's, whereas Bard's is the reverse, kind and giving.

The saga turns to a man, Hrapp of Hrappstead; he is a difficult man and a villain who is cruel to those around him; he is a neighbor of Hoskuld and Jorunn; the role Hrapp plays will not be clear until he dies in Chapter 17 and 18; his estate then passes to his brother-in-law, Thorstein Black the Wise, but because Hrapp's disgruntled ghost is haunting the area, Thorstein and his clan drown in the Breidafjord. Hrapp causes his own land to remain empty, and another farmer in another part of Iceland named Thorkel Fringe will come into possession of the land but allow it to lie fallow. It is due to the emptiness of the Hrappstead that Olaf the Peacock is able to buy this area in Chapter 24; he will call the place Hjardarholt, and raise his son, Kjartan Olafsson, one of the main characters. Hrapp's ghost foreshadows a tragic end for Kjartan.

## Chapters 1-10 Analysis

The Laxdaela Saga is one of the most important Icelandic and even European sagas of the Medieval period, the classic age of sagas. It covers the life and times of a lineage of Icelandic families that covers at two-hundred year time span, between 870 and 1073. Sagas contain many chapters, as their purpose is to tell a long story. Thus, the chapters are summarized in groups of ten and left unnamed for purposes of brevity.

The saga is divided into three parts, Chapters 1-31, 32-56, and 57-78. The first part sets up the main narrative by covering the history of Unn's offspring. This first part largely sets up the detailed narratives of the last two parts. While it may seem composed largely of tedious detail, these chapters are necessary to understand the context and depth of the future of these families.

The reader should also notice how often land is discussed in the Laxdaela Saga. This will continue throughout the book. At the time, the fledgling Icelandic people were settling a new land, and were descended from those chieftains and their families who highly valued freedom. As a result of this, they were closely connected to those parts of their lives that enabled them to live free and orderly lives. For a country with no industry, and whose major economic practices consisted in harvesting natural resources like timber and fish, land was the greatest of all assets.



# Chapters 11 - 20

## Chapters 11 - 20 Summary

Following Killer-Hrapp, we are introduced to a sub-theme in the story. We meet Thord Goddi, also a neighbor to Hoskuld Dala-Kollsson. Thord Goddi will marry Vigdis Ingjald's daughter; they will house a poor criminal named Thorolf. He is known as an "outlaw" because of the Icelandic reverence for the rule of law, as they have no ruler to speak of save the law that they adopt themselves. Thorolf, therefore, can be killed by anyone at any time. Thorolf's crime is the murder of Ingjald Saudisle-Priest's brother, and Ingjald is intent on tracking him down and killing him to avenge his brother's death. The presence of Ingjald causes Thord Goddi to display great cowardice, leaving Vigdis to defeat Ingjald's people. She then leaves Goddi and tries to claim half of their land for her own; Thord goes to Hoskuld Dala-Kollsson to prevent them. He wants so badly to prevent the hated Vigdis from taking his property that he gives it all to Hoskuld Dala-Kollsson to hold for his son, Ola the Peacock, one of the saga's main characters. These events occur mostly in Chapters 11, 14 and 16.

Chapter 11 also discusses Hoskuld travelling to Norway in order to procure timber to build for himself a great estate that reflects his high social status. However, in Chapter 12, we discover that he also purchases a prostitute for himself; Jorunn is annoyed but seems not to mind too much initially. It later turns out that the beautiful prostitute-slave actually has a noble lineage; her name is Melkorka, and in Chapter 13 it is revealed that she has an Irish king as her father. Hoskuld is overjoyed and falls in love with Melkorka but never marries her. However, he gives her a son, Olaf the Peacock. Chapter 14 introduces us to Ingjald, who we have already discussed, and in 15, Vigdis takes over. In Chapter 16, we discover that because Thord wants so badly to thwart Vigdis's machinations, then he not only gives Hoskuld his property but promises to rear Olaf for him, as Olaf is his illegitimate child. In Chapter 17, as we saw above, Killer-Hrapp dies; this leads, again, to Thorstein and his family's death in the Breidafjord.

In Chapter 19, we return to the main storyline, with Hrut Herjolfsson, the half brother of Hoskuld, immigrating to Iceland. He is eager to lay claim to his rightly owned half of his mother Thorgerd's inheritance. However, Hoskuld refuses to oblige and they nearly kill one another. But Hoskuld is growing old and the story shifts from his activities to those of his son, Olaf the Peacock. Olaf shows promise of becoming a great man; he is very smart and honorable. Melkorka wants him to return to Ireland and become a King. In Chapter 20, she decides to marry Thorbjorn the Feeble and gives Olaf the resources he needed to travel to Ireland.

## Chapters 11 - 20 Analysis

Chapters 11-20 can be roughly divided in half. They tell two stories that eventually converge. First, we are faced with the nasty marriage of Thord Goddi and his venomous



wife, Vigdis. The presence of the outlaw Thorolf brings the vengeance of Ingjald, whose presence reveals Goddi's cowardice, leading Vigdis to divorce him. When she tries to claim her half of their assets, Thord gives his assets to Hoskuld on behalf of Olaf and asks to raise Olaf so as to prevent Hoskuld from facing shame. These events provide for Olaf's wealth and his upbringing. However, another theme weaves through these chapters. Hoskuld is married to Jorunn, but on a trip to Norway for timber, he buys a concubine known as Melkorka; she gives birth to Olaf and it later turns out that Melkorka's father is the king of the Irish. Thus, Olaf has a noble lineage and immediately acquires a high social stature. The latter chapters transition from a focus on Hoskuld to the seemingly bright future of Olaf the Peacock.

Again, the Laxdaela Saga focuses on nobility and estates. Thorolf the outlaw and Melkorka the concubine represent the lowest rungs of Icelandic society. However, the presence of both eventually leads to the great elevation of Olaf the Peacock, displaying his great lineage, adding to his wealth, and preventing shame from coming upon his father, Hoskuld. It is also important to note the eclipse of Hoskuld and the rise of Olaf; the saga will now focus on his life, times and family.



# Chapters 21-30

## Chapters 21-30 Summary

Olaf obliges his mother and leaves for a grand journey to Ireland; he comes into contact with Melkorka's father in Chapter 21. The local King in Ireland, King Myrkjartan, is impressed by Olaf; amazingly, he asks if Olaf would accept the throne as his death, but Olaf refuses. He then travels to see King Harald and impresses him as well. When Olaf returns in glory to Iceland, Hoskuld asks Olaf to live with him and they reunite. Olaf agrees and travels to Hoskuldstead, where he settles down. Bard Hoskuldsson, Hoskuld's son, is particularly glad to see him. Towards the end of Chapter 22, Olaf decides to marry and Hoskuld suggests that he marry the daughter of the widely renowned Egil Skalla-Grimsson of Borg. The meeting is delayed due to the convening of the Althing, the periodic meeting of the chieftains of Iceland to make political decisions, but Olaf eventually meets her. Her name is Thorgerd and while she initially resists his attempts to woo her because he is the daughter of a prostitute, his charm wins her over. They marry in Chapter 23, buy the land in the Hrappstead (recall its dark shadow, the ghost of Killer-Hrapp) and build their new estate the Hjardarholt. These events round out Chapter 24. Chapter 25 recalls Thorleik Hoskuldsson, Olaf's other half-brother, into the story (Bard Hoskuldsson is Olaf's other half-brother). Recall that Thorleik follows his mother Jorunn in cruelty; he starts a fight with Hrut Herjolfsson, his uncle.

I

In Chapter 26, the reader encounters Hoskuld Dala-Kollson's death. Olaf, however, is Hoskuld's illegitimate son; as a result, it appears that Bard and Thorleik will divide Hoskuld's assets and land. However, Hoskuld has a plan to award Olaf a third of what he owns and is able to use a legal trick to do so; this infuriates Thorleik. Yet Olaf is too good-natured a person to allow such tension to develop between him and his brother, so he graciously offers to rear Bolli Thorleiksson, Thorleik's son. As a result Bolli will grow up at Hjardarholt, along with his foster-brother, Kjartan Olafsson, Olaf the Peacock's oldest son. These events cover Chapters 27 and 28. These are also crucial events in the set-up of the main events and plot of the Laxdaela Saga. For the major conflict of the book is between Bolli and Kjartan, to the chagrin of Olaf. Olaf grows older, and we are led to still another generation.

Kjartan and Bolli progress from children to men and develop a profound brotherly bond that persists this entire time. Both greatly admire the other, have great talents and are impressive men. However—and this is important—Kjartan's greatness always somewhat exceeds Bolli's and thus Bolli grows up always a step behind Kjartan. The descendants of Hoskuld are at their highest point during this time. However, this period sets the stage for the major conflict of the book. During this time, Olaf travels to Norway to gather timber; on his return, he brings a Norwegian named Geirmund back with him, who brings an accursed sword with him, "Leg-Biter." Geirmund falls in love and attempts





to marry Olaf's daughter Thurid; however, Olaf resists Geirmund's proposal, but Thorgerd intervenes on Geirmund's behalf with Olaf and he permits the marriage. However, their marriage is not very happy, and Geirmund leaves her and leaves no money for Thurid and her daughter Groa. When Olaf gives Geirmund a ship to take back to Norway, Thurid sneaks on, leaves Groa and steals Geirmund's cursed sword "Leg-Biter." However, the sword is yet to be accursed, until Geirmund curses the sword as Thurid rows away with it. When Thurid returns, she gives "Leg-Biter" to Bolli, who owns it for a long time afterward. Before Geirmund gets back to Norway, his ship crashes and he and his crew die.

## Chapters 21-30 Analysis

Chapters 21 through 26 continue the story of Olaf's rise to prominence. He accomplishes great things and makes extraordinary connections in Ireland and Norway, gaining the admiration of his grandfather, the king of the Irish, and King Harald of Norway (a descendant of the original). He returns to Iceland with great prestige and now openly lives with Hoskuld. When Hoskuld dies, he finds a way to leave Olaf with a third of his estate. Olaf marries well and builds his own manor, Hjardarholt. Since Hoskuld diminishes Thorleik's fortune on Olaf's behalf, Thorleik is angry with Olaf. In response, Olaf offers to raise Thorleik's son Bolli. He also has a son of his own, Kjartan. Bolli and Kjartan, next to Grunden, are the book's two main characters. Chapters 27 and 28 tell of their great admiration for each other but lets us know that Bolli somewhat grows up in Kjartan's shadow. In Chapters 29 and 30 we are introduced to a sub-plot through which Bolli comes into possession of a cursed sword, the "Leg-Biter" which will play an important role later in the saga. Chapters 21-30 transition between Hoskuld's generation and Olaf's, then between Olaf's and Kjartan's and Bolli's. The task of the first part of the book ends in Chapter 31, which we will explore next. However, the stage is largely set. Olaf is at the height of his power, with two proud and wonderful sons who could not be closer. All seems well; the House of Peacock is in its ascension.



# Chapters 31-40

## Chapters 31-40 Summary

While the first part of the Laxdaela Saga ends in Chapter 31, it is best to include it with the next section, for it foreshadows what is to come. In Chapter 31, Olaf the Peacock dreams that his favorite son will one day die covered in his own blood. This foreshadows the main body of the saga, which will ultimately end in tragedy.

Chapter 32 begins the heart of the saga. It opens by switching to the other main familial lineage in the story. Starting over with Ketil Flat-Nose, we follow the offspring of his son Bjorn the Easterner, particularly Osvifur Helgason and Gudrun, his daughter. Gudrun, along with Kjartan and Bolli, is a main character in the book. In Chapter 32, Osvifur purchases an estate in Saelingsdale, where he will raise livestock; this land will contain a later tragedy.

Chapter 33 is also of great import, because it contains prophesy made by Gest Oddleifsson, a medium. He gives three predictions in a single day which will outline the rest of the saga. First, Gest meets Gudrun, a woman he happens to be related to. Gudrun is at this time in her middle teenage years, and she relates four visions or dreams that she needs interpreting. From the dreams, Gest prophesies that Gudrun will not have one husband, but four. When Olaf invites him to Hjardarholt later that day, Gest first meets Bolli and Kjartan; he then has a vision that Bolli will not only kill Kjartan but die because of this murder. The third prophesy is less important; he predicts that he and Osvifur Helgason will one day lie in close proximity to one another (In Chapter 66, we discover that they will share a tomb). Thus, we see the destinies of Gudrun, Kjartan and Bolli in a single chapter; the remainder of the sage works out the details.

In Chapter 34, Gudrun is forced to marry when she is only fifteen years old. Thorvald Halldorsson has money but he is a cowardly man. Following two brief years of marriage, Gudrun is able to annul the marriage. Her second husband is Thord Ingunnarson, who is apparently married to Aud at the same time, an irritable woman that he soon thereafter divorces (though not before she mutilates him with a sword). Thord is good to Gudrun and she feels content, but tragedy will fall upon Thord when he fights a magician family (Kotkel's clan); their spells drown him in Chapter 35. Now Kotkel and his clan are killed but they cause Thorleik to have another fight with his uncle Hrut in Chapter 37. This important event leads to Thorleik's emigration from Iceland; Bolli is left to live out his years at Hjardarholt, abandoned by his father. These events comprise Chapter 38. Chapter 39 is crucial because it introduces Gudrun to Kjartan after the death of her second husband. He quite likes her and pursues her in Saelingsdale. Their fathers, Osvifur and Olaf are good friends, despite Olaf's deep reservations about their relationship. During this time, Bolli becomes something of a third wheel in Kjartan and Gudrun's budding relationship.



In Chapter 40, Kjartan grows restless to increase his power and fame. He decides to leave Iceland and sail to Norway. He pleads with Gudrun to delay their marriage; he will leave for three years, and they will be engaged the entire time. Gudrun declines and their departure is quick and awkward. Bolli follows Kjartan to Norway in Chapter 40. However, the King of Norway, Olaf Tryggvason is involved in an increasingly tense political and religious dispute with Iceland's chieftains. The Norwegian Crown never abdicates authority of Iceland. Much like the relationship between Britain and Canada, Iceland has broad autonomy but ultimately comes under the authority of a king across the sea. Iceland never officially secedes (as the United States did from Britain). King Olaf has become a Christian; this is the historical period where the Scandinavian countries are wholly converted from paganism. In 1000, the entire Icelandic people convert to Christianity due to this pressure.

## Chapters 31-40 Analysis

The Laxdaela Saga contains some of the most obvious and unsubtle foreshadowing that a story can have. Olaf the Peacock's dream seems a little mysterious, but when Gert interprets Gudrun's dream and has two other visions, one of Kjartan's and Bolli's deaths, it is clear what the climax of the story will be. Kjartan and Bolli will fight over something or other (could it be Gudrun? Very likely). This will lead to Kjartan's death. However, Bolli will die too, presumably at the hands of someone trying to avenge Kjartan. Thus, the central plot is set. The dreams are given before Gudrun meets either Kjartan or Bolli, so there is still time for the plot to build. Of course, the details are not filled in entirely. However, in general, whoever the author of the Laxdaela Saga is wanted the reader to know in broad outlines what was going to happen. Perhaps this is meant to add to the tragic effect of the story—that the fates of these two great men, Kjartan and Bolli, have already been written and that they will both proceed to tragic ends. Tragedy can occur in a moment, with shock. However, a deeper and often darker form of tragedy is one that is expected and inescapable. The author may have this form of tragedy in mind.

These chapters also introduce us to the other major familial line that descends from Ketil Flat-Nose and it also touches on the religious conflict between King Olaf and the Icelandic Chieftains. Despite the fact that this is a major change in Icelandic life and something significant to be fought about, it makes little impact on the chapter. Since the Laxdaela Saga is presumably written by someone Christian, this is peculiar, to say the least. However, the author clearly has an admiration for the Icelandic past, which he knows includes paganism and pagan practices. So it is not entirely clear what led the author to be so friendly to pagan culture. To speculate, some commentators on the pagan world suggest that it is more amenable to heroism than Christianity because of Christianity's emphasis on humility, avoiding violence and self-denial. The author may miss the heroic aspect of human personality which Christianity tends to suppress on behalf of other traits.



# Chapters 41 - 50

## Chapters 41 - 50 Summary

Three years prior to the official Christianization of Iceland, King Olaf is still at odds with the Icelandic chieftains. Thus, when Kjartan and Bolli arrive to the King's court, despite King Olaf's admiration for Kjartan, he decides to use him (and some others) as a bargaining chip with Iceland's chieftains by capturing him. Kjartan is held captive along with three others. Notably, Bolli is not imprisoned, and three years after Kjartan's capture, Bolli goes back to Iceland. Kjartan is stuck with King Olaf. The King's sister Ingibjorg is now interested in him (Kjartan). After Iceland converts to Christianity in 1000, Kjartan is released and goes back to Iceland in 1001 (when news reached Norway). Kjartan ends his tryst with Ingibjorg, but she leaves him with a gold-woven head-dress that is quite expensive; this was to be given to Gudrun upon their marriage. Further, King Olaf bequeaths Olaf a magical sword possessing the ability to render him unable to be harmed by any other weapon, that is, so long as he is equipped with it. These events occupy Chapters 43, 44 and 45.

Kjartan's return to Iceland is not a triumph like his last. He finds that Bolli and Gudrun are married; apparently, he is not upset and decides to marry someone else. He chooses Hrefna Asgeir's-daughter, who is the sister of his travel partner, Kalf Asgeirsson; Hrefna is kind and humble, and Kjartan gives her the golden head-dress. These events cover Chapters 46 and 47. However, for a variety of reasons, tensions build between Kjartan, Bolli and Gudrun. Olaf the Peacock can see the resentment coming and attempts to defuse it to no avail. One day Bolli gives Kjartan a gift, and Kjartan responds with surprising ingratitude, dismissing him. Gudrun's family is insulted, so his brothers decide to take the sword King Olaf gave him, rendering him defenseless; Hrefna's head-dress is taken as well during a feast, but the thieves are more mysterious. Kjartan, however, is sure that Bolli and Gudrun are responsible and blames Bolli and Gudrun publicly, bringing shame on their family. To do this, he takes sixty men to lay siege to Gudrun and Bolli's estate, keeping them inside for three days, and returns to Hjardarholt. Olaf is upset, but Thorgerd maintains that Bolli and Gudrun have brought it on themselves. The men of their estate in Laugar are now more or less at war with the men living at Hjardarholt. During this time, Hrefna gives birth to Kjartan's first son, Asgeir.

Retaliations quickly escalate, with more exchanges taking place. Gudrun is furious and pushes her brothers and Bolli to attempt to kill Kjartan. One day when Kjartan is going home through Svinadale with only two of his men, Bolli and Gudrun's brothers ambush them. Kjartan, great fighter that he is, holds all of Gudrun's brothers back. Bolli will not fight, presumably out of respect for Kjartan. Eventually, however, Bolli gets involved. Kjartan does not believe that Bolli will harm him and disarms himself because he cannot harm his brother. However, Bolli kills him with "Leg-Biter." These events mark a climax in the Laxdaela Saga and end Chapters 48 and 49. Chapter 50 follows quickly, displaying Gudrun at her worst, reveling in the death of Kjartan; she is excited about the



pain it will cause Hrefna. Bolli is able to see through this veneer, however, realizing that Gudrun hates Hrefna because she still loves Kjartan. She is jealous. Hrefna's fate is dark; in grief, she moves back home with her family and dies mourning Kjartan in Chapter 50.

## Chapters 41 - 50 Analysis

Chapters 41 through 50 build to one of the primary climaxes of the Laxdaela Saga. First, Iceland becomes Christian, King Olaf releases Kjartan and Kjartan returns to Iceland. When he returns, he discovers that Bolli, his foster-brother, has married Gudrun, his betrothed. They were unsure whether Kjartan would return. Kjartan's departure damaged his relationship with Gudrun anyway. Kjartan hides any emotional pain or betrayal he felt, and marries a gentle and kind woman, Hrefna. Apparently, however, Gudrun is jealous. Since Bolli is already resentful of growing up in Kjartan's shadow, their resentments grow and cause them to become spiteful to Kjartan. Kjartan too is angry, and in one way begins the two family's escalating feuds by spurning a gift that Bolli offers him. The feud escalates until Gudrun convinces her brothers and Bolli to kill Kjartan. Kjartan dies at Bolli's betrayal; he does not believe that Bolli would kill his own brother, but he is wrong. Bolli also kills Kjartan with the "Leg-Biter" blade that has been cursed by Geirmund in Chapters 29 and 30. Thus, Olaf the Peacock's dream comes to pass and Gest's second prophesy has come half-true.

The analysis here primarily concerns the climax of the book and the intricate social relations that lead to Kjartan's death. Looking back at the entire tapestry of the saga up to this point, the reader should recall that Gudrun comes from one major lineage in the book, Bolli and Kjartan from another. However, they are both descended from the Icelandic founder Ketil Flat-Nose, Kjartan and Bolli descended from Unn the Deep-Minded and Gudrun from Bjorn the Easterner. Further, a variety of familial conflicts set up these events. These conflicts include Hoskuld's fight with his brother, Thorleik's fight with his brother Bard and Olaf, Hoskuld's acquiring a concubine, and the death of Killer-Hrapp. The acquisition and cursing of the "Leg-Biter" blade is also relevant. Without appreciating this background, the reader will only see jealous lovers quarreling and leading to death, an old story that repeats thousands of times. However, in the light of the main characters' roles in a chain of families and dynasties, the conflict takes on a larger form and depicts a broader tragedy, not merely for those immediately involved but on the entire familial line.



# Chapters 51 - 60

## Chapters 51 - 60 Summary

Chapter 51 opens in the time following Kjartan's death. Olaf the Peacock's family now contains a near irresolvable conflict, one that can only be held at bay by Olaf himself. He does what he can to make sure the conflict is healed, or that it at least does not explode into a blood feud; he is somewhat successful for the three years following Kjartan's death, but then he dies. After his death, Thorgerd, Kjartan's mother, pushes Kjartan's brothers to avenge Kjartan's death on Bolli. They are aided by their grandmother Melkorka's other son Lambi Thorbjornsson, and Helgi Hardbeinsson, a soldier; the Olafsson brothers ambush Bolli. They find him in a shieling, a small house in a pasture where a shepherd lives in the summer, and kill him. After killing Bolli, the soldier and Olafsson ally, Helgi Hardbeinsson, finds Gudrun, who is with child; he takes his spear which killed Bolli and smears her husband's blood on Gudrun's clothes. He then foretells that her son will kill him. Gudrun gives birth to her and Bolli's son, Bolli Bollason the next spring. Gudrun moves from Saelingsdale to Helgafell; she trades houses with her teacher Snorri the Priest. These events comprise Chapters 51 through 56.

With the close of Chapter 56, the Laxdaela Saga passes into its final part. One of the final prophesies is that Gudrun will wreak vengeance against those who caused Bolli's death; and she constructs detailed plans to achieve her objective. In Chapter 57, the reader is introduced to two of the key figures who will help determine Gudrun's future, Thorgils Holluson and Thorkel Eyjolfsson. Thorgils is also born of Bjorn the Easterner, as Gudrun was. Bjorn is also related to Kjartan and Bolli, and even to Thorkel. All are within the lineage of Ketil Flat-Nose. Thorgils pursues Gudrun, attempting to win her hand, but she is focused on revenge and refuses to marry anyone else until vengeance is hers. She lays plans for years, until the time Bolli Bollason turns twelve. He is now old enough to play his role as the one who will take revenge for his father's death. Gudrun's teacher, Snorri the priest, conceives of a plan that requires both Thorgils and Bolli Bollason, and Gudrun consequently consents to marry Thorgils, but only if he will lead a troop of men to kill Helgi Hardbeinsson. Thorgils agree. Chapter 60 ends as Thorgils, Bolli Bollason and their men ride off to find Helgi.

## Chapters 51 - 60 Analysis

Chapters 51 through 60 can be roughly divided into two parts. Chapters 51 through 56 close part two of the saga, which contains the main events—the rise of Olaf the Peacock, the rise and glory days of his sons Kjartan and Bolli, and their intricate relationship to Gudrun. The events play out in an inexorable tragedy which cannot be escaped, and Kjartan is killed. Chapter 51, however, brings Olaf the Peacock's death; once he dies, the uneasy peace amongst his family members is shattered and his wife Thorgerd leads the call for Bolli's death. And in accord with her wishes, Kjartan's



brothers and two other men, Lambi Thorbjornsson and Helgi Hardbeinsson kill Bolli. Gudrun moves away and has a son, Bolli Bollason, but not before Helgi prophesies that Bolli Bollason will kill him in the future.

When the reader enters the third part of the saga in Chapter 57, she will find a sense of decline. Part one of the saga led upwards. The line of descendants grew more prominent. Their history was noble, and, for the most part, so was their present and future. Olaf the Peacock's story is a noble and exciting one, as is the story of the young Kjartan and Bolli. Yet prophesies, mid-way into the second part, signal the downturn of the saga, and lead to Kjartan and Bolli's deaths. Unlike many books, the climax of the book does not quickly release the tension in the main storyline. Many narratives function like a rollercoaster ride—a slow ascent followed by a quick descent from the climax to the denouement. However, not so with the Laxdaela Saga; part three is the story of revenge, bitterness and death, a gradual decay of the proud familial line of Ketil Flat-Nose.



# Chapters 61 - 70

## Chapters 61 - 70 Summary

In Chapter 61, Thorgils recruits Lambi Thorbjornsson and Thorstein the Black. Since they were involved in Bolli's death, they have a choice—join in the expedition against Bolli's killer or be killed themselves. Lambi resists, but agrees on the conditions that his nephews the Olafssons will not be killed if he participates and the vengeance is successful. In Chapter 62, Thorgils and his men spy out the land. There are ten men with them, all good warriors. The men include Thorgils, Bolli's two sons, Bolli and Thorleik. Thorgils attempts to gain sanctuary with Helgi at his chieftains' estate by pretending that he is an outlaw. Four men are at the estate, including Helgi; Thorgils and his men stay through the night. Chapter 63 finds Helgi with his shepherd. A boy comes to report the men, and Helgi guesses who they are. Helgi realizes that his death is near. He sends the women of the estate away and he goes to greet Thorgils. A small man approaches Thorgils, calling himself Killer-Hrapp. He talks to the men and discovers their plan of attack. Thorgils and his men leave to kill Helgi in Chapter 64; they reach his house at which time Helgi launches a spear, killing the man calling himself Killer-Hrapp. Thorgils and his men surround Helgi's shieling; four men aid Helgi, including his son, a shepherd and two outlaws. A brief fight ensues, which ends with Bolli Bollason killing Helgi with "Leg-Biter." These events end with Chapter 64.

Thorgils is pleased and returns to collect on his promise of marriage from Gudrun, but now she hesitates, for she has promised to marry no other man in the land than him, but not him necessarily. Further, Snorri has already selected Thorkel Eyjolfsson to be Gudrun's next husband and he is away at sea (qualifying him to be among those not in the land other than Thorgils). Thorgils is furious; Snorri arranges for him to be killed so that Gudrun can marry Thorkel without challenge. Gudrun and Thorkel wed in Chapter 68. In Chapter 70, Thorkel becomes a great chieftain, rising to prominence and aiming to win broad acclaim and respect. Snorri the Priest acquires great prestige as well. Thorkel runs his estate effectively, laying ground for a new church. He and Gudrun have a son, Gellier. Bolli and Thorleik grow up to be "tall, stalwart men." Bolli marries Snorri's daughter Thordis. After the marriage, Thorkel leaves to collect timber to build his church, going to an audience before King Olaf of Norway.

## Chapters 61 - 70 Analysis

Chapters 61 through 70 divide into two parts, much as Chapters 51 through 60 did. Chapters 61 through 64 tell the story of Thorgils expedition to bring revenge on Helgi for Bolli's death. Thorgils takes with him Bolli's sons Thorleik and Bolli. Bolli the younger deals Helgi his death-blow. Incidentally, Helgi is killed with the cursed sword "Leg-Biter," the sword with which Bolli the elder killed Kjartan. Thorgils' quest to marry Gudrun is blocked by the machinations of Snorri and Gudrun herself; and Snorri has Thorgils killed. These events lead into a brief lull in the saga's intensity. With Thorgils dead, the





way is cleared for Thorleik Eyjolfsson to marry Gudrun, becoming her fourth husband as foretold in Gest's prophesy. Chapters 68 through 70 mark a lull in the intensity of the saga's main storyline. Thorkel rises to become a great chieftain, and wishes to expand his estate. He and Gudrun have children and Bolli Bollason and Thorleik Bollason grow up to be good and strong men. The next plot event will occur in the following chapters, when Thorleik leaves to see King Olaf in Norway to collect timber for a church he wishes to build. Less deep plot devices are used in these chapters, as they primarily fill out lines of narrative set into motion in previous chapters. By this time, Kjartan, Bolli and Bolli's killer Helgi have all been killed and Gudrun has married her fourth husband. All but Gest's small, minor prophesy have been fulfilled by Chapter 70.



# Chapters 71 - 78

## Chapters 71 - 78 Summary

Chapter 71 ends the family feud. Bolli wishes to kill the Olafsson brothers, but Snorri argues that Helgi's death is sufficient revenge. Snorri goes to see Halldor Olafsson to warn them of vengeance; Halldor is expecting it and agrees with Snorri to pay compensation for Bolli's death. Snorri returns and tells Bolli of the offer; the offer is agreed to and the money is paid. Halldor gives Bolli a sword and Olafsson gives Thorleik a shield. The feud is ended and both sides' reputations are increased. After the feud ends, Thorleik returns to Iceland and Bolli wishes to go with him abroad, but Snorri sees risk. Bolli cannot be dissuaded and leaves with Thorleik for Norway. When the brothers reach Norway, they find that Thorkel has been reprovved by King Olaf for being arrogant. King Olaf prophesies that Thorkel will never be able to use his timber to build the church in Chapter 74. The prediction comes true when Thorkel dies in the Breidafjord (a dangerous fjord, indeed) in Chapter 77, but not before attempting to buy Hjardarholt in Chapter 76 (which fails). When Thorkel dies, Gert's prophecy is completed, with Gudrun having four husbands that all die. Chapter 78 closes the saga with several important events.

The dynasty has suffered great disasters, but those who have survived revive the family's glory. Bolli grows to great stature, is wed to Thordis, and acquires Saelingsdale, the land of his parents. Gudrun and Thorkel's son Gellir becomes a great man as well, but after becoming a pious man dies on a pilgrimage to Rome. Gudrun enters a nunnery. She dies at a very old age, but Bolli Bollason visits her before her death, and asks him which of her four husbands she loved the most. She then lists the things she liked most about each husband. Bolli presses her and she eventually tells him that she was the most terrible to the one she has the strongest love for. Her words are mysterious, but Bolli appears content with it. Gudrun's death ends the saga.

## Chapters 71 - 78 Analysis

Chapters 71 through 78 are the denouement of the saga, containing one final plot event. While 71 ends the feud, setting the stage for a decline in intensity, one more event must occur before Gest's prophecy is fulfilled—Thorkel must die. When he does in Chapter 77, the saga is ready to end. Chapter 78 gives the reader a standard history of the remaining characters' life and times. However, the story does not end until a fateful conversation between Gudrun and Bolli Bollason occurs. Bolli wants to know which man Gudrun loves most. When she tells him that she loved the one most that she treated most horribly, Bolli seems satisfied, but the reader may remain confused. In all likelihood, Gudrun is confessing that she loved none of her husband's most, but instead loved Kjartan most, because she was so terrible to him that she helped to plot and motivate his murder. Thus, the Laxdaela Saga acquires a new vein of tragedy, for Gudrun's jealousy had led to the tragedies in the first place; instead, of working things

out with Kjartan, she fumed with jealousy and hatred which led to a series of brutal deaths and destructive, violent encounters. The Laxdaela Saga was the fruit of twisted, bitter love.



# Characters

## Gudrun Osvifur's-Daughter

Perhaps the main character of the Laxdaela Saga, Gudrun Osvifur's-daughter has the four dreams which are read by Gest Oddleifsson. She is prophesied to marry four times, and in fact she does, divorcing her first husband, losing her next two husbands to being killed, and lives much of her life out with her fourth husband, afterward becoming the first nun in Iceland.

Gudrun meets Kjartan in Saelingsdale and they fall in love. They become devoted to one another, but Kjartan decides to seek his fame and glory at sea, in Norway and elsewhere. When he is captured by the king of Norway and Bolli returns, she believes due to a false rumor that Kjartan will not return. Thus, she marries Bolli, and when Kjartan returns and marries Hrefna, she lets secret jealousy brood inside her until it becomes an all-out rage in later chapters. This rage and jealousy ultimately provokes her to goad Bolli into killing Kjartan, something she regrets at the end of her life and perhaps before. Gudrun is a powerful, domineering character, who loves deeply but hates deeply as well. Her rage and jealousy are the source of almost all the havoc in the second part of the book. When she dies, she admits that she loved Kjartan most of all the men she was with, saying, "I was worst to the one I loved the most."

## Kjartan Olafsson

Kjartan Olafsson is the book's second most important character. He is the illegitimate son of his father Olaf the Peacock and his concubine Melkorka, who later turns out to be the daughter of an Irish king. Kjartan grows up brilliant and strong; everyone sees a bright future for him. He is the apple of his father's eye. He engages in almost superhuman accomplishments and constantly increases in fame, wealth and glory throughout the first half of part two of the saga. Things turn bad when Olaf the Peacock has a dream foretelling that Bolli will kill Kjartan. Kjartan falls in love with Gudrun and wants to marry her, but when he is in Norway he entertains the advances of the Norwegian princess Ingibjorg. When he returns from his three-year journey, he finds that Gudrun has married Bolli. Initially keeping his feelings to himself, he later erupts with anger and resentment towards Bolli and Gudrun, despite his previously famously close relationship with Bolli. A full family feud breaks out when Kjartan publicly humiliates Bolli and Gudrun. This erupts so violently that it ultimately leads Gudrun to goad Bolli into killing him. Kjartan dies a tragic death, fending off Bolli's accomplices, but throwing down his sword in front of Bolli, refusing—nobly—to believe that his own foster-brother and cousin would kill him. Bolli then murders Kjartan in cold blood.



## **Bolli Thorleiksson**

Bolli was Kjartan's foster-brother and cousin, the son of Olaf the Peacock's half-brother. He grows up brilliant and strong like Kjartan, with many great accomplishments. However, he always lives in Kjartan's shadow, which breeds resentment in him. He marries Gudrun and ultimately kills Kjartan in cold blood.

## **Olaf the Peacock**

Olaf the Peacock is the illegitimate son of his father Hoskuld and his mother Melkorka, who later turns out to be the daughter of an Irish King. Olaf, like his sons, grows up possessing great intelligence, strength and charisma, ultimately becoming a chieftain and creating his own estate, Hjarðarholt. He has a dream that foretells Kjartan's death at Bolli's hands.

## **Ketil Flat-Nose**

The founding father of the two familial lines in the saga.

## **Bjorn the Easterner**

The son of Ketil Flat-Nose whose family eventually produces Gudrun.

## **Unn the Deep-Minded**

The daughter of Ketil Flat-Nose, whose family line eventually produces Kjartan and Bolli.

## **Hoskuld Dala-Kollsson**

Hoskuld is the father of Olaf the Peacock with his concubine Melkorka. He makes sure Olaf receives a third of his inheritance after Olaf's noble lineage is revealed.

## **Thorleik Hoskuldsson**

The son of Hoskuld, and half-brother of Olaf. Bolli is his son whom he lets Olaf raise.

## **Osvifur Helgason**

The father of Gudrun.



## **Bolli Bollason**

The son of Gudrun and Bolli who later kills his father's killer, Helgi Hardbeinsson.

## **Thorleik Bollason**

Bolli and Gudrun's other son who helps Bolli Bollason take his revenge.

## **Snorri the Priest**

The mentor of Gudrun, fellow plotter, and the one who ends the family feud, Snorri's daughter marries Gudrun's son.

## **King Harald Gunnhildarson (Harald Grey-Cloak) of Norway**

The King of Norway whose consolidation of Norway leads Ketil Flat-Nose and his family to flee Norway (his children for Iceland).

## **King Olaf Tryggvason**

The King of Norway during Kjartan, Bolli and Gudrun's time. He admires Kjartan, but holds him hostage in an attempt to manipulate Iceland into converting to Christianity.

## **Melkorka**

The mother of Olaf the Peacock and a slave-girl concubine sold to Hoskuld, Olaf's father. It later turns out that she is the daughter of an Irish king.

## **Thorgerd Egil's-daughter**

Olaf the Peacock's wife, and Kjartan's mother.

## **Helgi Hardbeinsson**

Bolli's killer, whom Bolli's son eventually kills.



## Gest Oddleifsson

A chieftain who interprets Gudrun's four dreams and prophesies the deaths of Kjartan and Bolli.



# Objects/Places

## Iceland

The island nation where the Laxdaela Saga takes place.

## Norway

The main source of immigrants to Iceland. Iceland was nominally under the authority of the King of Norway during the saga.

## Breidafjord

The eastern fjord where several characters die, and near where many of the main characters live.

## Saelingsdale

The town where Kjartan and Gudrun meet.

## Laxriverdale

The town near where most of the estates relevant to the story are located.

## The Althing

The regular meeting of the Icelandic chieftains.

## Outlaw

What a man becomes when he breaks Icelandic law. He could be killed with impunity. Several outlaws play brief roles in the saga.

## Leg-Biter

Geirmund's sword that he curses when Thurid, his soon to be ex-wife, steals it from him. The Leg-Biter is the sword Bolli uses to kill Kjartan and the sword Bolli Bollason uses to kill Helgi.





## **Kjartan's Sword**

A sword given to Kjartan by his father, Olaf the Peacock. It will protect him from injury while he is equipped with it, but it is later stolen from him by a member of Bolli's family. The loss of the sword allows him to be killed.

## **Hjardarholt**

The estate of Olaf the Peacock, where many of the main events occur.

## **Gest's Prophecy**

Gest, a chieftain, interprets Gudrun's four dreams, predicting not only that Gudrun will have four husbands but that both Kjartan and Bolli will meet their doom and that he will one day lie in a grave near Osvifur.

## **Olaf's Dream**

Olaf the Peacock has a dream where he foresees that Bolli will kill Kjartan.

## **Princess Ingibjorg's gold-woven head-dress**

A gift given to Kjartan by the princess of Norway, Kjartan initially is supposed to give it to Gudrun as a wedding present, but he gives it to his wife Hrefna instead.

# Themes

## Romantic Love, Jealousy and Hatred

To the reader, the main plot line may seem a bit worn and old. In some ways, the Laxdaela Saga has a story line a bit like a soap opera, a *Days of Our Lives*. Two cousins, best of friends, feud because of the subtle jealousy of a woman who pits them against one another. This results in the men's deaths and an extended and destructive family feud. However, the reader should recall when the Laxdaela Saga was written, somewhere around the year 1245. Romantic tales, romantic in the ordinary sense of the term, were not common and almost nonexistent until the 13th century. One of the first romantic works in history was *Tristram and Yseult* (the archetype document for all the *Tristan and Isolde* stories throughout history, including the 2006 and the Wagner Opera), which was written around 1150. The 12th century saw the origins of the concept of "heroic" love, which could lead to greatness of tragedy. Thus, the classic tale of romantic love, jealousy, and the associated hatred and feud, extremely familiar to any Western reader, is not well-worn in the Laxdaela Saga, but instead is one of the first works of literature that includes heroic and romantic love. Gudrun is in some ways the main character of the story, a woman whose romantic attachment to Kjartan, her tragic marriage to Bolli (based on a false rumor), and her causing Kjartan's death to cause great suffering to Kjartan's wife are the actions of a woman mad with jealousy. Her early romance with Kjartan is something of a classic. The familiar theme of romantic love and hatred and jealousy associated with the romantic genre, while familiar, is contained for one of the first times in the Laxdaela Saga.

## Prophecy and Fate

Icelandic Sagas generally include supernatural happenings. However, typically these supernatural events are not widespread or of supernatural power or great intensity, such as in a modern "high-magic" fantasy novel. The Laxdaela Saga is no exception. While containing the ghost of Killer-Hrapp, the curse of the Leg-Biter, among other things, the Laxdaela Saga is not a work of pure fantasy. In fact, it purports to be historically accurate (although the historical accuracy has been challenged, many of the figures and events described are thought by historians to have occurred). Yet, the book is partly based around several tragic prophecies. The entire plot can be understood as structured by Gest's prophecies that Gudrun will have four husbands, and Olaf the Peacock's dream that Bolli stand over Kjartan's body, covered in blood. The reader knows one-third of the way through the book what its outcome will be (at least in broad outlines). In some ways, the reader can understand the theme of prophecy as indicated a strong sense of fate in the Laxdaela Saga. This fate has some supernatural aspects, but mostly proceeds through inexorable, but natural processes. Prophecy and fate are thus core themes of the novel; once tragedy has been prophesied, the fate of Gudrun, Bolli and Kjartan is sealed. There is no escape from these dark omens; all that is left are the working out of the details of Kjartan and Bolli's deaths and Gudrun's marriages.



## Land and Lineage

Icelandic culture in its pagan and early Christian periods (during which the saga takes place) was tied deeply to civil institutions like the family and the institution of private property. One reason for this is that the Icelandic people had no state to speak of at this time. They had a loose government of chieftains who would periodically meet at the Althing assembly, but they did not wield the formal legal power of modern, much less medieval rulers. In court, once a verdict was rendered, if the defendant would not comply with the ruling, the protagonist was forced to exact his reward or impose the appropriate punishment. The common punishment for breaking Icelandic law was to become an "outlaw" or someone outside of the law that could be killed with impunity. Exile was also common. Thus, the major ties holding Icelandic society together were not national, and due to its distance from Rome, not religious. Property and family were the ties that bound in medieval Iceland.

The Laxdaela Saga reflects these themes in their fullness. The saga itself covers two familiar lines deriving from a common ancestor over a two-hundred year period. Family lineages are connected and children are even named for their relationship to their parents. (Kjartan Olafsson is the son of Olaf the Peacock, and Gudrun Osvifur's-daughter is the daughter of Osvifur Helgason.) The reader will get the sense that the story of Kjartan, Bolli and Gudrun is not merely the story of three distinct characters, but the story of a family extended over two centuries' time. Estates are also a major focus of the book. Unn the Deep-Minded apportioned her estate partly according to merit when she neared death. The possession of an estate immediately elevated one into aristocratic elite. Estates were closely tied to familial character and familial life. In fact, the central location of the book's major events is at Hjardarholt. Land is passed down from generation to generation, as are names, and families are associated with estates for entire generations.



# Style

## Point of View

The author of the Laxdaela Saga is unknown. However, his major influences are clearly those of the culture of Chivalry on the European continent. This is a time of romance, of knights defending maidens and fighting the infidel on behalf of the church. In every way the Laxdaela Saga is a work of romance. The Saga looks wistfully upon the glory days of the Icelandic Settlement, seeing its founders as great heroes. Interestingly, the conversion of Iceland to Christianity in the saga is a mere blip and largely functions as part of a plot device. The author seems wholly uninterested in the great religious change in Icelandic life, even characterizing it as changing little. He looks upon pagan and Christian Icelanders of that period with the same sense of admiration. The author also takes a grand perspective on family histories, focusing on broad family lines. For instance, the Gudrun tragedy only arises in the middle of the book; the entire first third of the saga sets-up and deepens the intricacies and subtle ties of the rest of the book. He apparently sees the importance in the role of family structure over time and the ties that bind generations. The author of the saga also appears influenced by widespread belief in mystical practices, such as curses and prophecies.

The point of view of the saga is third-person. In some ways, the prose is ordinary, describing grand events, but not in a grand style. The reader never sees internal dialogue; instead, the entire story is told from the "outside." Further, the saga, and this is very notable, has no villain, save symbolic ones like Killer-Hrapp that play only a minor role in the story. While many of the characters are heroic, they are never morally perfect. Instead, the author seems to understand goodness and badness in terms of actions and not persons, all of whom he sees as flawed.

## Setting

The setting of the Laxdaela Saga is in Medieval Iceland, from the time of its first settlement in 870 A.D., through Iceland's christianization in the year 1000, all the way to 1073 A.D. The Icelandic population originates from several lands, including Scotland, Ireland, Norway, and Sweden, but mostly from Norway. During this time, Iceland is nominally under the authority of the King of Norway. Thus, while Iceland is the major country of the saga, many important events occur in Norway, as Icelanders travel to Norway to collect resources and seek glory and wealth. The story's setting does not extend across Iceland, however. It is confined largely to Iceland's northeastern corner, in several towns and estates near the Breidafjord, the gateway to the Atlantic Ocean to Iceland's east. The early part of the story begins with the emigration from Norway by Ketil Flat-Nose and his children. While Ketil Flat-Nose settles in Scotland, his daughter, Unn the Deep-Minded and son Bjorn the Easterner settle in Iceland. When Unn reaches Iceland, she claims a vast estate for herself, building her home at Hvamm, which became the name of her estate. She made land grants to her children, who then



created their own estates. Some events of the story occur in Laxriverdale; in fact the saga is called the Laxdaela saga because it occurred amongst the Laxdalers, those who lived around this area. Hoskuld, the father of Olaf the Peacock, calls his territory Hoskuldstead, which is adjacent to Hrappstead, where Kjartan is killed. The major setting of the book is at or near Olaf the Peacock's estate, Hjarðarholt, where Bolli and Kjartan are raised. Kjartan meets Gudrun in a town called Saelingsdale. Thus, the book has many settings, but most of the settings are on estates nearly Iceland's northeastern coast.

## Language and Meaning

The language and meaning of the text will initially appear straightforward and dry. The book contains seventy-eight chapters over a not particularly large number of pages, and many chapters seem to be merely mundane descriptions of lineages and events. The author writes wholly from the third-person point of view and never describes the inner thought lives of his characters. Thus, all the language seeks to impartially present events. One reason for this may be to focus the reader not on the immediate moment but on the vast tapestry of familial relations that stretch throughout the entire saga. The saga extends over two hundred years and is, in many ways, the tragedy of a single family line diverging from Ketil Flat-Nose, the saga's first character. The Laxdaela Saga is a tale that covers a vast stretch of time and includes over one-hundred characters, most of whom are minor. This is further illustrated by the mechanical introduction of characters, wholly without fanfare. The names of characters, such as Unn the Deep-Minded, usually tell all there is to tell about a character's personality. Their actions flow straightforwardly from their linguistic description. Even when tying the later events of the saga back to prophesy, the author does so without fanfare, using simple phrases like "as before." One should understand the author's language and meaning as seeking to minimize drama in order to focus on the saga as a whole. The point of the saga is to paint an enormous picture containing many human parts; thus, the descriptions of these minor parts takes on less significance, and this is reflected clearly in the text.

## Structure

The structure of the Laxdaela Saga is organized around gradual build-up, prediction, preparation and then the completion of the destiny alluded to earlier. Preludes are full of familial plots, lines, intermarriages, and so on. So the structure constantly points forward towards increasingly entwined character tapestries. The Laxdaela Saga's general structure can be seen as slowly building, gaining steam and building pressure until it forcefully comes to a head and then gradually resolves. Afterwards, the river dissipates peacefully into a wide ocean (the end of the feud and the lives of the main characters' descendants). These events can be traced to the building of the lineages throughout the first third of the book, the powerful recombination of the familial lines of Unn the Deep-Minded and Bjorn the Easterner in the tragedy of Gudrun (descended from Bjorn) and Kjartan and Bolli (both descended from Unn). The dissipation comes with the end of the feud and the move forward into the lives of the next generation.



The Laxdaela Saga contains seventy-eight chapters, most of which are a page or two pages in length. Thus, the story is told in a small number of briefly described events, each slowly building on the other. Sometimes the author takes detours to explain other family lines, or to tell sub-narratives whose significance will only be revealed later. The saga may usefully be divided into three parts. The first part, Chapters 1-31, is the preparation for the saga's main events. The second part, Chapters 32-56, which tells of the rise and fall of Kjartan and Bolli, and the third part, Chapters 57-78, winds the story down and resolves its main plot lines. Many narrative structures contain long preparation for the climax of the book, but they often quickly taper to a denouement. The Laxdaela Saga reads more like an even hill, with a slow rise and slow decline, despite the intense events of the top.



## Quotes

"There was a man called Ketil Flat-Nose, who was the son of Bjorn Buna. Ketil was a powerful and well-born lord in Norway." (37)

"I have reliable reports of King Harald's hostility towards us, and I am sure we need look for no mercy from that quarter. It seems to me that there are only two courses open to us: either to flee the country, or else be killed off each in his own place." (38)

"I call upon you, my brothers Bjorn and Helgi and all my other kinsmen and friends, to witness—that this house, and everything in sight that goes with it, I am now giving to my grandson Olaf Feilan to own and to administer." (45)

"Olaf was a peerless child, and Hoskuld loved him dearly." (57)

"My father is called Myrkjartan, and he is a king in Ireland." (57)

"As Olaf grew up it was quickly apparent that he would be a paragon of good looks and courtesy." (58)

"Their daughter was called Gudrun, and she was the loveliest woman in Iceland at that time, and also the most intelligent." (107)

"'Tell me your dreams,' said Gest. 'It may be that I can make something of them.'" (109)

"They have been allotted a dire destiny, Kjartan and his kind, and there is no altering their fate." (147)

"My cousin Bolli will never be a party to a plot against my life." (163)

"It is an ignoble deed, kinsman, that you are about to do; but I would much rather accept death at your hands, cousin, than give you death at mine." (166)

"Bolli made no reply to Kjartan's words, but dealt him his death-blow all the same. Then Bolli caught him as he fell, and Kjartan died in Bolli's lap. At once Bolli repented bitterly of what he had done." (166)

"Hrefna took no other husband after Kjartan. She lived only a short time after her return to the north, and it is said that she died of a broken heart." (170)

"Bolli was still standing up against the wall of the shieling, clutching his tunic tightly to stop his entrails falling out. Steinthor Olafsson now sprang at him and swung a great axe at his neck just above the shoulders, and the head flew off at once." (178)

"'For I have the feeling,' he said, 'that under this very sash lies the one who will take my life.'" (179)



"When Bolli saw this he rushed at Helgi with "Leg-Biter" in his hand and ran him through with it; and that was Helgi's death-wound." (200)

"You often show, Gudrun,' said Snorri, 'what an exceptional woman you are!'" (207)

"I was worst to the one I loved the most." (231)

"I think,' said Bolli, 'that the truth has now been told.' And he said she had done right to tell him what he had been so curious to know." (231)

"Gudrun grew to be very old, and people say she became blind. She died at Helgafell, and lies buried there." (231)

"And there this saga ends." (232)





## Topics for Discussion

What were Gest's three prophecies? How did they all come true?

Explain Gudrun's words, "I was worst to the one I loved the most."

What do you think led Gudrun to push Bolli to kill Kjartan?

What started the Olafsson-Thorleiksson blood feud?

Discuss three types of foreshadowing used in the Laxdaela Saga.

What is the significance of land in the Laxdaela Saga?

In what way does knowing the lineages of Kjartan, Bolli and Gudrun deepen the story line?