The Legend of the Christmas Rose Study Guide

The Legend of the Christmas Rose by Selma Lagerlöf

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

"The Legend of the Christmas Rose," by Selma Lagerlöf, was first published in 1908 in Swedish in a collection of stories, *En saga om en saga och andra sagor,* which was published in English as *The Girl from the Marsh Croft* (1910). The story is representative of most of Lagerlöf's tales, since it combines real-life details with legends and folklore. The story draws on the legend of the Christmas Rose, an actual flower—*Helleborus niger*—that blooms in winter conditions. The dominant legend of this flower's origin concerns the birth of Christ. However, as she does in other stories, Lagerlöf incorporates parts of this legend, but changes it to fit her own purpose and setting. Most of Lagerlöf's stories concerned Swedish legends and folklore. Because of this, "The Legend of the Christmas Rose" is unique. It takes place in Skåne, a modern-day Swedish province that was actually Danish during the twelfth century when the story takes place. The presence of Archbishop Absalon—the actual Catholic archbishop of Lund from 1177 to 1201—helps to pinpoint the story's time period. Through the seemingly simple tale of a miracle that is revealed every Christmas Eve to outlaws who live in exile in the forest, Lagerlöf explores some of the basic tenets of Christianity—including not judging people, the belief that anybody can be redeemed, and the rejection of materialism. More importantly, the story shows that any human, even a high-ranking member of the church, is susceptible to breaking these tenets. A current copy of the story can be found in *Girl from the Marsh Croft,* which was published in 1996 by Penfield Press.

Author Biography

Lagerlöf was born on November 20, 1858, on her family's farm estate, Mårbacka, in the province of Värmland, Sweden. She was tutored at home, where she also heard many legends and folk tales from her family—most notably her paternal grandmother. An avid reader, Lagerlöf also composed her own poetry, which she read at community events. At a wedding in 1881, Eva Fryxell, a well-known feminist, heard one of Lagerlöf's verses and encouraged the young writer to dedicate her talent to women's causes. As a result, Lagerlöf attended the Royal Women's Superior Training College in Stockholm, Sweden, where she studied teaching. In 1885, her father died, leaving many debts, so Lagerlöf's beloved Mårbacka was sold. The same year, she began teaching secondary school for girls, devoting her free time to many social causes, while writing at night.

In 1891, Lagerlöf published her first novel, *Gösta Berlings Saga*. The book did not receive much attention until it was translated into Danish the following year, at which point an influential Danish critic helped to make it both a critical and popular success. To this day, it remains one of her most acclaimed works. In 1894, she published her first collection of short stories, *Osynliga Länkar*—translated into English as *Invisible Links* (1899). She received writing grants from both the Swedish royal family and the Swedish Academy and left teaching to become a full-time writer. During the next decade, Lagerlöf wrote several novels, childrens' books, and collections of short stories. The latter included *En saga om en saga och andra sagor* (1908), which was published in English as *The Girl from the Marsh Croft* (1910). This collection included the story, "The Legend of the Christmas Rose."

Sweden, and the world, recognized Lagerlöf's unique writing style, which was heavily influenced by the legends and folk tales she had heard as a child. Her imaginative, romantic tales directly contradicted the gritty realism that was in vogue at the turn of the century. In 1904, Lagerlöf was awarded a Gold Medal by the Swedish Academy. In 1907, her successful book sales gave her the money to buy back Mårbacka's house and garden. In 1909, Lagerlöf became the first woman, and the first Swede, to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. In 1910, with the money from her Nobel Prize, Lagerlöf was able to buy back the rest of the Mårbacka estate. In 1914, she received her country's highest honor when she became the first woman elected to the Swedish Academy.

During World War I and World War II, Lagerlöf contributed much of her time to helping others. During World War II, she participated in the Resistance movement against the Nazis and helped a number of German artists and intellectuals escape from Nazi Germany. She also donated her gold Nobel Prize medal to help Finland finance its fight against the Soviet Union. On March 16, 1940, Lagerlöf died of a stroke at Mårbacka.

Plot Summary

"The Legend of the Christmas Rose" begins with a description of the Robber family, outlaws who live in exile in a forest cave, stealing from travelers to survive. In hard times, Robber Mother and her five children beg in the villages. On one trip, Robber Mother notices Abbot Hans's herb garden and is impressed, at first. She is interrupted by a lay brother, who orders her to leave the monastery. She ignores him, and the lay brother goes for reinforcements, but she and her children overpower them. Abbot Hans comes out and sees that Robber Mother is viewing his beloved garden. She says that it is a pretty garden, but it does not compare to the holy garden that blooms in the forest every Christmas Eve. The abbot has heard about this garden before but has never seen it. Robber Mother reluctantly agrees to take him to see it the next Christmas Eve.

The abbot tells the archbishop about the holy garden and asks the archbishop to pardon Robber Father's crimes. The archbishop does not believe in the legend, but nevertheless says that he will authorize the pardon if the abbot brings him a holy flower from the garden. On Christmas Eve, Abbot Hans and the lay brother go to the Robber family cave in the forest. While the abbot is excited, the lay brother is suspicious. They reach the bare cave, where Abbot Hans says that he is working on getting a pardon for Robber Father, but the Robber family does not believe it.

The appointed hour comes, and the forest goes through a rapid transformation from winter to spring. As each wave of heavenly light floods through the forest, trees bloom, forest animals appear, fruit begins to grow, and flowers appear. The abbot hears and sees the heavenly forms of angels, which come closer. However, the lay brother believes it is witchcraft and scares the miracle away with his violent reaction. The forest transforms back to its winter state, and Abbot Hans frantically searches through the reappearing snow for a flower to bring to Archbishop Absalon. In the process, the abbot, distraught over the angels' disappearance, has a fatal heart attack.

Abbot Hans's body is carried back to the cloister, where the monks pry a pair of root bulbs out of his tight grip. The lay brother plants the bulbs in the abbot's garden, where they lie dormant throughout spring, summer, and fall. The next Christmas Eve, the bulbs bloom into a large plant with beautiful flowers. The lay brother realizes that the miracle was real and takes flowers to Archbishop Absalon, who keeps his word and pardons Robber Father. The Robber family leaves the forest for good to live in the community once again, while the lay brother moves into their cave and lives alone, praying to be redeemed for his hard-heartedness. The forest never blooms again, but the single plant in the cloister does, as an annual reminder of the holy Christmas garden.

Summary

"The Legend of the Christmas Rose" is Selma Lagerlof's short story about Christian beliefs, and the positive possibilities or unfortunate outcomes when those beliefs are followed loyally or disregarded.

At the beginning of the story, a woman named Robber Mother and her five children who live in Robbers' Cave in Goinge Forest, have come into the local village to beg for food and clothing. Robber Mother's husband, Robber Father does not accompany them. He was labeled an outlaw for stealing a cow a few years ago and was banished from the town. The villagers would occasionally leave parcels outside their doorsteps for Robber Mother and the children, but would never come out of their houses to speak to the woman.

On this day, one of Robber Mother's children enters an open garden gate at the Ovid Cloister, where the monks live. Robber Mother follows the child into the lovely garden and is approached by a lay brother, chastising the intruders and imploring them to leave immediately. Robber Mother refuses to leave, until she has seen the entire garden. The lay brother is increasingly agitated and seeks the help of two monks, who are also unsuccessful in removing Robber Mother and her children from the garden.

Finally, the abbot of the monastery comes out to speak to Robber Mother. She tells the elderly gentleman that, although the garden is lovely, it is not as beautiful as another one she knows about. The abbot is skeptical, because his plants have come from all over the world. The garden is tended lovingly, year round.

Robber Mother is incredulous that the holy man does not know about the beautiful garden that springs up in the Goinge Forest every Christmas Eve. The abbot, anxious to see this miraculous garden, asks Robber Mother to send one of her children to him on Christmas Eve to guide him to the exact spot where the garden grows.

Robber Mother hesitates at first, for fear that her family's hiding place will be betrayed. Ultimately, she concedes. As a gesture of good faith, the abbot promises to ask the bishop for a pardon for Robber Father in exchange for the abbot's Christmas Eve visit to the garden in the forest.

The abbot shares the story of the Christmas Eve garden with the bishop and asks the bishop to pardon Robber Father should the story prove to be true. The bishop is skeptical but agrees to the pardon, if the abbot can provide a flower from the Christmas Eve garden on the next Christmas Day.

At last, Christmas Eve arrives and Robber Mother's oldest son meets the abbot and the lay brother at the edge of the forest to lead them to where the garden will bloom. The abbot is very happy about the excursion, but the lay brother feels the trip is an exercise in futility and has joined the expedition only out of love and respect for the elderly abbot.

The boy leads the two men along the perilous trip to the cave home of the Robber family, where a watery pot of gruel serves as the family's holiday meal. Robber Mother encourages the abbot to sleep after his trip, promising to wake him when it is time to view the garden. The lay brother tries to stay awake to guard the abbot from this family, but ultimately succumbs to sleep himself.

When the lay brothers wakes, he sees the abbot and Robber Mother in discussion about the holiday preparations in the village, a conversation which frightens Robber Father into thinking that the abbot is trying to take his family away from him. The abbot tries to calm Robber Father by telling him about the bishop's agreement to a pardon.

Soon, church bells from the village announce the arrival of Christmas Day. The abbot and the lay brother are led into the forest, where they watch in awe as a spectacular springtime floral display appears, complete with singing birds and newborn animals. The abbot can even hear the voices of angels singing.

The abbot considers the garden to be a miracle. However, the lay brother thinks that the garden cannot be a miracle, because it was revealed to a thief and his family. The lay brother thinks that the garden is the work of the devil, as a form of delusion. Suddenly, birds begin to circle the abbot and light on his arms and shoulders. All but one bird are too wary of the lay brother to perch on his arm.

One tiny dove flies toward the lay brother to rest her cheek against the man's face. The lay brother, thinking the dove to be a bird sent from the devil, swats the dove away and demands that it return to hell. At this edict from the lay brother, the angels cease their singing. The earth is covered in darkness, and the flowers and trees in the Christmas garden shrivel up and die.

The abrupt turn in the weather forces the Robber family and the lay brother back to the Robbers' cave for shelter, but the abbot is frozen in his place at the sudden loss of the beautiful garden. The abbot succumbs to the cold and falls forward, managing to grasp a handful of earth.

The lay brother returns to the site of the former garden. He retrieves the abbot's dead body and returns to the village. At the cloister, the monks take two root bulbs from the abbot's hand and give them to the lay brother, who plants them in the abbot's beloved garden.

The bulbs do not sprout until the next Christmas Eve, when the lay brother walks in the dead abbot's garden and sees a cluster of white flowers growing in the spot where the bulbs had been planted. The only other time the lay brother had seen this particular flower had been in the Goinge Forest.

The lay brother takes some of the white flowers to the bishop, who realizes that the abbot's dream had been a reality. The bishop extends a pardon to Robber Father. The lay brother visits the Robber family to deliver the good news, and the family returns to the village to live among their old friends again.

The lay brother remains in the Robbers' cave as a form of self-punishment for his lack of charity and faith. The Christmas Eve garden never blooms again, but the little flower in the abbot's garden blooms each year on Christmas in honor of the birth of the Christ Child.

Analysis

The story is told from the third person omniscient perspective, which means that the narrator can relay not only the actions of the plot line, but also the thoughts and feelings of the characters involved. This helps the reader to understand the motivations of each character, as the plot line unfolds.

The setting for the story is twelfth century Sweden, a time period referred to as the Middle Ages in Europe, known for its severe religious and legal practices. Sometimes barbaric, the people of the time period lived in fear of punishment from local authorities, who were also sometimes leaders of the Catholic Church. The expulsion of the Robber family is one such incident, where the entire family is banished from the town due to the act of the father. The adoption of the word, "Robber," in front of their names was another form of punishment from which they could not escape.

The author uses the literary technique of irony several times in the story to make critical points in this folk tale. For example, the magical Christmas Eve garden appears to the exiled Robber family that is considered to be unworthy of basic survival necessities, let alone any miraculous occurrences. In another ironic twist, it is the Robber family that achieves freedom at the end of the story, while the lay brother is self-imprisoned as punishment for his uncharitable behavior.

The author also uses symbols as literary techniques to help convey important messages. When the lay brother and the abbot visit the Christmas Eve garden, "a little forest dove plucked up courage, flew down to the lay brother's shoulder, and laid her head against her cheek." The dove is a universal symbol of peace, and the small bird signifies and extension of God's peace to the lay brother, who ultimately rejects the celestial offer and ruins the garden.

The forest and the garden are also universal symbols in literature. Forests are usually dark, frightening places through which characters must pass through, symbolizing some emotional or physical transformation. Gardens, of course, are sources of new life, vitality, and the promise of hope. Both the abbot and the lay brother crossed through the literal and symbolic forest to reach the garden, each with a different perspective, lesson, and ultimate outcome.

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Characters

Archibishop Absalon

Archbishop Absalon does not believe in the holy garden of Göinge at first but agrees to pardon Robber Father when the lay brother brings the archbishop some flowers as proof. Archbishop Absalon was an actual archbishop in the late twelfth century.

Abbot Hans

Abbot Hans feels blessed when he witnesses the blooming of the garden in the Göinge forest, but he has a fatal heart attack when the lay brother scares the miracle away. Abbot Hans is a peaceful man and does not judge others as quickly as the lay brother does. He loves his garden, which he has filled with many rare species of flowers. He is excited when Robber Mother tells him about the holy garden that blooms in the forest each Christmas Eve. Because he believes that God would not reveal such a miracle to evil people, he asks Archbishop Absalon to pardon Robber Father for his past crimes. The archbishop does not believe in the garden but does promise that if Abbot Hans can bring him a flower as proof, he will pardon Robber Father. Abbot Hans takes the lay brother with him to see the holy garden, and it is better than he expected. The forest is transformed from dark winter to a blooming spring of celestial light, from which angels steadily approach. The lay brother scares all of this away, and the abbot dies, heartbroken, but not before he is able to grab one of the roots from the holy garden. Back at the cloister, the monks find these roots in the abbot's hand, and the lay brother plants them. The resulting plant blooms every Christmas Eve in Abbot Hans's garden, although the holy garden in the Göinge forest never blooms again.

Lay Brother

The suspicious lay brother scares away the holy garden in the Göinge forest with his terrible outburst. The lay brother believes that Robber Mother and her family are evil. He tries in vain to kick her out of the garden, and is offended when she tells Abbot Hans that she knows of a garden better than his. The lay brother accompanies the abbot to the forest on Christmas Eve, where he expects that they will be ambushed. When the holy garden blooms, the lay brother mistakes the divine transformation for witchcraft. This delusion persists, even when he sees angels approaching. A small bird lands on his shoulder, and he thinks that it is an agent of the devil. He hits it, telling it to go back to hell. His outburst frightens the miracle away, and Abbot Hans dies, heartbroken at the loss of the miracle. The lay brother plants a pair of root bulbs that the abbot took from the holy forest, and when they bloom the following Christmas Eve, he takes some of the flowers to Archbishop Absalon, who gives the lay brother a letter of pardon for Robber Father. The lay brother delivers the letter to the Robber family, and when they move

back into the community, he takes their place in their cave, living alone and praying for redemption for his hard-heartedness.

Robber Father

Robber Father is an outlaw who lives in a cave in the Göinge forest with Robber Mother and their five children. The "Robber" part of the family's name is a label that indicates the father is a thief. Robber Father survives mainly by stealing from travelers who pass through the forest. When Abbot Hans comes to see the holy garden, Robber Father is worried that the abbot is trying to get his wife and children to leave him and move back to the village. However, Abbot Hans says that he is trying to get a pardon for Robber Father, who says that, if this should happen, he will never steal again. When the forest fails to bloom the year following the lay brother's outburst, Robber Father is angry, but soon calms down when the lay brother brings a letter of pardon from the archbishop.

Robber Mother

Robber Mother is married to Robber Father, and begs in the villages when there are no travelers for her husband to rob. When she goes on such trips, she always gets what she wants, because the villagers are afraid to refuse her. When Robber Mother walks into the monks' cloister, she assumes she will be left alone to view the garden in peace, but the lay brother tries to force her out. Robber Mother and her children overpower him and two monks, but Abbot Hans welcomes her and asks her what she thinks of his garden. She tells him that she has seen better in the holy garden that blooms in Göinge forest every Christmas Eve. At first she refuses to take the abbot to see it, because she is afraid for her outlaw husband's safety. However, she wants to prove to the abbot that the holy garden is better, and agrees to take him and one of his followers.

The next Christmas Eve, Robber Mother sends one of her children to lead the abbot and the lay brother to her family's cave. The Robber family lives in absolute poverty, and their cave offers little comfort. Still, Robber Mother is a very strong woman, and bosses the abbot and the lay brother around as any comfortable peasant woman would. Abbot Hans tells Robber Mother that she may not have to live in such poverty, and describes the festivities that are going on in the village. Robber Mother is interested, but when the abbot tells her he is working on getting Robber Father a pardon, she does not believe it. However, when the lay brother brings the letter of pardon, Robber Mother says that her husband will never steal again, and the Robber family moves out of the forest and back into the community.

Themes

Judgment

Although Jesus Christ is never mentioned directly in the story, Lagerlöf's story embodies many of the beliefs of the Christian religion. These elements include the belief that one should not judge people by their outside appearances. In the story, the lay brother does this repeatedly. Even after Robber Mother has gained the approval of Abbot Hans to stay and view the monk's garden, the lay brother antagonizes her, because he does not think that she—or anything associated with her—can be good. For example, after Robber Mother tells him about a garden that rivals Abbot Hans's garden, the lay brother is sarcastic to her. Says the lay brother: "It must be a pretty garden that you have made for yourself amongst the pines in Göinge forest!" Because of his inability to believe that the Robber family is anything but evil, he perceives the miracles in the forest as witchcraft. The lay brother thinks: "This cannot be a true miracle . . . since it is revealed to malefactors." This inability to look past his assumptions results in the lay brother's outburst, which scares the holy phenomenon away forever.

On the other hand, Abbot Hans does not judge people by their appearances and gives them the benefit of the doubt. When he first comes across Robber Mother in his garden, he is able to look past her reputation and the fact that she has just fought with some of his monks. "Wild and terrible as the old woman looked, he couldn't help liking that she had fought with three monks for the privilege of viewing the garden in peace." The abbot is also the only one who believes Robber Mother's story about the holy garden. In fact, the abbot uses this legend to lobby for the pardon of Robber Father. He tells Archbishop Absalon: "If these bandits are not so bad but that God's glories can be made manifest to them, surely we cannot be too wicked to experience the same blessing." Robber Mother also proves to be nonjudgmental. When she tells the abbot and the lay brother about a garden that rivals Abbot Hans's garden, she explains to the lay brother that she is being truthful, and that she does not "wish to make myself the judge of either him or you."

Redemption

The Christian idea of redemption is also expressed in the story. Abbot Hans believes that Robber Father can be redeemed. He speaks with Archbishop Absalon, "asking him for a letter of ransom for the man, that he might lead an honest life among respectable folk." However, the archbishop is not as forgiving and does not believe that the man can be redeemed. He tells Abbot Hans that he does not want "to let the robber loose among honest folk in the villages. It would be best for all that he remain in the forest." Nevertheless, the archbishop does tell Abbot Hans that he will pardon Robber Father if the abbot brings him a flower from the holy garden. The abbot is overjoyed that the archbishop is giving him a chance to help Robber Father and thinks that his superior is being sincere. However, the archbishop is only making to the promise so that he can satisfy Abbot Hans. The lay brother witnesses the conversation and realizes "that

Bishop Absalon believed as little in this story of Robber Mother's as he himself." In the end, Robber Father is redeemed when Archbishop Absalon keeps his promise and writes the letter of pardon. The lay brother, on the other hand, trades places with Robber Father. He moves into the former outlaw's cave, where he spends his time "in constant meditation and prayer that his hard-heartedness might be forgiven him."

Materialism

Christians believe that too much attachment to material possessions or ideas separates one from the divine, whereas the poor are closer to God. This story offers a literal depiction of that idea. The outlaws in the forest, who live inside "a poor mountain grotto with bare stone walls," are the ones to whom the divine miracle is first revealed. On the other hand, the people in the villages, who are attached to their material existence, do not see the miracle. They make extensive preparations for their Christmas celebrations, which are all based on material items, such as "hunks of meat and bread." This image contrasts sharply with the "wretchedness and poverty" of the outlaws' cave, where "nothing was being done to celebrate Christmas." The lay brother is also materialistic and would rather stay at home and join in the village celebration than go to see a miracle in which he does not believe. On the trip through the villages, "the lay brother whined and fretted when he saw how they were preparing to celebrate Christmas in every humble cottage." The lay brother is also suspicious that the Robber family is going to trap them. This attachment to earthly attitudes affects the lay brother in the forest, where he is unable to let go of his materialism and see the truth of the heavenly miracle.

Abbot Hans, on the other hand, is one of few people outside the forest who is not ruled by an attraction to material possessions or attitudes. When the abbot passes through the villages, he notices the extensive Christmas preparations, but he is not impressed: "He was thinking of the festivities that awaited him, which were greater than any the others would be privileged to enjoy." Even the abbot's beloved garden does not compare to his divine beliefs. "Abbot Hans loved his herb garden as much as it was possible for him to love anything earthly and perishable." As a result, when the miracle is revealed to the abbot, he is gracious and humble, realizing that he is seeing something that far outweighs anything on Earth. "He felt that earth could bring no greater happiness than that which welled up about him."

Style

Setting

The story's medieval setting is very important. During the Middle Ages, the Christian faith was extremely strong, and many believed in the possibility of miracles. When Robber Mother tells the abbot and the lay brother about the annual miracle in Göinge forest, the abbot believes her: "ever since his childhood, Abbot Hans had heard it said that on every Christmas Eve the forest was dressed in holiday glory." However, people in this time period also had particularly strong beliefs in evils like Satan. When the lay brother sees the miracle, he is blinded by his suspicion, and his mind makes him see witchcraft, which he thinks is sent by Satan. When a forest dove lands on his shoulder, "it appeared to him as if sorcery were come right upon him to tempt and corrupt him." The fact that the story takes place several hundred years before Lagerlöf wrote it also helps to give the story a mythical feel. Lagerlöf draws attention to the legendary quality of the story by referring to the fact that the story takes place far in the past. For example, at the end of the story, the narrator says that "Göinge forest never again celebrated the hour of our Saviour's birth." Finally, the remote location of Robbers' cave is also important. It is far enough away from the villages for the Robber family to live safely without fear of persecution. The cave's distance from civilization also helps to separate the divine miracle in the poor forest from the materialistic villages. When the abbot is traveling through the forest, the narrator notes that he journeys for a long time: "He left the plain behind him and came up into desolate and wild forest regions." In fact, as they ride farther and higher, they reach "snowcovered ground." The snow is important, because when the miracle takes place, those present can mark the beginning of the miracle by the disappearance of the snow.

Symbolism

A symbol is a physical object, action, or gesture that also represents an abstract concept, without losing its original identity. For example, in the story, the miracle takes place in a forest, which is physically just a group of trees. However, forests can also be symbolic, representing places of magical or spiritual occurrences, as the Göinge forest does in this story. Symbols appear in literature in one of two ways. They can be local symbols, meaning they are only relevant within a specific literary work. They can also be universal symbols, in which case their symbolism is based on traditional associations that are widely recognized, regardless of context. The story is saturated with universal symbols, such as the mystical forest. Other symbols include the two gardens, which traditionally represent paradise, as in the Garden of Eden. There are several animals in the story, which also symbolize other ideas. The dove that lands on the lay brother's shoulder is a traditional sign of peace, which the lay brother rejects by hitting it. The bear that comes into the forest is a sign of strength, which has no place in a holy garden. As a result, Robber Father strikes it on the nose and sends it away. Likewise, the owl, a night bird that is often associated with death or ill omens, also flees the holy

miracle. Even the name, the Christmas Rose, is a symbol for something else. Technically, the real Christmas Rose flower, *Helleborus niger,* is an herb of the buttercup family, not a rose. However, out of all flowers, the rose is the most symbolic. Its many associations include purity and perfection, so it is appropriate that a holy flower would bear its name.

Irony

Irony is the unique sense of awareness that is produced when someone says something and means another, or when somebody does something, and the result is opposite of what was expected. In "The Legend of the Christmas Rose," the irony is the latter, situational irony. In the beginning, the abbot is the only one who believes that the Robber family can be redeemed. He believes it so strongly that he asks his archbishop to pardon Robber Father. However, the archbishop—and the lay brother—are unable to see the potential good in the Robber family. Since an abbot is far below an archbishop in the church hierarchy, the archbishop is depicted as the more believable character. This becomes especially clear when the narrator shows how the archbishop agrees to Abbot Hans's pardon request merely to appease the abbot, not because he believes in the miracle. In fact, even the narration is biased. The narrator says that "Robber Mother and her brood were worse than a pack of wolves, and many a man felt like running a spear through them." As a result, readers are led to believe that Robber Mother and her family are bad people and are encouraged to side with the archbishop and the lay brother.

However, in the story's ironic ending, the actual outcome contradicts these expectations. The abbot is proved right, but he dies in the process. Throughout the story, the lay brother was concerned that the Robber family would try to capture Abbot Hans and perhaps harm him. Yet, in the end, it is the lay brother's rash actions that "had killed Abbot Hans, because he had dashed from him the cup of happiness which he had been thirsting to drain to its last drop." In addition, the archbishop is forced to pardon Robber Father, an agreement that he made to appease Abbot Hans, but which he thought he would never have to honor. In the story's final, ironic twist, the lay brother delivers the letter of pardon to Robber Father and takes the family's place in exile. These ironic outcomes do more than just surprise the reader, they also illustrate Lagerlöf's moral. In the end, Lagerlöf shows that all of humanity is subject to error and lack of faith when they are too close to the material world, even an archbishop. Likewise, true to the Christian ideal, even society's outlaws can be redeemed.

Historical Context

Skane

When Lagerlöf wrote the story in the early 1900s, Skåne, a province at the southern tip of modern-day Sweden, belonged to Sweden. However, the story takes place in the twelfth century—as evidenced by the real-life, twelfth-century character of Archbishop Absalon. In the twelfth century, Skåne was a Danish province. In fact, Lagerlöf's narrator refers to the Danish setting of the story when describing the audacity of Robber Mother. "It was obvious that she was as certain she would be left in peace as if she had announced that she was the Queen of Denmark."

Christianity in Medieval Scandinavia

It is important to understand Christianity at this time in order to grasp the historical context of the story. At this point in history, Christianity was the dominant religion in Europe, including Scandinavia. Sweden did not fully let go of its paganism until the twelfth century, while Denmark was Christianized in the mid-tenth century. As a result, Christian institutions were thoroughly entrenched in Denmark by the time the story takes place, which may be one reason why Lagerlöf chose Denmark instead of Sweden as the setting for her story. In the twelfth century, Christian meant Roman Catholic, which was the only accepted Christian denomination. Catholics then, as now, received their religious instruction from a pope, who was aided by a vast hierarchy of subordinates, including archbishops. These clergy differed from the monks and nuns who lived apart from the public in an attempt to achieve spiritual purity.

Life in a Medieval Abbey

In the story, Lagerlöf's narrator says that Abbot Hans lives in a cloister, a type of monastic establishment. The term cloister was generally used to refer to the square courtyard located at the center of most monasteries, or abbeys. A medieval abbey, as the name suggests, was an establishment where several monks lived and were ruled by an abbot, or in some cases an abbess—a female abbot. The monks in an abbey adhered to the Benedictine Rule, a strict, daily routine of prayer, manual labor, and study that they performed together in group rituals. The monks were helped in their labors by a number of lay brothers, non-monks who lived at the monastery. Lay brothers performed various manual tasks, but generally did not take part in the holy rituals or scholastic activities.

Life in a Medieval Village

Although the Robber family is depicted as poor in the story, in the twelfth century, most peasants were poor, even those who lived in the villages. The majority of Europe,

including Denmark, relied on the feudal system—an oppressive system of land ownership and employment that exploited peasant labor. On most days, peasant couples and their children worked from sunrise to sunset. Men would usually raise the crops, while the women cooked and cleaned, made clothes, and performed various other activities around the house. When the fields were frozen, peasants worked on indoor tasks, such as repairing tools for the next planting season. Christmas was one of the few reprieves from this schedule. As C. Warren Hollister notes in his book, *Medieval Europe: A Short History:* "The feast days of the Christian calendar—Christmas, Easter, and many lesser holy days (holidays)—provided joyous relief from an otherwise grinding routine."

Critical Overview

Not much has been written about Lagerlöf's "The Legend of the Christmas Rose." As Marguerite Yourcenar notes in a 1975 essay, the story's Christmas setting may be partly at fault. Yourcenar calls the story "an exquisite tale one might be tempted to overlook, so many stupid Christmas stories in illustrated magazines having disgusted us with that form of literature." Yourcenar is particularly interested in the forest miracle, which she calls a "profoundly satisfying notion of a biblical Eden." Likewise, in his 1931 book, *Selma Lagerlöf: Her Life and Work,* Walter A. Berendsohn calls the story "the most beautiful of the Värmland stories," and says that the story "is instinct with that blending of divine Love and human charity, of angel-vision and deep kindliness which lie at the very heart of Christianity."

In addition to the lack of critical attention paid to the story, the collection it was included in—*En saga om en saga och andra sagor,* published in English as *The Girl from the Marsh Croft*—is also rarely mentioned. In fact, it is sometimes conspicuously absent from lists of Lagerlöf's major works. This may be due to its short-story-collection status, since Lagerlöf's novels and other long narratives tend to receive more criticism. This absence might also be due to its publication date. When the Swedish edition was first published in 1908, Lagerlöf's reputation was very strong, due to the publication of her two-volume children's series, *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa* in 1906 and 1907. This series, which has since become one of her best-known works, has overshadowed many of Lagerlöf's other writings.

Some critics, like Hermann Hesse, feel that all of Lagerlöf's works share the same qualities, so by examining general commentary about Lagerlöf's works as a whole, one may be able to better understand the reception of individual works, like "The Legend of the Christmas Rose." In a 1908 essay that discusses Lagerlöf's *Gösta Berling's Saga,* Hesse notes that the work was perfect, and contained "all the essentials of the Lagerlöf gift; with it the author made her appearance as a finished, mature personality and since that time she has not changed in any characteristic." These characteristics include, most notably, the use of folk traditions in Lagerlöf's stories. Says Berendsohn, "the longing for her childhood's fairyland has always driven our author back to the folk-tale for her sources." Likewise, in her 1984 book, *Selma Lagerlöf*, Vivi Edström notes that the author's "interest in original narratives, in myths, folktales, fairy tales, and legends led her to delve into the depths of the folk culture." However, Edström, like other critics, also notes Lagerlöf's unique ability to blend folk traditions with other sources. Says Edström: "even though anonymous folk literature was one of her main sources, she often received inspiration from contemporary materials," such as newspaper articles. Lagerlöf's stories also incorporate contemporary narrative techniques, and thus transcend the traditional fairy tale. As Berendsohn notes: "Hers is not a realm of 'Once upon a time' and 'They lived happily ever after.'" Instead, as Edström says: "Her method is to turn a simple folk motif into a narrative with many different psychological dimensions."

In addition to their critical stature, Lagerlöf's works have always been well received by popular readers. As Berendsohn notes, her works share "a rich epic quality, common to the early narrative poetry of all nations, and this has made her works loved by readers throughout the world, wherever her books have been translated." Lagerlöf's books have been translated into an astonishing number of languages, another sign of her popular success. In his translator's note to Berendsohn's book, George F. Timpson says that "almost all Selma Lagerlöf's works have been translated into English, French, Russian, German, Danish, Norwegian, Finnish, Dutch, Polish and Japanese." In addition, Timpson notes that certain works have been translated into Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Hungarian, Estonian, Lettish, Yiddish, Czech, Slovakian, Roumanian, Croatian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Modern Greek, Faroese, Icelandic, Greenlandic, Bengali, Armenian, Turkish, Arabic, Ido, Esperanto, and Braille.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses the problem of categorization in Lagerlöf's works.

Lagerlöf's tales have been enjoyed by countless readers, but not many can say with conviction exactly what kind of stories they are reading. Since the publication of her first book, *Gösta Berling's Saga* (1891), Lagerlöf's unusual prose has defied conventional literary norms. In an age when Europeans were writing gritty, realistic stories, Lagerlöf's works were more idealistic and romantic. Readers would be mistaken, however, if they labeled her as merely a romantic writer. As Walter Berendsohn notes in his *Selma Lagerlöf: Her Life and Work:* "The critics have found it difficult to assign her a place in the course of Swedish literary development." Likewise, in her *Selma Lagerlöf,* Vivi Edström notes further that, with Lagerlöf's "unique mythical imagination and narrative talent," the author "cannot easily be placed into any literaryhistorical category. She is both a realist and a romantic." It is this inability to be categorized that gives Lagerlöf's stories their universal appeal.

Many of Lagerlöf's stories exhibit characteristics of Romanticism, a literary movement that dominated much of Europe in the late eighteenth century. Romantic works feature idealistic settings and situations that depict life as one would wish it to be. For example, in "The Legend of the Christmas Rose," Robber Father is pardoned at the end of the story by Archbishop Absalon, because the archbishop is keeping a promise. "Abbot Hans has faithfully kept his word, and I shall also keep mine." However, in real life at this time, the Catholic Church did not always exhibit such compassion, and thieves were often punished by mutilation or death. Lagerlöf's idealism is rooted in her spirituality, which is another element that is commonly found in romantic fiction. Lagerlöf's strong belief in Christianity dominates many of her works, including "The Legend of the Christmas Rose," in which the tenets of Christianity provide the main themes. Throughout the story, characters of all backgrounds and stations refer to Christianity and "our Lord," as when Robber Mother explains how "on every Christmas Eve the great Göinge forest is transformed into a beautiful garden to commemorate the hour of our Lord's birth." Natural settings like forests and gardens are also commonly found in romantic fiction, which elevates nature to the level of the sublime, or awe-inspiring.

However, Lagerlöf's works also exhibit characteristics of realism, another literary movement, which took place in the nineteenth century. Berendsohn notes that "the great wave of European Realism" reached Sweden in 1879, "and for twelve years dominated literature with its realistic descriptions of sordid scenes, its bitter criticism of society and its acrid discussion of social problems." Realism and its counterpart naturalism depict life as it really happens, stripping away any idealistic expectations and descriptions in the process. Realistic ction generally relies on actual details of everyday life, incorporating believable characters in realistic situations. Critics such as Edström note that, while Lagerlöf's fiction is developed from myths and folklore, "she often received inspiration from contemporary materials. She was an avid newspaper reader, and the

daily newspapers provided her with material for many a story." In this way, Lagerlöf's works blend romantic myth with realistic elements.

For example, while the story takes place in a quaint medieval setting, Lagerlöf does not let her readers escape totally into the fantasy of the fairy tale. In an idealistic way, the poor people in the villages receive "armfuls of bread and long candles" from the monasteries, and everybody prepares for a happy Christmas celebration. Abbot Hans gets a much different, more realistic depiction of the medieval poor when he goes to the Robber family cave. "Here were wretchedness and poverty, and nothing was being done to celebrate Christmas. Robber Mother had neither brewed nor baked; she had neither washed nor scoured." This stark description, which goes on to describe the "watery gruel" that the children are forced to eat, is a hallmark of realistic fiction, and it helps to balance the idealism of the story. Realistic fiction is often used as social commentary, and through the use of her ironic situations Lagerlöf also comments on social issues, specifically the hypocrisy and fallibility of the medieval Catholic Church.

As Gore W. Allen notes in his *Renaissance in the North,* "the religious opposition, as voiced by Kierkegaard in Denmark and Selma Lagerlöf in Sweden, repudiated the medieval Church no less vigorously than it was repudiated by the sixteenthcentury Reformers." Yet, even in her criticisms, Lagerlöf was not as harsh as other social commentators. She did not work in absolutes, and even in her commentary, she incorporated her idealistic belief that nobody is totally bad. The church is not depicted in a completely negative fashion. While the lay brother is the one who causes all of the problems, and the archbishop is depicted as having little faith, the Catholic abbot is portrayed in extremely favorable terms. Unlike the lay brother and the two monks, the abbot does not try to physically throw Robber Mother out of the monastery. In fact, he chastises his brethren "for using force and forbade their calling for help." He does not judge Robber Mother as the others do; instead he gives her the benefit of the doubt. In addition, the abbot loves his garden, but only "as much as it was possible for him to love anything earthly and perishable." Finally, when he is witnessing the Christmas miracle, he is humble, bowing down to earth "in reverent greeting" to the angels. These qualities, along with many others that are given to him in the story, show that Abbot Hans is one Catholic who lives up to the Christian ideal. Lagerlöf is criticizing the Catholic Church's hypocrisy, but she does not wage a crusade against Catholicism. Instead, she portrays its fallibility in a human way, so that even the lay brother inspires a reader's sympathy at the end of the story.

In addition to the question of whether Lagerlöf's works belong to realism or romanticism, her writ writings share characteristics with many other opposing categories. While her stories are often based in the legendary past and told in a fairy-tale style, they also incorporate modern narrative techniques, such as giving psychological depth to characters. In addition, Lagerlöf's works are hard to place as either popular or literary fiction. Her works were enormous popular successes, no matter what critics said about them. In fact, her works are often lumped in with other popular works, as is the case with "The Legend of the Christmas Rose." While Marguerite Yourcenar notes in her essay, "Selma Lagerlöf: Epic Storyteller," that the story is "an exquisite tale," she also

says that people may overlook it, due to all of the bad, popular Christmas stories that have "disgusted us with that form of literature."

Lagerlöf considered herself a writer of the people, and was more concerned about everyday readers than critics. Her works themselves can be read on two levels. As Edström notes: "On the surface, the stories can appear artless and simple, but upon closer scrutiny they reveal a complicated structure." For example, "The Legend of the Christmas Rose" can be read as a simple idealistic fable, in which the moral of the story is to have faith and not let earthly attitudes cause one to judge people or situations by their appearances. On the other hand, when one digs beneath the surface and examines the story's realistic aspects, Lagerlöf's religious beliefs, and the influence of modern narrative techniques, the tale yields more complex interpretations. In this way, the story can be read as a literary work, as opposed to just a popular story.

In the end, it is Lagerlöf's ability to fit multiple categories in stories like this one that has allowed her works to be enjoyed by countless readers in many languages. Says Allen: "Selma Lagerlöf, through the untamed beauty of her rhythmic prose, had won the hearts of rich and poor, of countrymen, and secretly of urban intellectuals also." In 1909, when Lagerlöf was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, Claes Annerstedt—then-president of the Swedish Academy—summed up the universal quality of Lagerlöf's unique stories in his presentation address: "The greatness of her art consists precisely in her ability to use her heart as well as her genius to give to the original peculiar character and attitudes of the people a shape in which we recognize ourselves."

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "The Legend of the Christmas Rose," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay excerpt, Edström reviews Lagerlöf's many works.

Critical Essay #3

Throughout her literary career, Lagerlöf wrote many short narrative works, a number of which were commissioned for newspapers and journals. She especially had many requests to contribute stories to Christmas editions of newspapers, which explains why many of her short stories concern winter and the celebration of Christmas. Lagerlöf was extremely conscientious when it came to these occasional pieces, and some of her Christmas stories, such as "The Peace of God" and "The Legend of the Christmas Roses" ("Legenden om julrosorna"), have become minor classics in Sweden.

Lagerlöf's first collection of short stories, *Invisible Links* (1894), established her as a writer of short fiction. The collection came out in several editions, augmented in 1904 by additional short pieces that she wrote in the closing years of the 1890s, some of which are counted among her finest works. Lagerlöf's publisher, Bonniers, also decided to publish collections of her short stories, reminiscences, and speeches in the interludes between the publication of her longer novels. In 1908, *The Girl from the Marshcroft (En saga om en saga och andra sagor*) was published, followed by the first part of *Troll och människor (Trolls and Men)* in 1915 and the second part in 1921. An additional collection of short prose, *Höst (Harvest)* came out in 1933. The final collection was a two-volume posthumous edition, *Från skilda tider* 1943-1945, which contains many short stories from various periods in Lagerlöf's literary career.

Frequently, a short story reveals a more intimate picture of its author than does a long novel. This can be said of Lagerlöf's stories, which reflect the great range of her talent and present a variety of structures and styles. Her short stories are more experimental than her longer works, in which the plot often dominates the entire work in an explicit way.

For the most part, Lagerlöf's short stories are based on anecdotes or other clear and simple narratives. She works in a tradition in which the narrative concludes with a point, or a solution to the psychological problem that lies at the core of the story. Sometimes she strives to achieve a light style in the spirit of Maupassant, but these stories are not especially successful. On the other hand, she works extremely well within the model of the fairy tale and folktale, and she is also a master of the legend.

A line of development can be seen in her short prose works—from a narrative overloaded with symbols into a concentrated structure in which each word is carefully weighed. During an early period, she succumbed to a "mania for description" in the manner of the Danish symbolist Jens Peter Jacobsen, as can be seen in "Stenkumlet" ("The King's Grave") in *Osynliga länker (Invisible Links),* a story with a number of visual elements, including the color red as a dominant symbol for the ruthless affirmation of life, as opposed to the acceptance of limits and responsibilities. A half-ruined cairn, the grave of a king, takes on the same fateful function as the famous millrace in Ibsen's *Rosmersholm;* Ibsen was, of course, an inevitable model for the symbolists of the 1890s.

Gradually, however, Lagerlöf's short fiction became oriented toward other models. The Icelandic saga and the works of Bjørnson and Jensen influenced her in developing a more concise form. Both the short stories and the fairy-and folk tales came to concentrate more directly on the action, with some of the later ones becoming almost expressionistic. Then, considerable tension arises from the discrepancy between the surface structure of a narrative and its deeper meaning.

Lagerlöf's short stories present a whole cavalcade of people: farmers and crofters, cavaliers and men of property, clergymen and beautiful girls, old people about to meet death, saints and murderers. She seems to understand them all and to be capable of interpreting their secrets, whether those secrets concern the sacrificial ardour of the saint or the hatefulness of the sadist.

In her short stories, Lagerlöf often depicts a person who has reached a turning point in life. Since guilt and responsibility are such essential problems in her writing, the moment is often one of enquiry or examination. The short story may be written in a lyrical vein, but at the same time it is dramatically effective in its focus on drastic change, the choice of path. The resolution usually takes the form of absolute happiness or tragic ruin.

Lagerlöf wrote contemporary short stories, historical narratives, and stories not bound to any particular time. While she often deals with contemporary social themes, it is clear that, like many other writers, she felt that she had greater freedom when writing from a historical perspective. She was particularly interested in the period of transition from paganism to Christianity in Sweden, and she included themes from this period in the stories "De fågelfria" ("The Outlaws"), "Stenkumlet" ("The King's Grave"), and "Reors saga" ("The Legend of Reor"), as well as in the stories in the collection *Drottningar i Kungahälla (The Queens of Kungahälla).* Her materials came from various literary sources, primarily Snorri's Heimskringla, which had been her favorite reading since childhood.

Set in various provinces of Sweden, Lagerlöf's short stories attest to her ability to create both historical and geographical authenticity. Several of the earlier stories are connected with Bohuslän, a western province she became familiar with when she visited her brother, a doctor in the small southern Bohuslän city of Kungälv. Another group of stories is set in the island of Gotland, Sweden's eastern outpost, which she visited during the 1890s, as did many other artists and writers of the period. Traces of her journeys abroad can also be seen in the stories set in Italy, the Near East, and other places. Of greatest importance, however, are the stories set in Värmland, with Lagerlöf's home district, often called Svartsjö, at the center. Several stories tell of what happens to the individual cavaliers from *Gösta Berling's Saga* after they leave the joyous life at Ekeby, while others, such as "Gravskriften" ("The Epitaph") and "Bröderna" ("The Brothers"), depict the problems of village folk, with the entire district as background.

In stories resembling folk tales or legends, the place names are especially important, for such tales are always rooted in a definite locale. Stories such as *En herrgårdssägen (The Tale of a Manor*), "Tomten på Töreby" ("The Imp at Töreby"), and "Sankta Katarina av Siena" ("Saint Catherine of Siena") suggest by their very titles how important the

setting is for the action. Lagerlöf belongs to those writers who with only a few details can create a memorable picture of a region, often integrating scenic depiction with psychological motifs. She often introduces a short story with a description of the setting that includes symbolic elements; the landscape thus foreshadows and accompanies the psychological problems of the story. This technique can be seen in "The Epitaph" and "En historia från Halstanäs" ("The Story of Halstanäs"), both of which appear in the collection *Invisible Links.*

Critical Essay #4

In some of her short pieces that could be classified as fairy tales, Lagerlöf, in keeping with the demands of the fairy tales, avoids designating the exact geographical location of the action. Nor does she limit these stories with regard to time. She begins many of them with the fairy-tale formula, "Once upon a time" or, more often, with "There was," thereby allowing herself the maximum freedom in recreating a time and a place. This is the pattern she follows in stories such as "The Peace of God" and "The Sons of Ingmar," the narratives she incorporated into *Jerusalem.* They were not connected with either Dalecarlia or any specific time, which enables her to place the greatest emphasis on the moral problems her characters are involved in.

The fairy-tale genre arouses special expectations of excitement, suspense, and fantasy, all of which Lagerlöf's stories provide. But despite the fact that she is so often called a teller of fairy tales, she does not merely relate fantasy-filled stories; indeed, she very rarely writes what would be considered genuine fairy tales. She uses, rather, the method of the fairy tale as a basis for organizing a story. She is most successful when she strives to create the suspense and mystery characteristic of the fairy tale. She often builds her action according to the three-step rule and employs the matter-of-fact style typical of the fairy tale. This holds true even in situations such as fateful encounters between persons or between man and nature. She uses upheaval, surprise, and metamorphosis in a way that can be associated with the fairy tale. The successful solution to the problem that the fairy tale usually presents is also typical of many of her stories. Complete unity between man and nature, blurring the distinction between fantasy and reality—all this is characteristic of Lagerlöf's short tales. While these traits are also found in some of her other works, they often appear in a purer form in the short stories. The very title of one of her collections, *Trolls and Men,* illustrates this union of the real and the fantastic.

Lagerlöf uses the fairy-tale genre both freely and artfully. By adopting the method of the fairy tale, she achieves naive effects, but the psychology is far more complex. "Bortbytingen" ("The Changeling," 1908), published in *Trolls and Men,* is an excellent example of a story patterned after a folk legend but with a modern psychological meaning; it is actually an allegory of a marriage on the verge of breaking up because the mother is completely occupied with the child. The changeling motif in both fairy and folktales goes back to a popular fear that an infant would be exchanged for a troll child if its mother did not take special precautions, a notion that explains in folk superstition why some children are born deformed. Tales of changelings usually are concerned with how the kidnapped child lives among the trolls. Lagerlöf, however, reverses the motif, depicting instead a troll in the world of men. While traveling on horseback with her husband, a farmer's wife loses her infant child, who is stolen by an old troll woman. When the parents desperately look for the child, they find instead an ugly troll child, with claws and a tail. The wife takes it home with her and looks after it with the greatest care and attention. Her husband protests, but not even his threats to leave home keep his wife from fulfilling her difficult task of caring for the repulsive troll. In the end, the conflict is resolved in the harmonious manner typical of the fairy tale. When the situation

appears to be hopeless, the husband and wife get their beautiful, fair-haired little boy back again. The woman's sacrifices not only helped the child to survive in the world of the trolls, but also brought about its release. The husband returns home with his son in his arms (where the troll child goes is not mentioned).

Critical Essay #5

Lagerlöf's knowledge of folktales was of great importance for her short fiction, for she frequently employs its typical form, adhering to it stringently. In contrast to the fairy tale, which typically aims at a happy ending, the folktale usually has a tragic conclusion. The short stories of Lagerlöf most consistently based on folktale motifs deal most often with crime and punishment and sometimes evince a fascination for violence. "The Outlaws," "Tale Thott," and "The Story of Halstanäs" (all in Invisible Links), which are based on folktale motifs, are stories of criminals. And "The Imp at Töreby," "Vattnet i Kyrkviken" ("The Water in Kyrkviken"), and "Gammal fäbodsägen" ("The Tale of the Old Saeter")—all in *Trolls and Men*—end in horror. In all these stories, the idea of nemesis predominates, with human pride appearing to call forth, or contribute to, misfortune and unhappiness.

There are several different kinds of folktales. Among these is the ghost story, Lagerlöf's favorite type since the days when she experienced it, with all its terror-struck fascination, in the nursery at Mårbacka. As a teacher, she often told ghost stories to her pupils, something that was not always appreciated by school officials. Her first literary attempt at a ghost story was "Karln" ("The Man"), which was rejected for publication when she wrote it but published posthumously. She later took up the theme of "The Man" in one of her most clearly defined ghost stories. *Löwensköldska ringen (The Ring of Löwenskölds*), a short novel written in 1925.

Along with the gloomy narratives that show man at the mercy of the powers, there are also stories of a different kind, impressionistic sketches which point up the irony of life and love stories. Elements of both these genres are found in one of Lagerlöf's most beloved short stories, "Dunungen" ("Downie") in *Invisible Links,* a love story with a comic tone, narrated somewhat in the style of Hans Christian Andersen. Lagerlöf herself wrote a dramatization of the story, which was later filmed.

A frequent theme, especially in the early stories, is the struggle of the individual to find his way in a chaotic situation. In the narratives, as in *Gösta Berling's Saga,* passion is pitted against moral imperatives. The motif of sin and atonement is varied in connection with the problems that revolve around determinism and responsibility. The question of the extent of man's possibilities for mastering his own destiny occurs again and again in Lagerlöf's works.

The main character in a Lagerlöf short story is often a socially or psychologically disadvantaged person. In her earlier stories, man is often defeated in his struggle, but gradually the tone of her narratives becomes more optimistic, with the author presenting characters whose power and strength of will bring them to reconciliation. "The Wedding March" (in *The Girl from the Marshcroft*) exemplifies this optimism. The story deals with a poor violinist who does not enjoy public recognition, despite his indisputable genius. Ultimately it relates how fame comes to him and, above all, how his artistry influences those around him.

In some of the short stories, there are women who find their destiny through having been neglected. The Cinderella motif is, for example, the basic theme in "Downie," in which a tender, delicate young girl makes a courageous choice in the end, as well as in *The Girl from the Marshcroft,* in which a poor tenant farm girl marries a rich farmer. "The Epitaph" depicts a woman who is at first weak and submissive, but who finally asserts the right to her own feelings.

Critical Essay #6

The Queens of Kungahälla While their multiplicity of themes and forms make the collections of Lagerlöf's short stories fascinating, the author herself preferred to publish collections with a unified subject matter and a consistent theme. *Drottningar i Kungahälla (The Queens of Kungahälla,* 1899) is an example of such a collection. It tells of the Swedish queens of the Viking period who celebrated their weddings in the city of Kungahälla, the present-day Kungälv, near the border between Sweden and Norway. In this period of transition, there were frequent battles between the Nordic countries, and as Christianity began to drive out paganism, the religious and political complications increased. Lagerlöf, who found these conflicts fascinating, became well acquainted with the history and topography of Kungälv when she visited the city in the 1890s, just when an interesting archeological discovery had been made there. Her stories about the women who celebrated or wanted to celebrate their weddings in the city have a historical basis. *The Queens of Kungahälla* can be seen as a bold attempt to create a feminist counterpart to Snorri Sturluson's history of the kings of Norway, *Heimskringla.*

The purpose of this collection of short stories was also to describe different types of women, something in which Lagerlöf had already excelled in *Gösta Berling's Saga.* One encounters in these stories refined women and good women, dangerous women, and women with a zest for living. The longest story, entitled "Astrid," is one of mistaken identity, in which the title character, with craftiness and cunning, manages to get the husband she wants, Olaf, who was destined to become St. Olaf. Contrasting with Astrid is her half sister, the mild and saintly Ingegärd, who actually from the very beginning had been the one designated to marry Olaf.

Elements of the legend are strong in several of the short stories in *The Queens of Kungahälla,* as, for example, in the story in which Olaf Tryggvason rejects the pagan queen Sigrid Storråda. In a dream vision, he sees how his insult to the Swedish queen brings about his martyr's death. Margareta Fredkulla, in the story of the same title, is transformed by the pressure of circumstances into a saint. For the sake of peace and her impoverished people, she sacrifices herself, overcoming her aversion to the bellicose and faithless bridegroom who awaits her.

Critical Essay #7

When *The Queens of Kungahälla* was published in 1899, the volume included a group of stories designated as legends and given the simple title *Legender (Legends*). In 1906, these legends appeared in a single volume. Two years earlier, in 1904, Kristuslegender (Christ Legends) was published, which together with Legends contain Lagerlöf's most important work in that genre.

Elements of the legend appear, however, as early as Gösta Berling's Saga, and they are common in the later novels, especially *The Miracles of Antichrist, Jerusalem II (or The Holy City*), and *The Emperor of Portugallia.* As early as 1892, the journal Ord och bild published "Legenden om fågelboet" ("The Legend of the Bird's Nest") in which a hardened, vengeful hermit is changed into a mild man resembling St. Francis of Assisi, who stands with upstretched arms to give the birds a haven in the wilderness. Lagerlöf's legends grew out of her strong interest in inner changes or conversions—transformations that frequently occur as miracles in her stories.

The legend is a genre difficult to define. Though it is close to the folktale and has its beginnings in pre-Christian times, it flourished especially during the late Middle Ages. At the end of the nineteenth century, the symbolists became interested in the legend form, seeing in it possibilities for describing religious experiences and elusive psychological phenomena. Around the turn of the century, the legend became Lagerlöf's most important medium for literary expression, evidenced by the fact that she wrote at least one legend a year between 1894 and 1906.

It was during her first journey to Italy, in 1895-96, that Lagerlöf developed her actual passion for the legend. She had, in a sense, entered into the world of the legend, and she eagerly collected material, especially popular anecdotes related to cloisters and churches in Catholic Europe. She also became acquainted with research being done on the legend, primarily with works on Sicilian folklore by the Italian scholar Giuseppe Pitré.

There are two main types of legends—stories of the lives of saints and stories related to the folktale. Lagerlöf wrote several saints' legends—"Saint Catherine of Siena," "Lucia," and "Ljuslågan" ("The Light of the Flame"), for example, but most of her legends are closer to the folktale. One of her plans was to write a series of legends linked with cities in Italy. Two that arose out of this project are "Fiskarringen" ("The Ring of the Fisherman"), set in Venice, and "Den heliga bilden i Lucca" ("The Legend of the Sacred Image"). The stress in these stories, however, is placed not on the local but on the psychological dynamics. In "The Legend of the Sacred Image," for example, Lagerlöf discusses the naive trust that provides the requisite basis for the miracle.

After the Italian legends, Lagerlöf, strongly inspired by her visit to the Near East in 1899-1900, approached the world of legends connected with the Holy Land. For Christ Legends, which she characterized alternately as a book for children and a popular book, she gathered material on the childhood of Jesus from the apocryphal Gospels, as well as from several other sources, including Giuseppe Pitré's work *Fiabe e leggende*

populari siciliane. The *Christ Legends* have a more naive character than her earlier legends; the nucleus of each story is a miracle which is left unexplained, as is often the case in saints' legends proper.

Jesus is described as a normal child, full of life, whose unlimited trust and affection dominate the stories. In perfectly narrated episodes, the simple, concrete events of Jesus' childhood are told—his birth (the miracle of which is described from three different points of view), the impending danger from Herod, the flight to Egypt, and the visit to the temple when he was twelve years old. Last in the series is the complicated legend of St. Veronica's veil, which culminates in Jesus making his way to the cross.

Lagerlöf gradually became an expert on legends. She restored and adapted them, and she expanded them with additional levels of meaning. As the scholar Gunnel Weidel notes, "none of her legends bear the guise of the simple, objective narratives characteristic of medieval legends." Lagerlöf did, however, possess the ability to evoke a biblical or medieval atmosphere while at the same time creating characters whose problems appear real to the modern reader. Characteristic of the legend is its naive and almost idyllic atmosphere, in which the miraculous appears to occur naturally. In Lagerlöf's legends, the introduction of the miracle into the everyday world in a manner that is both shocking and, at the same time, quite natural is central to her narrative technique.

Several years ago in an interview, the Nobel Prize-winning Swedish writer Harry Martinson stated that he believed it was unfortunate that Lagerlöf devoted herself so intensely to the genre of the legend. Her contemporary critics, though, would scarcely have agreed. The critic Oscar Levertin advised her to remain in the forests of her fairy tales and the cities of her legends.

Later scholars have pointed out the contradiction between the skeptical Lagerlöf, well schooled in the natural sciences, and the author of the naive narrative stance. For Lagerlöf, the legend was an aesthetically fruitful form, not a religious statement. The legend was also a means of reaching many people. It was through that genre that she seriously gained the acceptance of an international public, especially in Catholic countries. According to one critic, it was with the legend that she "most strongly approached an international and universally human wave length," because "the themes she treats in her legends are no longer the exclusive heritage of her national homeland, but a common cultural heritage for peoples of all countries."

Source: Vivi Edström, "Short Fiction: The Short Stories, Legends, and Short Novels," in *Selma Lagerlöf,* Twayne Publishers, 1984, pp. 70-84.

Adaptations

Lagerlöf's *Gösta Berling's* Saga was adapted into a feature film in 1924, the profits from which she donated to a fund for female authors. The silent film, entitled *The Story of Gösta Berling,* was directed by Mauritz Stiller and featured Greta Garbo in her first leading role. It is available on VHS from Timeless Video, Inc.

Topics for Further Study

Research other legends surrounding *Helleborus niger,* the flower commonly known as the Christmas Rose. Compare Lagerlöf's version to these other versions.

Archbishop Absalon was an actual archbishop in the twelfth century. Research his life and write a short biography about him. Compare his life and characteristics to the character in the story.

In the story, Robber Father is formally forgiven by the Catholic Church through Archbishop Absalon's letter of ransom, or pardon, which frees him to live in society once again. Research the history of ransom letters during the Middle Ages. Write a sample ransom letter for another historical personage who was actually condemned by the church during this time period.

Research the medieval feudal system. Imagine you are a feudal peasant during this time and write a sample journal entry that describes your typical day. Use your research to support your claims.

Research the various positions in the Catholic Church hierarchy in twelfth-century Europe. Plot each of these positions on an organizational chart and include a short, modern-style "job description" for each position.

Compare and Contrast

1100-1200: Catholicism is the only approved Christian denomination in most of Europe, including Denmark. Sweden is also increasingly dominated by Christianity, and pagan religious practice comes to be suppressed.

1900s: Following the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, a Danish Lutheran Church and Swedish Lutheran Church form and quickly gain dominance over Catholicism, a trend that continues in the twentieth century.

Today: More than 90 percent of both Danes and Swedes are Lutheran.

1100-1200: Skåne is officially a province of Denmark. Danish control of the Baltic-North Sea waterway that separates Skåne from mainland Denmark helps to make Denmark a major maritime power.

1900s: Following bitter struggles in the medieval and renaissance periods, Skåne is officially a province of Sweden.

Today: Skåne is still a Swedish province, but ownership is no longer an issue, since Sweden and Denmark are both lesser powers that do not rely on maritime warfare.

1100-1200: Pope Innocent III is the latest in a line of twelfth-century popes who increase the stature and influence of the Catholic papacy, which is increasingly involved in political matters.

1900s: Pope Pius X works to repress Modernism, an intellectual movement that seeks to revise Catholic teaching so that it is more consistent with modern sensibilities and understandings. In 1907, he issues a decree that urges censorship of Modernist books.

Today: Pope John Paul II is one of the most controversial and conservative popes, staunchly refusing to support many modern notions, including admitting women to the priesthood, allowing male priests to marry, and accepting abortion and homosexuality. In 1994, he releases *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* in English translation. This extensive document outlines the beliefs and moral tenets of the Catholic Church. The same year, he is named Time's Man of the Year.

What Do I Read Next?

Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen became famous in the nineteenth century for his imaginative fairy tales, many of which have inspired twentieth-century books and films such as Disney's *The Little Mermaid. Hans Christian Andersen: The Complete Fairy Tales and Stories* (1974), translated by Erik Hougaard, presents Andersen's immortal tales as they appeared in the original Danish edition in the 1870s.

One of the most famous saints of medieval Scandinavia was Bridget of Sweden. Bridget, also known as Birgit and Birgitta, became famous and earned respect for her religious visions. *Birgitta of Sweden: Life and Selected Revelations* (1990), edited by Marguerite T. Harris and translated by Albert Ryle Kezel, collects four of Birgitta's most renowned works, which were originally published in the fifteenth century.

Lagerlöf's *Gösta Berling's Saga* (1891)—translated into English in 1898—was the author's first major published work, and is still one of her most popular books. The episodic story centers on the title character, a failed country pastor who falls in with a group of cavaliers intent on destroying the estate of the Lady of Ekeby.

Many of Lagerlöf's works show the influence of her rural life at Mårbacka, a rural estate in the province of Värmland in southern Sweden. *Memories of Mårbacka* (1996) collects several of Lagerlöf's nostalgic, autobiographical writings about her childhood in this rural home.

Further Study

Ankarloo, Bengt, and Stuart Clark, eds., *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Middle Ages,* University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002.

In Lagerlöf's story, the lay brother mistakes the blooming forest for witchcraft and is so scared at this possibility, that he frightens the miracle away. In this collection of essays, noted experts examine the various views of witchcraft and magic in medieval Europe.

Nissenbaum, Stephen, *The Battle for Christmas,* Knopf, 1996.

Nissenbaum explores the troubled history of Christmas celebrations, which, from the fourth until the nineteenth centuries, were characterized by wanton drinking, violence, and crime. It was only in the Victorian era that Christmas began to resemble the modern holiday, with its focus on family—and commercialism.

Sawyer, Birgit, and Peter Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia: From Conversion to Reformation, circa 800-1500,* University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

This comprehensive study of medieval Scandinavia challenges long-held assumptions, which are largely based on nineteenth-century studies, including the differences between medieval Scandinavia and the rest of Europe. Topics include modern attitudes toward medieval history, medieval history writing, and the role of women in medieval Scandinavia.

Singman, Jeffrey L., *Daily Life in Medieval Europe,* Greenwood Press, 1999.

Singman offers an in-depth discussion of what life was like on a daily basis in medieval Europe. In addition to four chapters on medieval society in general, he also gives overviews of what life was like in villages, castles, monasteries, and towns.

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Timpson, George F., "Translator's Note," in *Selma Lagerlöf: Her Life and Work,* by Walter A. Berendsohn, translated by George F. Timpson, 1931, reprint, Kennikat Press, 1968, p. xi.

Yourcenar, Marguerite, "Selma Lagerlöf: Epic Storyteller," in *The Dark Brain of Piranesi and Other Essays,* by Marguerite Yourcenar, translated by Richard Howard in collaboration with the author, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984, pp. 129-53.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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