Myths of the Norsemen Short Guide

Myths of the Norsemen by Roger Loncelyn Green

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.

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".

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".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

Perhaps as long ago as 8000 B.C., a group of nomadic tribes wandered south into India and westward into central Europe from a homeland somewhere west of the Caspian Sea. These divergent groups shared a common language (Indo-European), a knowledge of farming, and the worship of certain gods.

First among their gods was a sky god, probably named something like deva (as in India) or Diu (Zeus) as in Greece. The Romans called him Diu-pater, or father god, which became Jupiter.

The names gradually changed as tribes settled in different places. Among the Germanic peoples of Central and Northern Europe the father-god was called Ziu (Old High-German) or Tyr (Icelandic). He was called Dia by the Irish or Tiw by the British, and from these names is derived "Tuesday." Other northern gods lent their names to the days of the week—Woden's day, Thor's day, and Freya's day.

Although once a unified whole, the oldest myths of the Indo-European gods and goddesses gradually changed and diverged, taking on new meanings in the new lands where the migrant tribes settled. The Norse gods persisted well into the Christian era in Scandinavia and Iceland, and many Norsemen—or Vikings—continued to take pride in the gods and heroes of their pagan past.

This attitude enabled the old gods and myths to persist in many places, even though many of the stories were lost.

Unlike the myths of the ancient Greeks, those of the Norse peoples were not written down until centuries after these countries were converted to Christianity. In their original forms, found primarily in two collections of poetry, called the Eddas (compiled in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries), the Norse stories often seem fragmented or contradictory.

In Myths of the Norsemen, Green connects the various stories and fragments to provide a coherent history of the gods.

In many ways the figures of Norse mythology have influenced Western culture to the same extent as have the Greek gods, although Odin and his band are less studied than the gods of Olympus.

The world of the Norse gods is one of valiant and vigilant heroes. Yet the doom of a prophecy hangs like a shadow over them. It is foretold that they will be defeated by the forces of chaos in a final battle called Ragnarok. With their fall will come the fall of human civilization, even of the world itself. And yet, beyond this tragic defeat lies a mysterious redemption and renewal. The secret of the rebirth of the world is known only to two of the northern gods—Odin and Baldur.

About the Author

Roger Lancelyn Green was born on November 2, 1918, the son of a Royal Air Force officer. He was educated in private schools in Surrey, England, and graduated from Merton College, Oxford, with a bachelor of literature degree.

At Oxford he was a part-time professional actor and a department librarian.

He went on to teach at the University of Liverpool and the University of St.

Andrews in Scotland.

Green is a poet as well as the author of books on folklore, and has written a biography of the great storyteller Andrew Lang (Andrew Lang: A Critical Biography, 1946). He was editor of the Kipling Journal and the author of Kipling and the Children (1965). His interest in Lewis Carroll led him to edit the Diaries of Lewis Carroll (1953) and The Lewis Carroll Handbook (1962).

Green authored two books about C. S. Lewis—a critical work published in 1963 and a biography in 1974. He has also written about J. M. Barrie, the author of Peter Pan; Mary Louisa Molesworth, an author of children's books; and A. E. W. Mason, who wrote historical romances and mystery novels. Green is an accomplished storyteller whose interest in myth and legend has inspired over thirty books of tales from ancient Greece, ancient Egypt, and Israel, and from the Norse and Arthurian legends.

Setting

Scandinavia is a region of mists and ice, of barren crags and threatening shores, favored only by a short season of sun and crops. The setting of Myths of the Norsemen gives the reader a sense of this harsh land and seascape, but much of the action occurs in a more cosmic realm.

Central to this realm is the World Tree—Yggdrasill—a massive evergreen ash that holds up the heavens with its branches and reaches with its roots to the depths of the underworld where dwell the dreaded frost giants. At the crown of the great tree is Asgard, the realm of the gods, who are called the Aesir. Here there are many splendid halls, especially Odin's palace, Gladsheim. Nearby is Valhalla, where warriors slain in battle are feasted. From a special seat, called Lidskialf or heaven crag, Odin can view all of the worlds at once. He is accompanied by two farseeing ravens and a giant eagle whose flapping wings cause the winds to blow.

Midgard, the world of humans, is far below. A red squirrel, Ratatosk, scurries up and down the tree, carrying news of Midgard to Odin or carrying his messages to earth. At the base of the tree is the fountain of wisdom where dwell three maidens called Norns, who rule the destinies of humans. They are called Fate, Being, and Necessity.

The future of the world depends upon the health of Yggdrasill, yet it is assaulted from all sides by destruction and decay. A large stag nibbles continually at its foliage. One root of the tree, called Nifelheim, is constantly gnawed by an evil serpent named Nid Hog. Rot eats away at the trunk. It is said that during Ragnarok, the final battle of the gods against the giants, Yggdrasill will fall, and the world will end.

Social Sensitivity

The world of Norse myth is full of primitive violence. Almost all conflicts are settled with weapons. The Vikings were, after all, the warriors who terrorized Europe for centuries with their raiding and pillaging. Yet violence has not abated in the world, although the times and weapons have changed, and the reader is challenged to confront this fact. Parents and teachers should help younger readers understand that violence only begets further violence, and that there are more lasting ways—such as negotiation and compromise—to solve conflict.

Baldur, the much beloved, has a truly elevated moral beauty, and is greatly mourned at his passing. It is Hrodur who naively casts the seemingly harmless mistletoe at him, and innocent though he is, Hrodur is slain for his deed. But Baldur greets Hrodur with joy in the land of the dead, providing an example of magnanimity and forgiveness.

Odin travels in disguise among humankind, rewarding goodness, morality, and generous hospitality. In this, he is like the Greek god Zeus, who was the patron of hosts and guests. Unlike Zeus, however, Odin is more restrained in his sexual conquests. Like any common person, he must persistently woo Rinda in order to beget the hero Vali.

The Norse gods as a group are more likely to express compassion for the sufferings of humankind than are the Greek gods, who seem to protect their favorites at the expense of humankind in general. The Aesir would not stoop to make humans fight wars over their own rivalries, as do Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite in the Iliad, Homer's epic of the Trojan war. Nor do they become furious and vengeful if humans are slightly disrespectful or overlook a detail of worship. The Norse gods are notable for always finding the humor in a dark situation, and they struggle as valiantly to save Midgard, the abode of humankind, as they do to preserve their own halls in Asgard, ultimately sacrificing themselves for this purpose.

Literary Qualities

When taken as a whole, Myths of the Norsemen constitutes a major tragedy.

Individual episodes, however, have the charm and entertainment value of folklore. Full of sudden and surprising events, of shape-changings, of riddles, and of unexpected triumphs, these tales strike a deep response. Green's skill at storytelling highlights the delightful details and maintains the continuity of his overall theme.

These stories were handed down by word of mouth for centuries. They embody a collective, cultural wisdom, and in this respect are a valuable part of the human treasury of folktales—German, English, African, and many others—that demonstrate the common humanity of the world's diverse peoples.

Themes and Characters

The major theme in Myths of the Norsemen is the constant fight against evil conducted by the gods, particularly Odin. Odin's is a constant, day-to-day battle against the forces of evil in the world. He works unceasingly to prepare for the battle of Ragnarok, although he knows that this battle ultimately will be lost. Odin also gathers the valiant warriors in Valhalla, where they train for the final battle and meanwhile lead a life of pleasure.

Odin is not merely a warrior. He seeks to gain true wisdom through a combination of knowledge and sacrifice. He gives up one of his eyes for a single drink from the fountain of wisdom, which allows him to see part of the future. Occasionally, he dons a broad-brimmed hat and a blue cloak, wanders the earth in disguise, and experiences the world of humans firsthand.

Thor and Baldur, two of Odin's sons, are featured prominently in the tales.

Thor, whose mother was the Earth, is goodhearted, direct, and loyal. He possesses three treasures—his mighty hammer, iron gloves by which to grasp it, and a belt that when strapped on doubles his already prodigious strength.

When he swings his hammer, the thunder roars, lightning flashes, and the frost giants slink back into their dens.

Wise and merciful, Baldur is the fairestlooking of the gods. When Baldur was born, every mineral and plant in the world swore an oath never to harm him.

Yet one lowly plant, the mistletoe, was overlooked, and thus Baldur's invincibility is illusory.

Another god is Loki, the son of a giant.

Loki is also fair to look upon, but his nature is devious. At first he appears harmless, given to mischief and boyish tricks—but as the story develops Loki becomes increasingly destructive. Instead of using his tricks to serve the Aesir, he becomes an active servant of evil and the agent who finally brings about the downfall of the gods. Loki's true nature can be seen in his children— the half-dead Hel of the Underworld, the gnawing Serpent of Midgard, and a monstrous wolf called Fenris.

The gods are exuberant. They love to eat, drink, and laugh. They share Loki's impulsiveness but not his evil. If adventure presents itself, Thor is sure to jump into the middle of it. If Freya, the most renowned of the goddesses of Asgard, has a chance to trick someone out of a beautiful necklace, she does so and laughs about it afterwards. The gods' high spirits, however, eventually lead to tragedy. During one of their feasts, the gods amuse themselves by throwing their weapons at Baldur, whom they believe to be invulnerable. Their arrows, darts, and boulders harmlessly veer away. But Loki has

learned the secret of the mistletoe, fashions a javelin from it, and guides the hand of the blind god, Hrodur, as he throws it. To everyone's horror, Baldur is pierced through and falls dead at their feet.

Baldur's tragic death begins the decline of the Aesir. The battle of Ragnarok and the twilight of the gods swiftly approaches. Green also includes the heroic human drama of Sigurd, his love of Brynhild, arid his fateful marriage to Gudrun. Through this story runs the curse of the evil ring of Andvari.

Topics for Discussion

1. How do the climate and geography of Scandinavia contribute to the ideas found in the Norse story of creation? Do you think that similar considerations influenced the creation stories of the Bible, of the Egyptians, or of the Greeks?

2. The World Tree stands at the center of the Norse cosmos. Human beings are created from an ash and an elder. Why do you think the tree has such a prominent place in Norse myth?

3. In what ways is the power of Odin limited? Are his limitations physical, intellectual, or both?

4. What are the comic elements in Norse myth? Are these based on exaggerations as in the American folk tales of Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill? What part does the idea of shifting sizes play in humor?

5. How do the myths treat love? Are there faithful relationships as well as sudden infatuations?

6. In the early stages of the story, Loki frequently saves Asgard. In the end, however, he appears to be the ultimate traitor. Is there a change in his character or do the circumstances change?

7. Odin spends much of his time preparing for a battle he knows he is fated to lose. Is his struggle worthwhile?

Does it reflect the essential nature of the human situation?

8. Some people may find the Norse myths prejudiced against women. What evidence supports this view? Compare the depiction of women in the Norse myths with those in Greek myths.

9. Does the story of Sigurd and Brynhild share the sense of impending, unavoidable fate that dominates much of Norse myth?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Loki, like the Greek god Hermes and the Native American Coyote figure, is a type of folk character called the "trickster." Compare Loki, Hermes, Coyote, and other tricksters of myth and legend.

2. The Norsemen were a seafaring people. What evidence of this can you find in their mythology?

3. Investigate Norse burial customs— especially ship burials—and show how these customs appear in myth. Compare also the funeral customs depicted in Beowulf. Research the archeology of the Sutton Hoo ship burial for further evidence.

4. Among the Norsemen, weapons frequently received names. What does this tell us about the Norse attitude toward weapons? Arthurian legend also features weapons with names, and during World War II, air force flight crews named their bombers, as well. Can you draw any conclusions from this trend?

5. Investigate the various sources of wisdom in Norse myth. How do these compare with sources of wisdom in Greek myth?

6. In early times those who knew both Roman and Norse gods equated Thor with Jupiter, Odin with Mercury, Tiu with Mars, and Freya with Venus. Investigate the reasons for one, or more, of these parallels and show how they influenced the names of the days of the week.

For Further Reference

Ciklamini, Marlene. Snorri Sturluson.

Boston: Twayne, 1978. A general introduction to medieval Iceland's most important author, whose works preserved the early history of Iceland and Norway and much of what is known of the Norse myths. Also included are chapters about the primary sources of Norse myths.

Davidson, Hilda R. Scandinavian Mythology. London: Hamlyn, 1969. This authoritative book on Norse myth includes illustrations and a helpful map.

Ker, W. P. Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature. New York: Dover, 1957. An old but good authority for general background on the heroic age, Teutonic epics, and Icelandic sagas.

Strayer, Joseph R., ed. Dictionary of the Middle Ages. New York: Scribner's, 1982. A multi-volume work by distinguished medieval scholars that provides excellent information on Eddie poetry. Up-to-date and authoritative.

Sturluson, Snorri. The Prose Edda: Tales from Norse Mythology. Translated by Jean I. Young. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.

Available in paperback, this readable translation from the Icelandic is a good source for Norse mythology. An introduction by noted professor Sigurthur Nordal explains the Edda's importance in Icelandic literature.

Taylor, Paul B., and W. H. Auden, trans.

The Elder Edda: A Selection. New York: Random House, 1970. A selection of Eddie poems, complete with useful annotations and a glossary.

Terry, Patricia, trans. Poems of the Vikings: The Elder Edda. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969. A useful translation of The Elder Edda, including the early ballads of Fafnir, Sigurd, Gudrun, and Brunhild.

Related Titles

Readers who wish to compare Green's myths to the original sources should consult The Prose Edda, compiled in the thirteenth century by an Icelander named Snorri Sturluson. The Elder Edda, compiled in the twelfth century, is a collection of poems written from 800 to 1100, and a good source of Norse myths. The Nibelungenlied (c. 1200) tells the story of Sigmund, Sigurd, and Brynhild in a much expanded version and would be an ambitious reading project.

The Norse sagas, available in excellent translations by Magnus Magnusson and Herman Palsson, are excellent reading for those already familiar with Norse mythology.

The Namia books of C. S. Lewis and The Lord of the Rings by J. R. R. Tolkien are both heavily influenced by Norse myth, and German composer Richard Wagner (1813-1883) used the Norse myths as the basis for his series of operas, The Ring of the Nibelung (1876).

Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotes Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996