Norse Mythology (Stories) Study Guide

Norse Mythology (Stories) by Neil Gaiman

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The following version of this book was sued to create this study guide: Gaiman, Neil. Norse Mythology. W.W. Norton and Company, 2017

Norse Mythology is a series of traditional stories from ancient Norse mythology as retold by author Neil Gaiman. The book is written in the third-person and in past tense, except for the final chapter, which is written and the present and future tenses. The book opens with an introduction from the author explaining the cultural and literary significances of Norse mythology. He also explores differences between traditional Norse mythology and the ways that figures of Norse mythology are portrayed in popular culture. Lastly, the author details his research methods and lists the sources of traditional Norse mythology that he utilized in his research.

The first chapter gives information about the three main figures in Norse mythology: Odin, his son Thor, and his adopted son Loki, all of whom are Aesir, which is the name of the gods of Asgard. The next chapter relates the Norse creation myth, beginning with the formless mists and fires that form the giants and the nine worlds. The giants give birth to the first gods, and Odin is among them. Odin creates human life in the world called Midgard, and he also builds a wall separating Midgard from Jotunheim, the world of the giants, who are the enemies of the Aesir. The next chapter discusses Yggdrasil, the life-giving world tree that stretches throughout the cosmos. This chapter also lists the nine realms of Norse mythology, each of which is inhabited by a different group of creatures. This is followed by a brief chapter concerning the story Odin sacrificing his eye for the attainment of great wisdom.

The next chapter tells a story in which Loki shaves the head of Thor’s wife, Sif, as a prank. Thor forces Loki to remedy the problem, so Loki goes to visit dwarves who are also master craftsman. He convinces the dwarves to create treasures for the gods. The following chapter tells a story with a similar pattern of Loki creating a problem and then fixing it. A mysterious man comes to Asgard and proposes to build an impenetrable wall around it. In exchange, he asks for the hand of the goddess Freya in marriage. Loki convinces the Aesir to agree to the bargain but to only give the builder his payment if he completes the task in six months. The builder, who turns out to be a giant, nearly completes the task, but Loki uses trickery to foil the giant. Loki is also a central character in the following chapter, which tells the story of Loki’s affair with a giantess and the three evil children to whom the giantess then gives birth.

In the next chapter, an ogre lord named Thrym steals Thor’s hammer and says he will give it back if he is allowed to marry the goddess Freya. Thor and Loki go to the ogre’s castle in disguise; Loki is disguised as a maidservant, and Thor is disguised in a wedding dress and veil, pretending to be Freya. In the banquet hall, when Thrym brings out Thor’s hammer, Thor picks it up and slays the ogres. The subsequent chapter is one of the longest and most complicated in the novel, and it tells the story of the creation of a magical mead that gives anyone who drinks it the ability to create beautiful poetry. Odin steals this mead and brings it back to Asgard, and it is said that this mead is the

source of all great poetry. In the next chapter, Thor and Loki travel to Jotunheim, the land of giants, where they are guests of a giant king named Utgardaloki. Utgardaloki challenges them to various competitions, which Thor and Loki appear to lose. However, Utgardaloki later reveals that he beat them only through the use of illusions.

In the following chapter, Loki is captured by the giant Thiazi, who lets Loki go only after he has promised to steal the Aesir's apples of immortality and give them to Thiazi. Loki does so, after which he is forced by the Aesir to retrieve them. Loki does so, and the Aesir kill Thiazi. The next chapter tells the story of the god named Frey. He is a god of Asgard, but he falls in love with a giantess. In order to win her love, he gives away his magical sword, thus leaving him more vulnerable in the eventual advent of Ragnarok, the apocalypse of Nose mythology. The subsequent chapter tells the story of Thor's visit to the giant Hymir. Thor and Hymir go on a fishing expedition together, and Thor nearly catches Jormungandr, the enormous serpent in the seas of Midgard.

The final three chapters form a nearly seamless narrative. The first of these chapters tells the story of the death of Balder, the mast beloved of the Aesir. Balder is killed due to mischief caused by Loki. In the next chapter, Loki flees Asgard to escape punishment for his crime, but the Aesir eventually catch him and punish him by killing Loki's son and then imprisoning Loki for eternity. The final chapter tells of Ragnarok, the prophesied apocalypse of Norse mythology. Loki and his three remaining children escape their places of imprisonment and fight against the Aesir. Meanwhile, the world is consumed with fire. In the wake of all of this destruction, the world tree, Yggdrasil, breathes new life into the world, thus restarting the cycle of rebirth after the world's death.

Pages 11 – 68

Summary

Pages 11 - 18: The author introduces the collection of stories by discussing the history and importance of Norse mythology. He points out that the figures of Norse myths have various differences from how they are portrayed in popular culture. He also says that Norse mythology contains many elements that have influenced myths and religions that formed later. He then states that many Norse myths have been lost, and the ones that have not been lost mostly concern three figures: The god Odin, Odin's son Thor, and Odin's adopted son Loki. He concludes the introduction by discussing the texts he consulted for research, and he says that myths are meant to be retold by various storytellers. He says that the myths in the book are his own retellings, and he encourages the readers to retell the myths in their own ways.

Pages 19 – 26: The author then discusses the three main figures of Norse mythology. Odin is "the highest and the oldest of all the gods" (21). He is the leader of the Aesir, which is a name for the gods of Asgard. He performed a sacrifice ritual on himself to gain wisdom and magical powers, and he sacrificed his eye to gain great wisdom. From his throne in Asgard, he is able to survey all parts of every realm in the cosmos. Thor is the son of Odin. He is the god of lightning, and although he is not very smart, he is incredibly strong and powerful. He wields a hammer called Mjollnir, and he is the defender of Asgard (the realm of the gods) and Midgard (the realm of humans.) Loki is the son of two giants. He is lives in Asgard, and he greatly enjoys causing mischief. He is very intelligent, and although he often causes problems, he usually does as much good as harm. However, Loki and his children are destined to fight against the Aesir at Ragnarok, which is the end of the world.

Pages 27 – 48: In the creation myth of Norse mythology, the cosmos formed out of shapeless mist. It formed Ymir, the first being, who gave birth to giants. These giants gave birth to Odin and his brothers, Vili and Ve. Odin and his brothers slew Ymir and used his flesh to create the world. The earth is a flat disk surrounded by water. The giants live at the edge of the world, and Odin and his brothers created a wall to separate the giants from the rest of the world, which they named Midgard. In Midagrd, Vili and Ve shaped wood into humans, and Odin breathed life into them. This is why one of Odin's titles is "the all-father" (35). The world tree, Yggdrasil, is an enormous ash tree that spreads throughout the universe and gives life. It reaches through all the realms and worlds of the cosmos.

Pages 49 – 68: As a prank, Loki magically removes the hair of Thor's wife, Sif, so that the hair will never regrow. Thor threatens to brutally hurt Loki if he does not fix the problem somehow. Loki goes to Svartlfheim, the realm of the dwarves, and he speaks with two groups of dwarf brothers. He challenges each group of brothers to make better treasures for the gods than the other group, and he says that one of the treasures must be golden hair. One of the groups, comprised of dwarves named Brokk and Eitri, agree

to the contest, but only if they can keep Loki's head if they win. Loki agrees and then unsuccessfully attempts to sabotage Brokk and Eitri, who create three great treasures for the gods: a golden boar called Gullinbursti, a self-copying arm ring called Draupnir, and the great hammer Mjollnir. The gods judge these to be the finest treasures, and Loki manages to avoid having his head cut off through use of tricky logic and semantics.

Analysis

The book's introduction, while seemingly superfluous, is actually integral to the function of the book in several ways. Firstly, it helps give the reader a sense of the importance of Norse mythology in terms of history, religion, and even literary significance. As the author says, "History and religion and myth combine" (13). Gaiman argues that many literary and religious traditions contain referents to things that originated in Norse mythology, and it is thusly important to understand the Norse myths that originate these traditions. Secondly, Gaiman argues for the importance of myths in the history of storytelling as an art form. Gaiman argues that the unique nature of myths is that they are kept alive by the act of retelling them in different ways and by different people. Thus, one of the implied purposes of the novel is not only to give the reader a primer of various stories of Norse mythology, but also to demonstrate how the myths may be subjected to someone's personal styles and sensibilities so that may take on a new life, engaging new readers and listeners members.

The section of the book dedicated to the introduction of Odin, Thor, and Loki not only serves the practical purpose of familiarizing the reader with the most prominent characters in Norse mythology, it also juxtaposes the contrasting natures of these characters to establish some of the main themes and sources of conflict in the novel. The benevolence, power, and wisdom of Odin help to establish him as a symbol of goodness and justice for the reader. Odin, in all of his valiance, intelligence, and righteousness, appears to act as an exemplar for the primary values of Norse society. Thor then seems to act as a strong yet less self-aware extension of these virtues. Thor, through the will and direction of Odin, seeks to protect serve these values by protecting the Aesir and the humans of Midgard. Loki, on the other hand, represents a corruption of these values. Loki is very intelligent and cunning, but his amorality robs him of any positive intentions. The malevolence of this amorality is emphasized when the narration mentions that Loki is destined to fight against the Aesir during Ragnarok.

The Norse creation myth, although rather complicated, appears to be based around a principle of the opposing forces of good and evil. The world is created out of many hostile and unstable forces, and while these forces lead to the creation of the Aesir and the humans, they also lead to the creation of malevolent beings such as the giants. The world is thusly divided between forces of destruction and forces of benevolence and self-preservation. This dynamic is present even at the largest view of the cosmos, which not only contains the fires that shall consume the world during Ragnarok, it also contains the life-giving world tree Yggdrasil, which will give the cosmos new life even after Ragnarok. The Norse view of the cosmos thusly seems to be a view of the

opposing forces of good and evil, life and death, which appear to exist in the human world as well as all of the other realms.

The first tale that the novel contains helps to demonstrate and exemplify various elements that are present in many of the book's stories. The basic arc of the story is that Loki causes great harm through his mischief and must then use his cunning to fix this problem or else suffer great consequences. This description may be applied to many other tales contained in the book. This pattern helps to deepen and further explore the nature of the conflict between Loki's nature and the ideologies of the other Aesir. The tale also helps acclimate the reader to Gaiman's style when approaching these myths, which is quite comical in the fashion of dark humor. Much of this humor arises from the various ways in which Gaiman humanizes the god's emphasizing their flaws and the ways in which these flaws contrast with their might and wisdom and power.

Discussion Question 1

What aspects of Odin and his origins make him fit to be the ruler of the Aesir? What aspects of Odin, if any, represent his flaws or possible unfitness for the position?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways does the Norse creation myth reflect the nature of Norse mythology? In what ways might it reflect upon Norse culture?

Discussion Question 3

How does the story of the gods' treasures establish and introduce important character dynamics? What are other possible reasons for the selection of this story as one of the first in the book?

Vocabulary

impose, sequence, mischief, irascible, truce, accommodate, attribute, contradict, invaluable, consult, rune, agony, gallows, plausible, subtle, woe, maelstrom, nourish, resilient

Pages 69 – 124

Summary

Pages 69 – 90: The next story is entitled “The Master Builder.” Thor goes east to fight trolls, and the rest of the Aesir realize how unprotected they are without Thor and Mjollnir. They decide that they need to build a wall around Asgard to keep out their enemies. A man arrives and says that he will build an impenetrable wall around Asgard, and it will only take him 18 months. He says that in payment, he wants the sun, the moon, and the hand of the beautiful goddess Freya in marriage. Loki tells the gods to accept the offer, but on the condition that the man will only be paid if he completes the task in six months. That way, the gods will have the foundations of their wall built for free. The man accepts, and he begins to build the wall at an impressive speed. After several months, it soon becomes clear that the man may finish the wall. The gods believe that the man must actually be a giant, for no human could work so quickly. Loki solves the problem my shape-shifting into a mare and luring away the man’s workhorse. Before the giant can complete the wall, Thor returns and kills the giant with the help of his hammer Mjollnir. Meanwhile, Loki, having copulated with the horse, gives birth to a mighty eight-legged horse named Sleipnir, and he presents it as a gift to Odin.

Pages 91 – 106: The next story is called “The Children of Loki.” Loki is married to a woman named Sigyn and has a son named Narfi. However, he sneaks away from Asgard and has an affair with a giantess named Angrboda. Angrboda then gives birth to three children: a serpent, a girl, and a wolf. The serpent, Jormungandr, grows very rapidly, and the gods cast it into the sea. It is later called the world serpent and the Midgard serpent, for it is able to wrap itself around all of Midagrd. The daughter, Hel, appears malevolent and ghastly, and they assign her to rule over the dishonorable dead in the underworld, which they then call Helheim. The wolf, Fenrir, grows very rapidly as well, and the gods begin to fear it. They trick Fenrir into allowing them to bind it with an unbreakable chain, and in retaliation, Fenrir bites off the hand of the god Tyr, with whom Fenrir had previously been friends. Fenrir says that he now wishes to harm the gods, but only because they deceived and bound him. It is prophesied that during Ragnarok, Fenrir will become loose from his chains and fight against the Aesir.

Pages 107 – 124: Thor awakes one morning to find that his hammer is missing, meaning that the Aesir are much more valuable to attack. Loki travels about the realms looking for the hammer and discovers that it has been stolen by Thrym, the lord of the ogres. He says that he will give return the hammer if he is given Freya’s hand in marriage. Loki returns to Asgard and tells this news to the other Aesir. They then plan to send Thor in a wedding dress and veil to pretend to be Freya and steal back the hammer. Loki shape-shifts into a woman and accompanies Thor in the disguise of a maidservant. At Thrym’s castle, Thor’s disguise proves to not be completely convincing, but Loki manages to explain away the things that rouse Thrym’s suspicion. Before the wedding ceremony, Thrym has Mjollnir carried into the hall as a token of the

consecration of the wedding. Thor then grabs Mjollnir, uses it to kill all the ogres, and then Loki and Thor return to Asgard with the retrieved Mjollnir.

Analysis

While the story of “The Master Builder” appears to simply reinforce the character dynamics established in the previous story, it actually helps to build and inform the world of Norse mythology in several diverse ways. Firstly, it establishes the nature of the threats and problems that the Aesir must strive to overcome and plan for in their regular lives. Thor’s departure to fight trolls for example, implies that the Aesir face ongoing threats from many different fronts and many different enemies, the trolls being but one example. Thor’s absence emphasizes the necessity of Mjollnir as a defensive weapon for the Aesir, and the necessity of a wall around Asgard further affirms the state of constant possible threat that the Aesir face. The figure of the master builder further develops the hostilities faced by the Aesir when the master builder is revealed to be a giant. The giants, who are separated from Asgard by a wall built by Odin, are further developed as an ongoing threat to the Aesir. This chapter also introduces the important figure of Freya, whose beauty attracts the attention of many different malevolent figures in Norse myths, including other myths contained within this book.

The story of Loki’s children essentially acts as an origin story for three prominent figures of malevolence in Norse mythology, and the juxtaposition of these three figures helps to illustrate various antitheses for the virtues demonstrated by the Aesir. In addition, the Aesir’s fear of these figures serves to humanize the Aesir and demonstrate their fallibility. For example, as Jormungandr grows in size, he inspires an increasing amount of fear in the gods, and even though they cast him into the sea around Midgard, the danger that the serpent represents has not been diminished. It simply waits in the ocean for Ragnarok to occur, when it can indulge in its violent nature against the Aesir. Similarly, the gods attempt to utilize the apparent evil of Hel for a useful purpose, allowing her to reign over the dishonorable dead, but her continued existence, like that of Jormungandr, merely promises eventual danger to the Aesir. In the case of Fenrir, the danger that Fenrir poses appears to be directly linked to the gods’ fear, for Fenrir states, “If you had not lied to me, I would have been a friend to the gods. But your fear has betrayed you. I will kill you” (106).

The story of Thor’s stolen hammer does not do much to deepen the themes or character relationships of the book, but it does serve as an entertaining anecdote that emphasizes the role of humor in these retellings of Norse myths. Although Thor has a more central role in this story than the previous ones, he serves mostly to act as a source of comic relief. His bumbling attitude and inability to remain discreet while disguised serve to emphasize Thor’s overall lack of intelligence and self-awareness. The situation of Thor’s stolen hammer mostly serves as a platform between the comedic juxtaposition between Thor’s incompetence and Loki’s attempts to keep the ruse from failing. As a result, Thor’s ultimate redemption—in the form of using Mjollnir to dispatch the ogres—is presented less as a triumph and more as a humorous comment on Thor’s relative uselessness when parted from his hammer.

Discussion Question 1

How does the story of the master builder help to further explore and establish the world of the Aesir? What similarities or differences does it share with the story of the gods' treasures?

Discussion Question 2

How does the narrative characterize Loki's children? What do Loki's children represent, both individually and as a whole? What narrative functions do they serve?

Discussion Question 3

What are the tonal similarities and differences between "Freya's Unusual Wedding" and the other stories? What function does this story serve compared to the other stories?

Vocabulary

graze, seldom, incantation, ardor, cunning, enmity, rouse, forge, joist, fetter, pare, scowl, dainty, rivulet, quench, dour, silhouette, harried, deter, carmine, intimidate

Pages 125 – 178

Summary

Pages 125 – 136: The subsequent story is entitled “The Mead of Poets.” The story begins at the end of the war between the Aesir and the Vanir. The Vanir are the gods of a realm called Vanaheim. When it becomes apparent that neither side can win the war, they agree to a truce. They have a feast to celebrate this truce, and the saliva of the Aesir and Vanir mingles on the feasting table. The gods decide to make a man out of this mingled saliva. The man is called Kvasir, and he possesses great knowledge and wisdom. The gods send Kvasir to travel throughout the realms in order to gather and distribute knowledge. Kvasir eventually comes across two dwarf brothers, Fjalar and Galar, who kill Kvasir and use his blood to brew a magical mead. The mead grants any who consume it the ability to create great poetry. Later, the dwarves accidentally cause the death of a giant named Gilling when they all go rowing together in a boat. The boat sinks and breaks, and Gilling drowns. Suttung, the son of Gilling, finds out about this, and he takes the mead of poetry from the dwarves as recompense for the death of his father.

Pages 137 – 153: From the all-seeing position of his throne, Odin learns of the mead of poetry, and he sets out to steal it away from Suttung. He goes to the farm of Suttug’s brother, Baugi, where he kills the nine giant slaves that work Baugi’s fields. Then, in disguise, Odin goes to Baugi and says that he can do the work of all those slaves combined, and he would like Suttung’s mead of poetry as payment. When Baugi sees that Odin really can work at a prodigious pace, he asks Suttung for some of the mead of poetry to give as payment. Suttung refuses, and he names the mountain under which the mead is buried. Baugi then helps Odin break in to the mountain. There, Odin seduces the giantess who guards the mead, and he drinks up all the mead that is stored there. He then transforms into a giant bird and flies to Asgard, where he vomits the mead into a bucket. The narration then says that this mead is the source of all good poetry. The narration also adds that a little bit of the mead came out of Odin’s backside, and this mead is supposedly where bad poetry comes from.

Pages 154 – 178: The next story concerns a journey taken by Thor and Loki to Jotunheim, the land of giants. On their way through Midgard, Thor and Loki are hosted by a family of humans. Loki convinces one of them, a boy named Thialfi, to break the bones of one of Thor’s goats and drink the marrow to gain great strength. When Thor discovers that Thialfi has done this, he demans that Thialfi act as a servant on their journey. In Jotunheim, they meet a very large giant named Skrymir. They attempt to steal from Skrymir while he sleeps, but they are unable to undo the strong cords of his bag. They are also unable to harm or even wake Skrymir, even with the use of Thor’s mighty hammer Mjollnir. At the castle of Utgardaloki, a leader of giants. Utgardaloki challenges the travellers to various contests. He challenges Loki to an eating contest, he challenges Thailfi to a running contest, and he challenges Thor to various contests of strength. However, the travelers lose every contest to their giant competitors, much to

their surprise and dismay. While escorting the travelers out of the castle, Utgardaloki reveals that all of the challenges—including their encounter with Skrymir—were illusions created by Utgardaloki, and thus these challenges were impossible to win. In retaliation for this trickery, Thor kills Utgardaloki and many of the other giants in the castle.

Analysis

Although “The Mead of Poets” only tangentially discuss the war between the Aesir and the Vanir, this war appears to be a defining event in world of Norse mythology, and this story’s allusion to the war helps to establish and develop that idea. Instead of dedicating an entire chapter to the war between the Aesir and the Vanir, the book only briefly mentions this dynamic at various times in the book, with the opening of “The Mead of Poets” being the most prominent example. The Vanir are a separate group of gods who live in Vanaheim as opposed to Asgard, and that is made fairly clear in this story. The story also mentions the Vanir’s role in the production of food and grains and the tending of nature. This is cited as one of the main reasons why the Aesir and the Vanir decide to come to a truce. While not much more information is given on this inter-group dynamic, the book appears to give just enough information to orient the read while also subtly encouraging them to research this relationship on their own, as the book itself merely acts as a primer on Norse mythology and not an exhaustive guide.

The main narrative concerning the mead of poetry stands as one of the longest and most detailed in the novel; this level of attention appears to emphasize the mythological and thematic importance of the mead of poetry as both an object and a concept. Although the book itself is written in prose, the inclusion of this story appears to imply that poetry holds a position of great importance in Norse mythology and Norse culture. The actual plot of the story is quite dramatic and relatively complex, with many different ideas and scenes culminating in Odin’s ultimate possession of the mead. All of the drama contained within the story further reflects the power of storytelling and the necessity of poetry and poetic language in telling those stories in engaging and effective ways. Because the book itself functions as an introduction to Norse mythology, the book’s versions of these myths do not often feature highly complicated or poetic language, but the prose does seem to often contain poetry in many of the simple and beautiful images and descriptions it contains. Thus, both the language of the novel and the presentation of the story of the mead of poetry helps to argue for the integral role that poetry and poetic language have in the art form that is mythology. As the narration states: “We know that those people who can make magic with their words, who can make poems and sagas and weave tales, have tasted the mead of poetry” (151).

Unlike many of the other stories that involve Thor and Loki, the story of their journey to Jotunheim does not develop the ideological differences between Thor and Loki, but rather the ideological and cultural differences between the Aesir and their enemies the giants. While Loki does engage in some mischief towards the beginning of the novel, it is rather minor and not highly integral to the story. The real focus of the narrative is the giants’ use of trickery to make themselves look powerful and to make the Aesir look weak. Utgardaloki’s name roughly translates to “Loki of the outer lands,” thus indicating

the trickery in which these giants enjoy. However, unlike Loki himself, these giants use trickery for a distinct purpose. Utgardaloki creates illusions to gauge the true strength and danger of the Aesir. Loki himself would never engage in anything so practical. Thor, meanwhile, disagrees with the giants' trickery simply based on principle and on the fact that the giants intend to use their new knowledge to undermine the Aesir. Thus, this story actually serves to find something resembling common ground between the usually-at-odds Thor and Loki.

Discussion Question 1

How do the various plot points of "The Mead of Poets" connect to the story's overall themes or functions? Why does this story in particular have such a complicated plot?

Discussion Question 2

How does "The Mead of Poets" explore the differences between the Aesir and the other beings of the Norse worlds? What are the apparent differences between the Aesir, the Vanir, the dwarves, and the giants as explored in this story?

Discussion Question 3

In "Thor's Journey to the Land of the Giants," what important characteristics does the story reveal about the Aesir and their relationship to the giants? What are the most important functions of this narrative?

Vocabulary

renown, shackle, marrow, convoluted, parley, illustrious, grandeur, typical, glance, arduous, glower, valiant, tome, ponder, remark, plait, dissuade, voracious, gregarious, rebuke

Pages 179 – 228

Summary

Pages 179 – 198: The next story is entitled “The Apples of Immortality.” The story opens in the mountains at the edge of Jotunheim. Thor and Loki sit around a campfire with another god named Hoenir. Suddenly, an enormous eagle swoops down upon them and picks up Loki, carrying him off into the air. The eagle threatens to kill Loki unless Loki agrees to steal the apples of immortality and give them to the eagle. Loki agrees to this and the eagle lets him go. Later, in Asgard, Loki speaks to Idunn, he keep of the apples of immortality. Loki says that he has found much better apples in the woods and says that he will show Idunn where he found them. In the woods, the eagle swoops down and carries away Idunn along with the apples of immortality. The eagle declares itself to be a giant named Thiazi. When the gods find out what happened, they force Loki to retrieve Idunn and the apples. Loki transforms into an eagle, flies to Thiazi’s castle, transforms Iddun into a hazelnut, and carries her back to Asgard. Thiazi chases in the form of an eagle, but when Thiazi reaches Asgard, the Aesir kill him.

Pages 199 – 210: The next story concerns Frey, an Aesir and the brother of Freya. Although Frey is very handsome and is a great warrior, he finds that he is unfulfilled. He sneaks into Odin’s hall, and there, he gazes out over the nine worlds. He sees a beautiful giantess named Gerd, and he immediately falls in love with her. He asks his servant, an elf named Skirnir, to go and win Gerd for him. Skirnir does so, and he requests to be paid with Frey’s magical sword. After Gerd agrees to marry Frey, Frey gives his magical sword to Skirnir. The narration notes that Frey is very happy in his marriage to Skirnir, but the narration also states that the Aesir are more vulnerable for the loss of Frey’s sword. The narration ends the story by ominously stating that during Ragnarok, “Frey will wish he still had his sword” (209).

Pages 211 – 228: The next story opens in the hall of a sea giant named Aegir. The Aesir arrive and request Aegir to make a feast for them. Aegir agrees to do so, but only if the Aesir provide a cauldron big enough for all of the ale that the Aesir wish to drink. Tyr declares that his father, a giant king named Hymir, has a suitable cauldron, and Thor accompanies Tyr to retrieve this cauldron. They arrive at Hymir’s home, and Tyr introduces Thor as Veor, as Thor is a great enemy of the giants. Hymir treats the two gods as guest, and Hymir suggests a fishing outing. Thor accompanies Hymir, and during the outing, Thor nearly catches Jormungandr, the world serpent. The serpent damages their boat, and Hymir just barely manages to row them back to shore before the boat sinks. Thor then carries Hymir back to his house. During a feast that evening, Thor requests the use of the large cauldron, and Hymir says that Thor can have the cauldron if he is able to break Hymir’s drinking cup. Using a hint from Hymir’s mother, Thor breaks the cup by smashing it across Hymir’s extremely hard skull. Thor then collects the cauldron as his prize and carries it back to the hall of Aegir, there the Aesir enjoy a feast prepared by Aegir.

Analysis

The main function of “The Apples of Immortality” is to further demonstrate the nature of the Aesir’s vulnerability and fallibility. Firstly, strictly from a practical point of view, the Aesir’s dependence on the apples of immortality represents a major weakness in the Aesir’s existence. The revelation that the Aesir’s immortality is not intrinsic to them radically alters the idea of the Aesir as gods. Although many of the Aesir’s abilities are natural to them, they rely on magical items for many other advantages they enjoy, and the fact that this applies to their immortality challenges the very nature of their status as gods. This tale juxtaposes this vulnerability with the specific vulnerability that Loki represents. Once Loki is released by the eagle, Loki does not technically have to follow through on his promise to steal the apples. However, Loki’s mischievous nature appears to be the force that compels him to make good on this hazardous promise. Although Loki ultimately helps undo the problem, his willingness to turn against the Aesir foreshadows the threat that Loki and his children eventually pose to the Aesir.

The story of Frey and Gerd continues to develop these themes of vulnerability and humanity in the gods. The story opens by establishing that Frey is a great warrior and enjoys the myriad perks of being a god of Asgard. However, he is paralyzed by his sudden love for Gerd, which seems very similar to the type of sudden and irrational passion that one might expect to find in humans. Not only does this love appear to essentially paralyze Frey and make him despondent, but the fulfillment of his love makes him even more vulnerable. Frey gives his sword to Skirnir as payment for helping win Gerd’s love, and the narration makes a specific point of how this makes Frey more vulnerable. The narration’s makes an ominous comment that “Frey will wish he still had his sword” (209) during Ragnarok. This comment may imply that Frey is specifically doomed to die during Ragnarok due to the loss of his sword, or simply that the Aesir in general will be more vulnerable, but either way, Frey’s lowered defenses due to his obsessive love help to humanize him and highlight his various vulnerabilities.

The most striking facet of the story of Thor and Hymir is the various ways in which it explores surprisingly positive aspects of the relationship between the Aesir and the giants. Previously, the giants have only represented outright enemies of the Aesir, and while that is somewhat the case in this tale, the relationship is revealed to be more nuanced. For example, the story begins with the Aesir paying a visit to a sea giant named Aegir, woshing only to feast in Aegir’s gradn hall. Secondly, Tyr appears to have an amicable relationship with father, the giant king Hymir. Thirdly, although Thor is technically an enemy of Hymir, Thor’s disguise as “Veor” gives him the opportunity to win Hymir’s respect. Thor even receives assistance in winning the cauldron when Hymir’s mother surreptitiously gives Thor some helpful advice. The story even ends with Aegir’s agreement to cook a harvest feast for the Aesir every year. Thus, the tale not only functions as an entertaining adventure and a more nuanced exploration of Aesir-giant realtions, it also appear to function as an examination to the possibilities for peace between supposed enemies.

Discussion Question 1

What do the apples of immortality appear to symbolize? What important implications do the existence of the apples have with regards to the Aesir?

Discussion Question 2

What is the nature of Frey's love for Gerd, and in what ways does this love humanize Frey? What are the consequences and implications of this love?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the relationship between Tyr and his parents? How does this comtrast with Thor's relationship with Tyr's parents? What implications do these relationships carry with regards to the relationships between Aesir and giants?

Vocabulary

antipathy, mire, ruse, cask, wane, carouse, keen, deem, nettle, frail, inveigh, aggrieved, callous, digress, prudent, tactic, jubilant, effusive, diligent, writhe, profess

Pages 229 – 283

Summary

Pages 229 – 248: The story entitled “The Death of Balder” begins with a description of Balder as the kindest and most beautiful of the Aesir. Balder begins to have nightmares, and Odin visits the grave of a wise dead woman who may be able to shed light on the meaning of these dreams. Odin animates the woman’s dead body and asks questions of the body. She says that Balder is in imminent danger of death. Odin tells this to his wife, Frigg, and she walks the earth to procure a promise from every being and object that they will not harm Balder. The only thing from which she does not bother to extract this promise is the mistletoe plant, as she deems it harmless. Loki, discovering this information, sets out to use the information to cause mischief. In Asgard, the Aesir amuse themselves by attacking Balder and seeing how no object can hurt him. Balder’s blind brother, Hod, wishes to join in on the fun, so Loki hands him a poison dart of mistletoe. Hod throws this, unwittingly killing Balder. Loki flees from Asgard, and the Aesir attempt to bargain with Hel. Hel says that she will restore Balder to life if every living thing on the planet declares that they wish for Balder to return. Loki, disguised as an old woman, says that he wishes for Balder to remain dead, so Hel does not return balder to life.

Pages 249 – 266: The next story, “The Last Days of Loki,” takes place immediately after “The Death of Balder.” When Loki attempts to join the Aesir for a banquet in the hall of the sea giant Aegir, Thor threatens to kill Loki for his evil deeds. Loki flees to the mountains where he has a secluded home. He decides that if the Aesir find him, he will turn into a salmon and flee in the river. Loki invents a net and then worries that the Aesir might make one if they saw his, so he burns the net The Aesir soon find the house and the burned remains of the net. They make their own net and use it to catch Loki. The Aesir punish Loki by killing his son Narfi and binding Loki in a cave. They place a snake above him, and the snake continually drops venom onto Loki’s face. Loki’s wife Sigyn must remain in the cave constantly to catch the venom in a bowl, thus protecting Loki from the pain of the venom. The narration states that that is where Loki remains until Ragnarok.

Pages 266 – 283: The final story of the book is entitled “Ragnarok: the Final Destiny of the Gods,” and it tells the prophesied story of Ragnarok. It will begin with a long and terrible winter that will cause all humans to turn on each other. Then the earth will be consumed by fire and earthquakes. Finally, Loki and his children will escape and fight against the Aesir. The Aesir’s many enemies will also attack. Almost all of the gods will be killed, and Loki and all of his forces will perish. However, after Ragnarok, Yggdrasil the world tree will breathe new life into the cosmos. The few remaining gods will discover chess pieces resembling themselves and all the perished beings, and they will begin a game of chess with these pieces. The novel ends with the line “And the game begins anew” (283).

Analysis

The three final stories of the novel appear to act as one continuous narrative, detailing the fall of Loki and the rise of Ragnarok, and exploring the mythological implications of these series of events. As has been heavily foreshadowed throughout the novel, Loki poses one of the main threats to the Aesir during the apocalyptic even that is Ragnarok. However, Loki's actions and subsequent punishment in "The Death of Balder" and "The Last Days of Loki" are key to understanding why Loki ultimately turns against the Aesir, who are technically his family. While Loki's previous actions generally cause no permanent harm, his mischief with regards to Balder results in dire consequences for the Aesir. Balder appears to be the most beloved of all the Aesir, and thus Balder's death is a great tragedy for the gods of Asgard. Even Loki realizes that he has finally gone too far, and while he feels no shame, he does flee Asgard because he realizes that there will be terrible consequences. Loki's punishment when caught is quite dark and severe, involving not only the execution of his son, but also the eternal confinement of himself and his wife. This confinement is only broken by the advent of Ragnarok, and so Loki's resentment compels him to fight against the Aesir for revenge. This provides a much richer and more complex nature to Loki's betrayal than simply the expected amoral turns of his nature.

As the event that concludes both the book and the sequence of Norse mythology, Ragnarok presents a very complex series of events and corresponding thematic movements. When Ragnarok is finally described in the novel, it appears to be a much more complicated event than an outright apocalypse and total destruction of the cosmos, although it certainly carries important apocalyptic elements. From the perspective of humanity, Ragnarok appears to be an event of total extermination. Even before the earth is engulfed in flames and earthquakes, a harsh winter exterminates most of humanity. The only surviors of Ragnarok appear to be a few benevolent gods, but humanity does not survive. In this way, Ragnarok appears to be more concerned with the destruction of humanity than of the entire world.

An even more striking and significant feature of Ragnarok is that it does not actually represent an ultimate end, but instead it leads to a type of rebirth in the wake of so much death and destruction: "That is the end, but there is also what will come after the end. From the grey waters of the ocean, the green earth will arise once more" (279). While Ragnarok causes much destruction to the nine realms, the life-giving world tree Yggdrasil remains unscathed, and it proceeds to fill the world with new life. Moreover, the survival of some of the gods implies that they may possibly re-create humanity, as humanity was originally created by gods. This potentiality is symbolized by the cryptic chess game that the remaining gods begin to play, using chess pieces that have mysteriously appeared on their own. This game may be interpreted as an abstract representation of the vicissitudes of life and how no destructive event can truly end them, at least in the view of Norse mythology.

Discussion Question 1

What are the literary and characteristic differences between Loki and Balder? In what ways does Loki's plan to kill Balder symbolize these differences?

Discussion Question 2

Why do the Aesir choose to punish Loki in the way that they do? How does this section differ in tone from the rest of the book? What are the sources and functions of these differences?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways is Ragnarok a culmination of previous events from the book? In what ways does Ragnarok act as a culmination of the book's themes?

Vocabulary

enthrall, clamor, distress, naught, despise, birch, infirmity, radiant, astonish, remedy, mourn, foremost, pyre, nimble, decry, repent, snivel, twine, furl, judder, inimical

Characters

Odin

Odin is the leader of the gods of Asgard. He is the son of the giants Bor and Bestla. In order to gain wisdom and the magic powers of runes, he performed a blood ritual on himself while suspended from Yggdrasil, the world tree. He later sacrificed his eye to a god named Mimir in exchange for great wisdom. Odin's hall is called Hlidskjalf, and from his throne, he can view any part of any realm. He is the leader of the Aesir, the gods of Asgard. It is said that those who die in battle join Odin in the Asgard hall of Valhalla in the afterlife. He is called the "all-father" because he breathed life into the first humans created by the gods.

Thor

Thor is the son of Odin. Although Thor is rather dim-witted, he is incredibly strong and powerful. He wields the hammer Mjolnir, which was forged by the dwarf brothers Brokk and Eitri. Mjolnir is said to be the gods' greatest protection against the giants whoa re their enemies. Thor is a great warrior but does not generally serve the role of leader or tactician in the Norse myths, as he is not very intelligent. Instead, he acts more as a weapon, soldier, and enforcer.

Loki

Loki is a god and a member of the Aesir. He is the son of two giants—Laufey and Farbauti—and he is the adopted son of Odin. Loki is a trickster god who greatly enjoys mischief. He is very clever and very able to deceive and manipulate. Although his tricks often cause harm, the Aesir keep him around because he usually causes at least as much good as he harm. He had three children by the giantess Anrboda: Fenrir, Hel, and Jormungandr. At Ragnarok, Loki and his children fight against the Aesir.

Fenrir

Fenrir, also known as Fenris wolf, is an offspring of Loki and the giantess Angrboda. Fenrir is a huge and terrible wolf creature. After his birth, he quickly grows to be very large and very strong, and the gods begin to fear him. The gods deceive him and bind him in unbreakable chains, and in revenge, Fenrir bites off the hand of the god Tyr, who had earlier befriended Fenrir. It is prophesied that at Ragnarok, Fenrir will become lose from his chains and fight against the Aesir.

Hel

Hel is the daughter of Loki and the giantess Angrboda. She is mild-tempered but vaguely threatening, and so the Aesir assign her to preside over the dead who died dishonorably or did not die in battle. Hel accepts this position. It is prophesied that, during Ragnarok, she will fight with her father Loki and her brothers against the gods of Asgard.

Jormungandr

Jormungandr is an enormous serpent. His name translates to “huge monster.” He is a son of Loki and the giantess Angrboda. The Aesir banish Jormungadr to Midgard, the realm of humans. Jormungandr is also known as “the serpent of Midgard” and “the world serpent,” because he is able to wrap himself around the large ocean that encircles Midgard. It is prophesied that, during Ragnarok, he will fight with his father Loki and his siblings against the Aesir.

Tyr

Tyr is a god of Asgard. He is associated with law and with glory in battle. He is the son of the giant Hymir, a foe of Thor. Tyr befriends Fenrir, but Fenrir bites off Tyr’s hand after the Aesir deceive Fenrir and bind him with chains. Later, Tyr, brings Thor to the home of his father Hymir, who possesses an enormous cauldron. Thor and Tyr successfully win the cauldron from Hymir and use it to brew mead in Asgard.

Freya

Freya is the most beautiful of the goddesses of Asgard. She is the goddess of love, beauty, fertility, and gold. Many enemies of the Aesir attempt to execute schemes to win Freya’s hand in marriage. A giant offers to build a wall around Asgard in exchange for Freya’s hand in marriage. At another time, an ogre steals Thor’s hammer and says he will only give it back if he is allowed to marry Freya. The Aesir successfully protect Freya in all of these instances.

Frey

Frey is a god of Asgard. He is the brother of Freya. Frey is handsome and intelligent and a great warrior. Frey falls in love with the giantess Gerd and sends his servant, Skirnir, to win her for him. Skirnir does so, and as payment, he requests and receives Frey’s magical sword of great power. During Ragnarok, the absence of Frey’s sword is prophesied to be a great disadvantage for the Aesir.

Balder

Balder is a god of the Aesir. He is said to be the most beautiful of the Aesir, and he is the god of justice, light, and purity. Loki tricks Balder's blind brother Hod into inadvertently killing Balder. Hel, the sovereign of the underworld, agrees to return Balder to life if every living thing in the world proclaims that they wish for Balder to return. However, Loki disguises himself as an old woman and says he wishes for Balder to stay dead, thus sealing Balder's fate.

Utgardaloki

Utgardaloki is one of the leaders of the giants. He is a trickster, and his name means "Loki of the outer lands." He invites Thor and Loki to visit his castle so that their power may be tested. Thor and Loki accept, and they come to Utgardaloki's castle. They compete in challenges with the giants there and lose every challenge. Utgardaloki later reveals that they only lost because Utgardaloki had used various illusions to trick them.

Heimdall

Heimdall is a god of Asgard. He serves as Asgard's gatekeeper, and he possesses a gift of sight that allows him to survey all of the realms of the world. Heimdall is a great warrior who wields a mighty sword. During Ragnarok, he battles with Loki, and Heimdall and Loki ultimately slay one another.

Symbols and Symbolism

Mjollnir

Mjollnir, the hammer of Thor, symbolizes power and protection. When Thor is first given Mjollnir by the dwarves Brokk and Eitri, the gods of Asgard rejoice for the great protection it will provide them from their enemies. When the hammer is stolen by the king of the ogres, it represents a moment of grave panic for the Aesir. In this way, Mjollnir also represents the precariousness of the Aesir's power, as so much of it rests on the possession of Mjollnir.

Yggdrasil

Yggdrasil, also known as the world tree, represents the strength and everlasting nature of life. Yggdrasil is an enormous ash tree at the center of the cosmos. Its root and branches extended to all realms of the universe, and it gives life and stability. The tree is not even felled by Ragnarok, which is supposed to be an apocalyptic event. Instead, the tree gives birth to new life, thus restarting the cycle of death and rebirth.

The Apples of Immortality

The apples of immortality represent both the power and the weakness of the gods of Asgard. The apples are guarded and tended by the goddess Idunn, who regularly distributes them among the other Aesir to keep them young. When the apples are stolen, the Aesir begin to age, as they become vulnerable to the passage of time. The apples are ultimately retrieved, but the fact that they are necessary to keep the gods alive affirms the gods' power as well as their destructibility.

Draupnir

Draupnir represents the wealth of the gods. Many of the figures in the stories possess great wealth in the form of gold, jewels, and other treasures. However, the Aesir appear to be among the wealthiest. Odin receives a band of precious metals from the dwarves Brokk and Eitri, and it is called Draupnir. This translates to "the dripper," because each day the band makes copies of itself. This symbolizes the seemingly inexhaustible wealth that the gods possess.

Frey's Sword

Although Frey's sword represents the power of the gods, its main literary function is to symbolize the human feelings that characterize the gods. These characteristics humanize the gods to a large degree. Frey gives away his sword in order to win the

hand of the giantess Gerd, for he finds himself deeply in love with Gerd. He thusly prizes Gerd over the protection provided by the sword. This love humanizes Frey, but the loss of his sword makes him more vulnerable.

Skidbladnir

Skidbladnir, the ship of the gods, symbolizes travel and adventure. Skidbladnir is the second largest ship in the realms, smaller only than the ship of the underworld that carries the dead. Skidbladnir always sails quickly, regardless of the conditions of the wind. It can even be folded into a small shape and carried easily about. In their adventures, the gods travel to many far-reaching places, and although they do not always use Skidbladnir to travel, it represents their explorative abilities and tendencies.

Gullinbursti

Gullinbursti symbolizes hope in foreboding situations. Gullinbursti is a metal boar with golden bristles forged by the dwarf brothers Brokk and Eitri. It is able to pull a chariot and illuminate darkness with the light of its golden bristles. Gullinbursti acts as a beacon of hope for the gods even in literal or figurative darkness. For example, Gullinbursti is a valuable asset for the gods during the darkness of Ragnarok. However, it is unable to prevent many of the gods' deaths.

Ragnarok

Ragnarok symbolizes death, destruction, and fated doom. Ragnarok is the prophesied end of the world, during which the Aesir must fight against the collective force of all of their enemies. During Ragnarok, Loki and his children fight against the Aesir. This represents a fruition of various poor judgments on the part of the Aesir, such as trusting Loki. However, while Ragnarok does end in much death and destruction, the world tree creates nee life in the wake of the carnage, thus restarting the cycle of death and rebirth.

Fenrir

Fenrir represents fear, both in the abstract sense and in the literal context of Fenrir's relationship with the gods. Fenrir is a son of Loki and the giantess Angrboda. Fenrir takes the form of an enormous wolf. The gods fear him, so they bind him up with an unbreakable chain. Fenrir forms a grudge against the gods for binding him, and during Ragnarok, Fenrir is able to escape his bindings. He then fights against the Aesir, supposedly motivated by his grudge, which came about due to the gods' fear and containment of him.

The Mead of Poetry

The mead of poetry symbolizes beauty and artistry. The mead of poetry is made from the blood of Kvasir, a wise man created by the Aesir and the Vanir. Draves by the name of Fjalar and Galar brew mead with Kvasir's blood, and the mead gives them great poetic powers. The mead comes into the possession of a giant named Suttung, and eventually Odin steals the mead away. The novel's inclusion of the story of the mead of poetry functions as a reminder of the necessity for beautiful storytelling and the hard work and talent that poetry and storytelling require.

Settings

Asgard

Asgard is the realm of many gods in Norse mythology. It is the home of Odin's hall Hlidskjalf, as well as Valhalla, the hall of the human warriors who died bravely in battle. Residents of Asgard include Odin, Thor, Loki, Freya, Frey, Balder, Heimdal, Sif, Hod, and others. Asgard serves as a fortification against the enemies of the Aesir. Asgard contains many grand halls in which the Aesir reside, confer, and have celebrations. Many of the book's stories begin and end in Asgard, as it is the home of the Aesir, who serve as the book's main characters.

Midgard

Midgard is the realm of humans. It is a large land mass surrounded on all sides by water. Midgard was given its shape by the gods. The ocean surrounding Midgard is inhabited by the enormous serpent Jormungandr. In Midgard, Odin and his brothers created the first humans out of pieces of wood, and Odin breathed life into them. The gods rarely visit Midgard, as it is the realm of human affairs, which do not interest the gods enough to interfere with them often. It's name translates to "middle land," as it lies between the other realms of the world.

Jotunheim

Jotunheim is the realm of the giants and ogres, who are enemies of the Aesir. The gods of Asgard rarely venture into Jotunheim other than to do battle with the giants. However, Thor and Loki travel to the castle of the giant named Utgardaloki when invited. Thor and Loki also travel to Jotunheim to retrieve Thor's hammer after it is stolen by the king of the ogres. Thor and Tyr travel to the castle of the giant Hymir, Tyr's father, in an attempt to obtain Hymir's enormous cauldron for the brewing of mead.

Helheim

Helheim is the realm of the dishonorable dead. All beings who die but do not die in battle are sent to Helheim. Helheim is ruled over by Hel, the daughter of Loki. After the god Balder is killed due to trickery by Loki, Balder is sent to Helheim. A god of Asgard named Hermod then travels to Helheim to retrieve Balder. Hermod petitions Hel for Balder's return, but Hel does not ultimately return Balder to life.

Svartalfheim

Svartalfheim is the realm of a race of beings called dwarves. Many of the dwarves are master forgers and craftsman. Among the dwarves in Svartalfheim are a group of brothers called “the sons of Ivalid,” as well as two brothers named Brokk and Eitri. These dwarves make various famous treasures for the gods, including Mjolnir, the hammer of Thor.

Themes and Motifs

Life and Rebirth

Despite the ever-present threat of death and destruction in the tales of Norse mythology, one of the underlying themes of this sequence of tales appears to be the tenacity and everlasting nature of the concept of life. Although individuals in Norse mythology—whether they are humans or giants or gods—are always susceptible to the consequences of violence and danger, the myths appear to treat the concept of life in general as something eternal and invincible. For example, even in the wake of Ragnarok, which is supposed to be the ultimate form of destruction, the earth is reborn when the world tree Yggdrasil breathes new life back into the cosmos. In addition, the surviving gods are able to create new humans. These humans are called “Life and Life’s Yearning” (280). These humans and their names represent the eternal strength and importance that Norse mythology places on the concept of life.

Even before the coming of Ragnarok, Norse mythology appears to treat death not as an ultimate ending, but simply as a transition state between the end one life and rebirth into a subsequent life. For example, humans who actively seek death by braving dangerous combat are ultimately rewarded if they are met with such a fate, for the humans who die in combat are carried away by Valkyries to Valhalla in Asgard. In addition, those who do not die in battle are sent to the realm of Helheim in their next life. In this way, the metaphysics of the mythological Norse world are such that one’s death is inextricable from one’s next life. Thus, considering these facts along with the large-scale rebirth that follows Ragnarok, it is evident that Norse mythology presents death not as an all-important conclusion, but simply as a brief benchmark between all-important but distinct stage of life.

The Norse myths appear to place such emphasis on the importance and eternity of life because life provides the only possible platform for fidelity to the various personal virtues that Norse mythology espouses. Tales of Norse mythology functions as an exploration of social values of valor and justice, it presents life as a constant struggle to stay loyal to these values. The idea that life is eternal makes it much easier for one to disregard one’s own safety or wellbeing in favor of embodying these values. Moreover, from the point of view of mythology, the phenomena of life and rebirth allow the tales to explore the nature of these virtues in a larger metaphysical sense, both in terms of life and in terms of rebirth.

Deceit

Although honesty and justice appear to be such highly regarded virtues in Norse mythology, the use of deceit and cunning appears to be the main motif through which the Norse myths explore the value of honesty. The most prominent example of this comes in the form of the character Loki, who cannot help but operate by deceit in all of

his endeavors. Loki not only uses deceit to fix his own problems and the problems of others, but usually his penchant for trickery is the cause of those problems in the first place. Ultimately, Loki carries this affinity for deceit too far, and it results in the death of Balder, for which Loki is severely punished. Loki is ultimately characterized as a villain when he fights against the Aesir during Ragnarok, and thus the sequence of Norse myths appears to fiercely decry Loki's nature. Although Loki was able to produce much good through cunning, his tricks ultimately do more harm than good.

However, this view of deceit is complicated by the fact that the Aesir often use cunning for noble means, and thus the sequence of myths appears to qualify its position on deceit by arguing that trickery is ultimately bad or good depending on one's intentions. One good example of this would be Odin's use of deceit in order to steal the mead of poetry away from the giant Suttung. Odin's plan is rather long and complicated, and it relies on deceit at every step. Odin tricks the slaves of Baugi, he tricks Baugi himself, he tricks Suttung, and he tricks the giantess who guards the mead. Ultimately, however, this deceit is all for a noble cause. Once Odin retrieves the mead of poetry, he treats it as a gift to the whole world, distributing the poetic nature to many different beings. Thus, Odin's well-intentioned trickery is distinguished from Loki's amoral and sometimes malevolent cunning.

In the end, the tales of Norse mythology treat deceit as something that is rarely a permanent solution, and the tales advocate for direct methods of confrontation as more honest and reliable. Often in the tales, a character's deceit is shown as not being enough in itself to accomplish a task, and direct confrontation is the only viable recourse. For example, Loki's deceit of the master builder prevents the builder from completing the wall around Asgard, but then it becomes necessary for Thor to defeat the giant builder in battle. In another example, Loki is able to use stealth and deceit in order to steal the apples of immortality back from Thiazi, but then the Aesir must defeat Thiazi in battle. In this way, the Norse myths appear to advocate for openness and bravery as the only means of solving one's problems in a conclusive fashion.

Valor and Adventure

Of all the virtues that the Norse myths appear to promote, the most central virtues appear to be those of valor, bravery, and a thirst for adventure. In all of the tales, the Aesir must face some kind of danger with a sense of valor, and often these adventures arise because the Aesir themselves go looking for such adventure of their own volition. For example, Thor often finds himself in positions of great risk because he wishes to prove himself, or else he wishes to preemptively defend his homeland of Asgard. Thor often travels away from Asgard to fight trolls or ogres or giants, and these adventures serve as much to prove Thor's valor as to protect Asgard. Even when Thor is in a position that should not be dangerous in the slightest, such as when he is fishing with Hymir, he finds a way to make the situation risky and full of exciting adventure. As much as these tales are meant to entertain, they also appear to serve the function of inspiring bravery in the audience.

Even Loki, who generally resorts to deceit and trickery in his endeavors, spears to be drive by an underlying code of bravery. Loki's tricks often arise simply out of a need for excitement, and in this way, Loki appears to be drawn to adventure as much as Thor is. Loki's tricks are often ricky in their initial execution, but then they inevitably lead to the need for more tricks in order to undo the damage that the initial tricks have been done. Loki, being as intelligent as he is, must recognize this pattern, and so his initial tricks appear to be partially motivated by the promise of further adventure that will come as a result. In this way, even though Loki appears to operate from a place of avoiding confrontation, he actually is driven by a very strong need to explore the limits of his own intelligence and bravery.

In many ways, the Aesir serve as models of virtue who are meant to inspire similar virtues in the audiences of the Norse myths, and they provide many examples of bravery to contrast with the cowardice of their enemies. While the ogres and giants often resort to deceit simply as a means of avoiding as much trouble as possible, the Aesir appear to welcome trouble. Whether in the adventures of Thor, the instigations of Loki, or the love of life in Frey and Balder, the Aesir appear to embrace all the risks inherent to their lives of power and adventure. In this way, the narrative of Norse mythology appear to attempt to highlight the powers of everyday human life and the importance of taking advantage of those powers to explore all adventurous aspects of life.

Fear

Despite the strong valor and bravery of the Aesir, the narrative also seeks to explore the role and negative effects of fear in the lives of the Aesir. One of the most significant examples of the Aesir's fear arises after they bring Loki's children to Asgard from Jotunheim. The Aesir begin to fear the children as they grow, seeing them as grave threats. In order to protect themselves, they cast two of them—Hel and Jormungandr—out of Asgard, and they bind the wolf Fenrir with an unbreakable chain. Ultimately, these acts of mistreatment come back to harm the Aesir during Ragnarok, when Loki and his children fight against the gods of Asgard. Thus, the Aesir's fear is portrayed as a destructive force. Although it is uncertain, it is possible that the Aesir might have avoided their fate if they had been able to overcome their fear.

As a characteristic, fear serves to humanize the Aesir, as well as to expose their vulnerabilities in a didactic fashion for the benefit of the audience. For example, the Aesir are aware that they are quite vulnerable without the protection of Thor and his hammer Mjollnir, and this fear often drives them close to destruction. For example, when Thor leaves Asgard to fight trolls, the other Aesir attempt to find refuge through the construction of a wall. However, this nearly results in the gods having to give away Freya, the sun, and the moon, and the conflict only ends when Thor returns to kill the giant builder. Thus, the fear of the Aesir serves to undermine their own security, and fear is thusly characterized as an inner force to be resisted.

In many ways, fear is portrayed as a driving force behind Ragnarok, the destruction of the worlds. The Aesir's initial fear of Loki's children ultimately leads those children to turn against the Aesir during Ragnarok. In addition, Ragnarok represents a culmination of all of the Aesir's worst fears. However, during the actual combat of Ragnarok, the Aesir have no choice but to face their fears and fight against all the threats in their world. In this way, the Norse mtyhs further characterize fear as simply a way of putting off the inevitable. The overall narrative appears to argue that it is always better to face one's fears as soon as possible, for avoiding them will only cause more trouble at a later time.

Justice

In many ways, the Aesir appear to appoint themselves as arbiters of justice in the world, and through the Aesir's attempts to impose proper justice, the Norse myths explore the deeply complex nature of justice in general. One potentially tricky characteristic of justice that the myths explore is the relationship between justice and self-interest. For instance, the gods often filter their view of justice through their own personal desires and their will for self-protection. The Aesir claim to act in the interest of objective righteousness, but this objectiveness is necessarily filtered through the Aesir's own subjective views and desires. For example, while the Aesir often work to dispatch malevolent threats from the world, these threats often are also threats to the Aesir themselves, thus demonstrating an alignment between public good and private interests.

The myths also explore how attempts at imposing justice can sometimes cause more harm than good if the means of justice are not moderate or carefully handled. For example, after Loki kills Balder, the gods punish him with a very grave sentence of eternal imprisonment and torture. The Aesir even kill Loki's son Narfi, who did nothing wrong. These immoderate punishments serve to twist and corrupt Loki further, thus transforming him from a mostly harmless trickster to a bloodthirsty god out for revenge. Thus, this misuse of justice results in bad consequences for the Aesir. The Aesir became carried away with punishing Loki due to their own personal feelings of rage and grief with regards to Balder's death. The narrative thusly explores how justice is best served by an impartial third party rather than people who have a personal stake in the crime being tried and punished.

However, the Norse myths ultimately characterize justice as a force that cannot be wielded by any one group or person, as justice appears to act as a force with its own will, punishing and rewarding deeds until a moral equilibrium has been reached. At the conclusion of each tale, there is a sense of justice regardless of whether the characters themselves have acted in pursuit of justice. The circumstances of each story appear to conspire towards some type of stability, whether through characters' actions or simply through chance incidents. Ultimately, the destruction of Ragnarok and the subsequent rebirth of the world act as a final comment on this natural origin of justice, wherein the uncontrollable aspects of fate and nature serve to creat the ultimate moral equilibrium through the re-creation of the cosmos itself.

Styles

Point of View

The book generally maintains a third-person omniscient perspective, but for the bulk of the novel, this perspective is often closely associated with one character at any given time. For example, many of the stories feature Loki causing mischief in some capacity and then working to reverse the ill effects of his mischief to avoid punishment. Thus, the omniscient narrator mostly relates the actions of Loki, generally portraying other characters only when they interact with Loki. When Loki is not the main point-of-view character, this burden is usually assumed by either Odin or Thor, as they are the other two main figures of the book and of Norse mythology in general. Meanwhile, in stories that feature more than one of these three main figures, the perspective may shift within chapters, as the narration focuses first on the actions of one character and then transitions to the actions of another when necessary.

However, the novel utilizes the wider scope afforded its third-person omniscient perspective in chapters at the begging and end of the novel. These chapters concern events that affect the Norse cosmos beyond just the gods of Asgard, and so the narration is less tethered to specific perspectives in these chapters. For example, in the chapters that focus on the Norse creation myth, the world tree, and the nine worlds, the narration is utilized more as a means of conveying general information about the state and changes of the Norse cosmos. Similarly, for the final chapter, which concerns Ragnarok, the narration gives a broad sweep of events in the world of Norse mythology rather than simply focusing on a few different perspectives.

Language and Meaning

One of the most striking characteristics about the tone of the book is how comical the storytelling style is. The prose often utilizes a distinct dry humor that, when paired with the often fantastical and ridiculous events of Norse mythology, creates a highly comical effect. As a character of mischief who has no true allegiances, Loki is often a vessel for this humor by either serving as the butt of a joke or interacting with other characters in characteristically humorous manner of mischief and deceit. To contrast, the character of Thor provides a great source of humor due to his general lack of intelligence and the ways in which the prose emphasizes and represents this trait. Thor’s stupidity is always presented in a very comical light, and it is complemented by his rather unreflective love for violence and shows of strength. This humor is often very dark, as the myths often deal with very dark events and subject matter, but the humor serves to make this darkness more palatable.

On the other hand, the novel sometimes eschews humorous language and descriptions in order to embrace the darker and more poignant aspects of its stories. One example of this is towards the beginning of the novel during the telling of the Norse creation

myth. The prose is very grand and earnest, conveying the terrifying and awe-inspiring nature of the events that formed the worlds in Norse mythology. A similar prose style is used with descriptions of Ragnarok, in which all the enemies of the Aesir attempt to take their final revenge in an epic and bloody battle. Most of the stories in the middle of the novel have some form of humor or lightness, with the exceptions of the story of Loki's children and the story of Loki's final punishment. These stories maintain a dark and unflinching tone to foreshadow the dreaded final retaliation of these characters during Ragnarok.

Structure

Norse Mythology is structured as a series of distinct stories, but the stories help to develop an overarching narrative concerning the Aesir, who are the gods of Asgard. The stories begin with a wider scope, first conveying the Norse creation myth. However, once this foundation has been laid, and once necessary background information has been related to the reader, the stories mostly focus on the figures of Odin, Thor, and Loki, as they are the central figures in most surviving Norse myths. These stories help to develop these characters' personalities and interpersonal dynamics, and they also help to develop the world around them. The stories demonstrate Loki as the sources of many problems, but the stories also explore the ways in which conflict arises from outside Asgard, such as from the giants and other enemies of the Aesir. These stories finally culminate in Ragnarok, the final clash between the Aesir, Loki, and all the enemies of the Aesir.

However, despite the overall continuity that the books seeks to maintain and build upon, the individual stories are told in such a way as to allow them to stand on their own, The author states in the introduction that one of the main functions of mythology is to lend itself to retelling. Thus, the individual stories in the novel are conveyed in a clear an accessible way that not only entertains and provides various morals, but also allows facilitates easy recollection of plot, making it easy for a reader to then retell the story in their own fashion.

Quotes

It is likely, or at least a workable hypothesis, that there were tribes of people who worshipped the Vanir and other tribes who worshipped the Aesir, and that the Aesir-worshippers inveaded the lands of the Vanir-worshippers…History and religion and myth combine.
-- Narration (Introduction)

Importance: This quotation helps to frame the importance of the book's stories and of mythology in general. The author points out the inextricable connection between mythology and the cultures that create it, and in this way, he encourages the reader to look for possible cultural significances in other aspects of the stories.

In the ecstasy of [Odin's] agony, [Odin] looked down, and the runes were revealed to him. He knew them, and understood them and their power…Now he understood magic. Now the world was his to control.
-- Narration ("The Players")

Importance: This quotation helps to illustrate the nature of Odin's power and of the nature of poer in general in the world of Norse mythology. Odin's position as the leader of the Aesir is herein explained to be a product of his unique communion with magical properties inherent in runes and other mystical sources that are only fully understood by the self-sacrificing Odin.

[Thor] is straightforward where his father Odin is cunning, good-natured where his father is devious.
-- Narration ("The Players")

Importance: This description not only gives the reader a better sense of Thor's personality, but it also illuminates the philosophical and ideological complexities that exist within the Aesi as a group. Although Odin's cleverness and cunning are necessary means of carrying out justice, Thor's ability to face problems head-on ultimately proves necessary for the solution of many of the gods' practical and philosophical problems.

Odin and Vili and Ve killed the giant Ymir. There was no other way to make the worlds. This was the beginning of all things. The death that made all life possible.
-- Narration ("Before the Beginning, and After")

Importance: Violence and battle are recurring motifs in the tales of Norse mythology, and the image described in this quotation helps to develop the nature and origins of those motifs. Ymir's death is portrayed as a source of life, and the other figures of Norse mythology similarly view death and struggle as sources of life. This description also gestures towards the rebirth that comes after the supposedly final death that is Ragnarok.

That was the thing about Loki. You resented him even when you were at your most grateful, and you were grateful to him even when you hated him the most.
-- Narration ("The Treasures of the Gods")

Importance: This quotation helps to articulate one of the central characteristics and contradictions in the character of Loki, namely that his mischief usually causes as much good as it does harm. This established equilibrium is important to understand with regards to Loki's character because the loss of this equilibrium is ultimately how Loki warrants his final punishment, which in turn causes him to seek revenge against the Aesir.

If you had not lied to me, I would have been a friend to the gods. But your fear has betrayed you. I will kill you…I will wait until the end of all things, and I will eat the sun and I will eat the moon.
-- Fenrir ("The Children of Loki")

Importance: This quotation represents a statement that may or may not be seen as true by the reader. However, regardless of whether or not the reader believes Fenrir would have been a friend of the Aesir, this statement raises important ideas about the fear and fragility that the Aesir face despite their power. This fragility humanizes the Aesir and helps to explain their final downfall.

Ever since then, we know that those people who can make magic with their words, who can make poems and sagas and weave tales, have tasted the mead of poetry. When we hear a fine poet, we say they have tasted Odin's gift.
-- Narration ("The Mead of Poets")

Importance: This quotation, which helps to eloquently conclude the epic saga of the mead of poetry, helps to articulate a further source of value In the storytelling of mythology. Namely, the personalized task of telling one's own version of a myth provides an opportunity for literary expression. This quote implies that the grand stories of myths are perfect vessels for equally grand language and poetry.

Ragnarok is coming. When the sky splits asunder and the dark powers of Muspell march out on their war journey, Frey will wish he still had his sword.
-- Narration ("The Story of Gerd and Frey")

Importance: This quotation, which comes at the end of the story of Frey and Gerd, interrupts the often comical nature of the book to allude to the terrible tragedy that awaits the Aesir in their destiny. Furthermore, this quotation implies that Frey's act of giving up his sword for the sake of love makes him more vulnerable, despite being a noble act that helps to humanize him.

Thor our enemy? Thor who has killed more giants than anyone else, even other giants? Thor whom I have sworn to slay if I ever encounter him?
-- Hymir ("Hymir and Thor's Fishing Expedition")

Importance: This series of pronouncements by the giant Hymir serves to develop the antagonistic relationship between Thor and the giants. However, this relationship is subverted in several ways during this story. Tyr, one of the Aesir, is Hymir's son, thus complicating the antagonism between the gods and the giants. Thor's relationship with Hymir also becomes deeper and more nuanced throughout the story.

If [Loki] was going to do harm to Balder, he was going to hurt as many people as possible.
-- Narration ("The Death of Balder")

Importance: This quotation represents the moment that leads to Loki upsetting the balance that has kept him in the favor of the Aesir despite his mischief. Loki's trick involving Hod leads to the death of Balder, as Loki intended. Loki is thus punished for his terrible deed, which Loki did not seek to remedy. In some ways, this quotation may be seen as the decision that ultimately leads to Loki's position against the Aesir during Ragnarok.

When I was bound beneath the ground…all that kept me from madness was thinking of this moment…when my beautiful children and I would end the time of the gods and end the world.
-- Loki ("Ragnarok: The Final Destiny of the Gods")

Importance: This speech from Loki reflects his deep-seated grudge against the Aesir for imprisoning and torturing him. Loki's vengefulness, and the punishments which caused it, are deeply rooted in the dark end suffered by Loki's position in Asgard. This quotation also helps to draw focus to the tension between Loki and the Aesir, thus positioning it as one of the main dynamics of Ragnarok.

That is the end, but there is also what will come after the end. From the grey waters of the ocean, the green earth will arise once more.
-- Narration ("Ragnarok: The Final Destiny of the Gods")

Importance: This quotation subverts the expectation that Ragnarok is the end of the world. The rebirth of the world after Ragnarok helps Norse mythology to transcend the death and violence that characterize so much of it. This rebirth also acts as a parallel of the death of Ymir, which gives initial life to the world in Norse mythology.