

# **The Norse Myths Study Guide**

**The Norse Myths by Kevin Crossley-Holland**

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# Contents

[The Norse Myths Study Guide.....1](#)

[Contents.....2](#)

[Plot Summary.....3](#)

[Chapter 1, The Creation; Chapter 2, The War of the Aesir and Vanir; Chapter 3, The BUilding of Asgard's Wall.....4](#)

[Chapter 4, Lord of the Gallows; Chapter 5, The Song of Rig; Chapter 6, The Mead of Poetry.....6](#)

[Chapter 7, Loki's Children and the Binding of Fenrir; Chapter 8, The Theft of Idun's Apples; Chapter 9, The Marriage of Njord and Skadi.....8](#)

[Chapter 10, The Treasures of the Gods; Chapter 11, Skirnir's Journey; Chapter 12, The Lay of Grimnir.....10](#)

[Chapter 13, The Necklace of the Brisings; Chapter 14, The Lay of Thrym; Chapter 15, The Lay of Vafthrudnir.....12](#)

[Chapter 16, Thor's Journey to Utgard; Chapter 17, The Lay of Hymir.....14](#)

[Chapter 18, Hyndla's Poem; Chapter 19, Thor's Duel with Hrungnir; Chapter 20, Odin and Billing's Daughter; Chapter 21, Gylfi and Gefion.....16](#)

[Chapter 22, The Lay of Harbard; Chapter 23, The Ballad of Svipdag; Chapter 24, Thor and Geirrod.....18](#)

[Chapter 25, The Lay of Loddfafnir; Chapter 26, Otter's Ransom; Chapter 27, The Lay of Alvis; Chapter 28, Balder's Dreams.....20](#)

[Chapter 29, The Death of Balder; Chapter 30, Loki's Flyting; Chapter 31, The Binding of Loki; Chapter 32, Ragnarok.....22](#)

[Characters.....24](#)

[Objects/Places.....27](#)

[Themes.....29](#)

[Style.....32](#)

[Quotes.....34](#)

[Topics for Discussion.....35](#)



## Plot Summary

In *The Norse Myths*, Kevin Crossley-Holland gathers together thirty-two myths important to the Scandinavian culture. These myths provide explanations for the ways of the ancient world and give the reader insight into the beliefs of the Nordic pagans. While the myths themselves are certainly not true, the strong belief in them held by the pagan culture is factual. The gods and goddesses of the Norse myths were the only connection to a spiritual world prior to the introduction of Christianity. The giants, dwarfs, and monsters the gods battle against are manifestations of the ancient Norse's frustrations with their own lives. A great deal of life was a mystery and some explanation was needed in order to feel that a man held a purpose on earth.

The myths tell how the world was created from a great void where ice and flame collided. The gods shaped the earth from the body of a slain giant after two humans dropped from his armpits and a son came from his heel. The gods spend their days taunting the giants, disguising themselves in order to play tricks on humans, and engaging in general debauchery amongst themselves. The gods are free to interfere in the lives of men as they please by altering the course of battles or making kings out of horrible men. The gods have little to fear except for one of their own who seems fallen from their good graces. Loki is the trickster who nearly costs the gods their lives, brings forth evil children who will destroy the gods at Ragnarok, and acts only for his own benefit.

Crossley-Holland presents the Norse myths in a very educated and well researched manner. He spends a great deal of time introducing the reader to the myths and provides strong notes that allow the reader to clarify inconsistencies or confusing passages. Crossley-Holland does not take lightly his subject matter and wishes to impress upon the reader that the value of these myths is very real. The myths bring order to a confusing existence. They explain the great mysteries of life, give man something to believe in and hope for, and teach lessons. The Norse myths are the backbone of a culture. As such, they should be treated with respect and not read lightly.



# Chapter 1, The Creation; Chapter 2, The War of the Aesir and Vanir; Chapter 3, The BUilding of Asgard's Wall

## Chapter 1, The Creation; Chapter 2, The War of the Aesir and Vanir; Chapter 3, The BUilding of Asgard's Wall Summary and Analysis

Life begins with fire and ice. The region in the south is Muspell where Surt sits with a flaming sword waiting to destroy the world with fire. In the North is icy Niflheim. Where the two regions meet is the void of Ginnungagap. The ice of Ginnungagap thaws to reveal Ymir the giant. A man and a woman form under Ymir's left arm and a son comes from his right leg. The cow Audumla licks Buri out of the ice. Buri has three grandsons who are part man and part frost giant. Their names are Odin, Vili, and Ve. The three sons kill Ymir and use his body to create the earth. The giants live in Jotunheim, and Midgard is built from Ymir's eyebrows to protect the three brothers from the giants. The brothers also take a fallen ash tree and a fallen elm tree and form them into the first man and woman, respectively, to live in Midgard. The three sons then build Asgard where they live with the rest of the Aesir. Asgard is linked to Midgard by Bifrost, the rainbow bridge. Over all three realms stands the world tree, Yggdrasill.

Gullveig of the Vanir visits the Aesir. Her talk of gold angers the Aesir who burn her three times. Each time she steps from the flames whole. From that time on Gullveig travels from hall to hall giving herself a new name each time and acting as a seeress. The Vanir are angered by Gullveig's treatment and plot war on the Aesir. When it appears that neither side will win the war, they call a truce. The Vanir and Aesir decide to live in peace and exchange leaders to seal the deal. When the Vanir suspect that they have been tricked by the Aesir, they cut off Mimir's head to send back to the Aesir. Odin sprinkles the head with herbs to prevent it from decaying. Odin then talks to Mimir to gain all his wisdom.

The wall around Asgard is destroyed in the war but none of the Aesir feel like rebuilding it themselves. A lone man on a horse approaches to offer to rebuild the wall stronger and higher than before. The man names as his price the sun and moon and the goddess Freyja. Loki recommends they consider the plan even though Freyja refuses. A bargain is struck that the man must complete the wall in six months and can only be aided by his own horse, Svadilfari. Every night the man and his horse haul large rocks from the quarry. During the day the mason builds the wall and makes quick progress. When the gods see how quickly the wall is being constructed they charge Loki with finding a way out of the bargain. That night a mare appears and occupies Svadilfari until sunrise so that the man can haul no stones. The enraged man disposes of his disguise to reveal his true identity as a rock giant. The gods call for Thor who uses his hammer to



smash the giant into a thousand pieces. Loki remains missing for many months. When he returns he is holding the bridle of an eight legged colt. Loki presents Sleipnir to Odin saying the horse is the fastest of all and will take Odin anywhere he wishes to go.

These initial chapters lay the foundation for the rest of the myths. The story of creation is very similar to that found in most cultures. From a void sprung life and a supreme being (or beings) shaped and ordered the world. Also similar to other creation myths are the unexplained appearance of a multitude of beings. There is no explanation where the rest of the gods came from or why it appears that the Vanir are an older race of gods than the Aesir. The reader does quickly learn how conniving the gods can be. The treatment of the lone man who offers to rebuild Asgard's wall is a prime example of the gods' greediness, laziness, and desire to get their own way without following through on promises. The stage is now set for the reader to embark on a whirlwind of crazy stories fueled by strange antics.



# Chapter 4, Lord of the Gallows; Chapter 5, The Song of Rig; Chapter 6, The Mead of Poetry

## Chapter 4, Lord of the Gallows; Chapter 5, The Song of Rig; Chapter 6, The Mead of Poetry Summary and Analysis

Yggdrasil shelters all creation but is constantly under attack. From below the world serpent Nidhogg gnaws the trees roots. Deer eat at the shoots and bark. Under the third root which stretches into Jotunheim is the spring of Mimir who dispenses wisdom. Odin gives an eye to gain knowledge from Mimir's spring. Odin then hangs himself from Yggdrasil for nine days in order to gain greater wisdom. Odin learns the power of the runes and eighteen charms to aid in battle, find love, and raise the dead.

Heimdall comes to Midgard disguised as Rig and visits the home of Ai and Edda. He stays for three nights sleeping in between the couple each night. Nine months later Edda gives birth to a son named Thrall. Thrall is ugly and deformed but strong. Thrall falls in love with Thir the Drudge who is equally deformed and ugly. The couple marry and have ten sons and nine daughters who form the race of thralls. Heimdall continues his journey and stays three nights at the farm of Afi and Amma. Nine months later Amma bears a son named Karl. Karl marries Snor and they have twelve sons and ten daughters. This family forms the race of peasants. Heimdall then spends three nights with Father and Mother. Nine months later Mother gives birth to a son named Jarl. Jarl is magnificent to look at and masters sword play. Heimdall brings Jarl the gift of the runes and says he is the boy's father. Heimdall says he is really Rig the King and that Jarl will also be Rig the King. Jarl leaves home and establishes his own hall where he wins battles, gains retainers and builds great wealth. Jarl marries Enna and they have eleven sons. Kon is the youngest and learns the runes from his father. In the woods one day a crow tells Kon to go out and war with Dan, and tells Dan to win great treasure of his own. Here the manuscript ends.

The Aesir and Vanir seal their truce by spitting in a jar and fashion a man from the spit. The gods name the man Kvasir and he knows all. Two dwarves, Fjalar and Galar, plot against Kvasir. They kill him and use his blood to make a fine mead that will turn men into poets or wise men. One day the dwarfs are visited by the giant Gilling and his wife. When an argument breaks out the dwarfs drown the giant and use a millstone to smash the giantess' head. Gilling's son, Suttung, comes to seek his parents. In exchange for their lives the dwarfs give up their secret mead. Suttung boasts about his new treasure. Odin disguises himself as Bolverk the giant and works for Suttung's brother all summer. At summer's end Suttung refuses to pay Bolverk in mead. Odin turns himself into a snake to gain access to the cave where Suttung's daughter Gunnlod guards the mead.



Odin, in the shape of a man, beguiles Gunnlod and convinces her to give up Suttung's mead. Odin transforms himself into a bird and carries the mead in his beak back to Asgard. The mead remains a treasure of the gods.

These myths continue to introduce the reader to the world of the gods. Heimdall's journey throughout Midgard establishes the social order of humans. It is unfortunate that the manuscript is missing leaving this myth incomplete. Perhaps the crow's suggestion to Kon would have lead to the first recorded war between man in Norse tradition. The reader also learns more about the character of the gods. The gods are not everlasting or omnipotent. Odin must sacrifice his eye and his life in order to gain wisdom. The gods are also vulnerable. The mead is rather easily stolen from them and is in danger of being used against the gods. Only through deceit are the gods able to reclaim their source of knowledge.



# **Chapter 7, Loki's Children and the Binding of Fenrir; Chapter 8, The Theft of Idun's Apples; Chapter 9, The Marriage of Njord and Skadi**

## **Chapter 7, Loki's Children and the Binding of Fenrir; Chapter 8, The Theft of Idun's Apples; Chapter 9, The Marriage of Njord and Skadi Summary and Analysis**

Loki often snuck into Jotunheim where he spent many nights with the giantess Angrboda. Loki and Angrboda had three children Fenrir the wolf, Jormungand the serpent and Hel the most hideous of women. The gods decide to capture the three children after binding and gagging Angrboda. Odin throws Jormungand into the ocean surrounding Midgard. There the serpent grows until he encircles Midgard and bites his own tail. Odin hurls Hel into Niflheim where he charges her with the care of the dead. The gods decide to keep Fenrir with them and Tyr takes over care of the wolf. When Fenrir grows very large the gods realize that they need to fetter the wolf. Fenrir breaks the links of the first two chains the gods use to bind him. The gods send to the dwarves for aid and are given the slender rope, Gleipnir. Fenrir is skeptical about the rope and agrees to be fettered only if one god will place his hand in his mouth as a sign of good faith. When Fenrir cannot break Gleipnir he bites Tyr's hand off. The gods then chain Fenrir to a rock driven a mile into the ground and gag him with a sword stuck vertically in his jaws. The three children remain bound awaiting the end of the world and Ragnarok.

Loki, Honir and Odin decide to explore the far areas of Midgard. As evening approaches they find an ox to slaughter and roast for dinner. No matter how long they cook the meat it is never done. An eagle says that if he can eat his fill the meat will cook. Loki becomes angry when the eagle takes all the meat and rams his staff into the bird's back. Loki cannot let go of the staff and is dragged by the eagle over the ground until he promises to bring Idun and her apples out of Asgard to the disguised giant. Seven days later Loki tricks Idun into Midgard where the eagle seizes her and carries her into Jotunheim. When the gods find Idun missing they are anxious because without her golden apples to keep them young, the gods will quickly grow old. Odin calls the gods together and discovers that Loki is also missing. The gods search for Loki and threaten him with death if he doesn't bring Idun and her apples back. Loki borrows Freyja's falcon skin so that he can fly into Jotunheim to rescue Idun from the giant Thiazi. Loki turns Idun into a nut and carries her back to Asgard as Thiazi in eagle form follows close behind. The aging gods build a fire that burns the eagle. Idun is transformed back into herself and distributes apples to the gods.





When Thiazi does not return from pursuing Idun, his daughter Skadi swears vengeance on the gods. Skadi arms herself and sets out for Asgard. The gods do not wish for more battle and offer Skadi whatever she desires. Skadi asks for a husband and Odin agrees as long as she chooses only by viewing the gods feet. Thinking to win Balder, the handsomest of gods, Skadi chooses the most shapely feet. The feet belong to Njord the god of seafarers. As further payment Loki tells a silly story to make Skadi laugh and Odin throws her father's eyes into the sky to always look upon her. Njord and Skadi try to split time between her home in Thrymheim and his home in Noatun but soon realize they must live apart.

The reader learns about more of the gods' vulnerabilities. The gods are selfish, particularly Odin, and nearly cause their own downfall by keeping the wolf pup Fenrir in Asgard. It is interesting to note that the gods do not immediately destroy Loki's offspring despite knowing that they will cause the deaths of many of the gods at the end of the world. The decision to keep Hel, Jormungand and Fenrir alive shows respect for Loki and for the inevitability of fate. The sequence of life is that all things will be destroyed at Ragnarok and Loki's three children play an integral role in that battle. The fact that the gods do not try to overcome what is preordained is evidence of the cultural belief that a man was incapable of changing the station into which he was born.



# **Chapter 10, The Treasures of the Gods; Chapter 11, Skirnir's Journey; Chapter 12, The Lay of Grimnir**

## **Chapter 10, The Treasures of the Gods; Chapter 11, Skirnir's Journey; Chapter 12, The Lay of Grimnir Summary and Analysis**

Loki sneaks into Sif's bedroom and cuts off her golden hair. Thor demands that Loki replace Sif's hair. Loki enlists the help of the dwarfs promising to fully repay them when the time comes. The sons of Ivaldi make a beautiful skein of spun gold hair for Idun, a ship for Freyr, and a spear for Odin. On his way back to Asgard Loki stops at the cave of Brokk and Eitri who are envious of the treasures Loki carries. The brothers set about making a golden boar, a gold arm band and, through a trick of Loki's, a short handled hammer. Loki and Brokk return to Asgard for the gods to judge whose treasures are better. The gods are greatly impressed by Mjollnir the hammer and declare Brokk the winner. Brokk demands Loki's head as payment but settles for sewing Loki's lips together. Loki stands outside the gods' happy hall plotting his revenge.

Freyr sits on Odin's high seat and looks into the land of the giants. Freyr sees Gerd the daughter of Gymir and falls madly in love with her. Njord becomes worried over his son's sullen manner and sends Skirnir to discover the cause of Freyr's discontent. Freyr reveals his love for Gerd and charges Skirnir with bringing Gerd to him at all costs. As payment for his troubles, Freyr gives Skirnir his magic sword and best horse. When Gerd refuses to come with Skirnir he curses her and lays spells on her. The spells break Gerd's icy manner and she agrees to give herself to Freyr nine nights later. Freyr is eager to be with Gerd and does not know how he will endure the wait.

Agnar and Geirrod are the sons of Hraudiung, King of the Goths. One day they go out fishing and are swept to a foreign land by a storm. The brothers spend the winter with an old peasant couple. Agnar is cared for by the wife and the husband teaches Geirrod all he knows. Upon reaching their father's shore again, Geirrod steals the oars and sends his older brother back out to sea. Geirrod is made king during his father's absence and he tells everyone that Agnar drowned. Odin and Frigg, who were really the old peasant couple, watch over the boys. Frigg sends a messenger to warn Geirrod of a strange visitor who he must not welcome. Odin disguises himself as a magician named Grimnir and comes to Geirrod's hall. Remembering the warning, Geirrod is skeptical of Grimnir and instead of welcoming the magician he trusses Grimnir up on a spit. For eight days Grimnir roasts over the flames. Only Geirrod's son Agnar offers Grimnir a cup of mead. For his generosity Grimnir rewards Agnar with the promise of a future kingship. Grimnir goes on to tell about the halls of the gods and how the world was formed. Grimnir then reveals himself to be Odin and foretells Geirrod's death. Geirrod stands to



release Odin from the spit but slips and falls on the blade of his sword and dies. Odin disappears and Agnar is made king.

These three myths begin to show the individual personalities of the gods. Loki is the trickster who desires to work chaos for his own pleasure. His attempt to gain a great deal of treasure for nothing is thwarted when Thor delights in the oddity of Mjollnir's short handle. Thor is a vain god who takes great pride in his immense strength. The short handled Mjollnir is unique in its powers and therefore a fitting weapon for the giant bashing god. The story of Agnar and Geirrod shows Odin's penchant for meddling in the lives of men for his own amusement. He has done his best to outwit his wife but Frigg is even more conniving than her husband. Odin is forced to admit that he did not raise the best foster son when Geirrod treats him unkindly. It is sweet redemption that Geirrod's son Agnar, named for the son Frigg fostered, is made king because of his proper actions.



# **Chapter 13, The Necklace of the Brisings; Chapter 14, The Lay of Thrym; Chapter 15, The Lay of Vafthrudnir**

## **Chapter 13, The Necklace of the Brisings; Chapter 14, The Lay of Thrym; Chapter 15, The Lay of Vafthrudnir Summary and Analysis**

Loki sees Freyja quietly leave her hall and cross Bifrost. Loki follows Freyja as she enters the smithy of four dwarfs. Freyja is enraptured by a necklace of fluid gold and desires it at all costs. The dwarfs do not want silver or gold but desire to have Freyja lay with each one in turn for four nights. Freyja hates dwarfs but she desires the necklace so strongly that she agrees. Loki reports all that he sees to Odin. Loki knows that Odin secretly lusts after Freyja and delights in seeing Odin seethe with anger. Odin charges Loki with bringing him the necklace. Loki changes into a fly to gain access to Freyja's hall and manages to steal the necklace from her while she sleeps. When Freyja awakens to find her necklace missing she knows that only Loki could have stolen it. Freyja storms into Odin's hall demanding her necklace. Odin agrees to return it but only if Freyja will make war among two kings of Midgard. Freyja bites her tongue and agrees.

Thor awakens to find his hammer Mjollnir missing. Loki borrows Freyja's falcon skin to fly out in search of Mjollnir. Loki learns that the giant Thrym has stolen the hammer and buried Mjollnir deep in the earth. Thrym will only return the hammer if Freyja agrees to be his bride. When Loki reports to Thor and tells Freyja, she becomes so enraged that she breaks her treasured necklace into pieces. The gods assemble and Heimdall suggests that they dress Thor in a bridal veil to go in Freyja's stead. Thor grudgingly agrees and is dressed as befits a bride. Loki goes along disguised as Thor's handmaiden. At the feast in Thrym's hall, Thor devours a whole ox, a catch of fish, and drinks three horns of mead. Loki explains that the bride has not eaten for days out of anxiousness for the wedding night. Loki also explains that the bride's eyes are red because her excitement has kept her from sleeping. Thrym calls for Mjollnir to be brought and placed in the bride's lap. When Thor sees Mjollnir he grasps the hammer and throws off the bridal veil to reveal his identity. Thor proceeds to crush the skulls of all the giants gathered in Thrym's hall.

Odin is bored and desires to visit Vafthrudnir the giant to engage him in a game of riddles. Odin disguises himself and enters Vafthrudnir's hall. He wastes no time engaging the giant in a battle of wits. The giant asks Odin several questions to be sure of his guest's ability to play and then invites him to sit down. The two agree to wager their lives on the contest. The god and the giant trade questions back and forth for some time. Each answers quickly and correctly. Odin then asks Vafthrudnir to tell him what Odin whispered to Balder before Balder was burned on the pyre. No one knows this



answer except Odin and the question sparks recognition for the giant. Vafthrudnir admits that he has been beaten and that Odin is the wisest

The lives of the giants can be viewed as full of adventure or terribly boring. Thor is constantly at battle with the giants, Freyja appears to be a vain goddess, and Odin needs to spark trouble just to have something to occupy his days. The Norse gods are not like the Christian God or other faith based gods who provide spiritual protection and a strategy for living one's life. Instead the Norse gods and their tales are intended for enjoyment and to teach a few lessons. The Norse gods are like the tales of Robin Hood and King Arthur. There is scanty proof that they existed but their exploits fuel the fire of warriors into battle and inspire the minds of young children gathered around a fire.



# Chapter 16, Thor's Journey to Utgard; Chapter 17, The Lay of Hymir

## Chapter 16, Thor's Journey to Utgard; Chapter 17, The Lay of Hymir Summary and Analysis

Thor decides to journey to Utgard to battle the giants and takes Loki along as his companion. At evening they ask for food and shelter in a poor farmhouse. The peasants have no meat so Thor kills the goats that pull his chariot to be cooked for dinner. Thor tells everyone to be careful with the bones and throw them on the goat skins. The farmer's son is so hungry that he breaks a bone to suck the marrow from it. In the morning Thor uses Mjollnir to restore the goats and discovers that one is now lame. As payment for the misdeed Thor takes the two peasant children as his servants. When the foursome lands in Utgard they walk for a whole day through the forest. The boy, Thialfi, finds a large hall with one whole wall missing. Since they are tired from their journey the travelers take shelter in the strange building. In the middle of the night they are awakened by a large rumbling and move further into a smaller side room of the hall. In the morning they discover that the hall is really a glove belonging to the giant Skrymir. The foursome travel with the giant and at night try futilely to open the glove to retrieve their provisions. Thor becomes angered and tries three times to bash the giant's head with Mjollnir. Each time the hammer that is supposed to stand up to all giants, fails.

In the morning Skrymir takes his leave of the foursome after telling them the way to Utgard and admonishing them to keep their pride in check. With some struggle the companions gain access to the high walls of Utgard. Once inside the host, Utgard-Loki, declares that each one must show a talent worthy of staying in the giant's hall. Loki boasts that he can eat more than any giant. He engages in a contest but is declared the loser when he fails to consume the bones. Thialfi states that he can run faster than anyone. After three contests against Hugi, Utgard-Loki suggests that Thialfi may not be as fast as he thought. Thor then tries to drink from a large horn but for as much as he sips the liquid level does not go down. Utgard-Loki says that maybe Thor would like to try his hand at lifting the giant's cat. When Thor fails to lift more than one paw from the floor his anger leads him to agree to wrestle Utgard-Loki's crone of a foster-mother. The crone easily beats Thor which angers him more. Utgard-Loki calls for an end of the contests and they all sit down to eat. In the morning Utgard-Loki walks the four companions out of Utgard and explains that he is the same giant whose glove they slept in. Through spells the giant king prevented any of the visitors from winning their contests. Utgard-Loki and his hall vanish as Thor and his companions hurry to retrieve Thor's chariot to return to Asgard.

The gods run out of mead and seek the aid of Aegir, the god of the sea. Thor angers Aegir who refuses to brew the mead unless a very large cauldron can be procured. Thor and Tyr travel to Hymir's hall to steal his cauldron which is five miles deep. Tyr's mother



suggests they hide under a cauldron until she has spoken to her husband Hymir. Thor is introduced as Veur, Hrod's enemy, and Hymir senses the visit will not go well. The next day Hymir and Veur row out to fish for more food. Hymir catches two whales but Thor catches the Midgard serpent. He looses the creature while trying to wrestle it into the boat. To redeem himself for the lost catch Thor hauls the boat with the whales and Hymir still in it back to the giant's hall. Hymir tests Thor again by asking him to smash a glass goblet. Tyr's mother whispers to Thor to throw the goblet at Hymir's head. When the goblet breaks, Hymir relents and says if Thor can carry the cauldron he may take it. Thor struggles to lift the huge cauldron but manages to carry it back to his chariot and on to Asgard. Thor manages to outwit Aegir and the gods enjoy warm ale for many winters.

The myth of Utgard-Loki is long and twisting. Thor is, beside Odin, the best loved of the Norse gods. His brute strength makes him someone to admire and a comical target for Loki's jokes. Unlike The Lay of Thrym where Thor is humiliated by being dressed as a bride, here Thor's strength is called into question. Thor is the smasher of all giants and yet he barely dents the giant Skrymir. Likewise, Thor is unable to drain the drinking horn, lift a cat, or out wrestle an old crone. Something strange must be happening for Thor to struggle so much. The reader is relieved to know that Thor is not as vulnerable as his defeats make him seem. Only magic can cause Thor not to succeed. Thor redeems himself by stealing the great cauldron from Hymir. At first it seems that Thor will be unable to lift the cauldron, but much straining and huffing rewards the god with the object. His strength is not lessened or vanished.



# **Chapter 18, Hyndla's Poem; Chapter 19, Thor's Duel with Hrungrnir; Chapter 20, Odin and Billing's Daughter; Chapter 21, Gylfi and Gefion**

## **Chapter 18, Hyndla's Poem; Chapter 19, Thor's Duel with Hrungrnir; Chapter 20, Odin and Billing's Daughter; Chapter 21, Gylfi and Gefion Summary and Analysis**

Freyja calls the giantess Hyndla out of her gloomy cave to venture to Valhalla. They discuss the ancestry of Ottar and Angantyr. Freyja tells Hyndla to recite the names of the ancients. Hyndla begins by turning to Freyja's boar and addressing it as Ottar. Hyndla recites the whole lineage and then Freyja asks the giantess to give her boar memory ale. This way he will remember everything that has been said when Ottar and Angantyr meet in three days. Hyndla insults Freyja's promiscuous behavior and the goddess encircles her with flame. Hyndla gives Ottar the beer saying that he will not prosper. Freyja quickly counteracts the curse by touching the boar gently and stating that Ottar will always have the best.

Odin is bored and jealous that Thor is out having fun so he takes Sleipnir and rides to the hall of the giant Hrungrnir. Odin and Hrungrnir engage in a contest to see whose horse is faster. Odin tricks the giant into Asgard and invites him to drink from Thor's horns in Valhalla. Odin and Freyja give the giant horn after horn of ale but Hrungrnir does not fall into a stupor as planned. When Odin tires of the giant's ravings, he calls for Thor. Hrungrnir states that Thor would be greatly dishonored to kill the unarmed giant and proposes that they meet between Asgard and Jotunheim to fight a duel. The giants build a massive giant out of clay and place a mare's heart in its chest. Thor and Hrungrnir clash. Mjollnir smashes the giant's skull but a sliver of Hrungrnir's bone lodges in Thor's head. The sybil Groa tries to remove the splinter from Thor's head but when Thor lavishes praise on her she loses concentration and cannot finish.

In chapter twenty, Odin gives a great speech about the fickleness of women and the dangers of loving a woman. Odin talks at length about the evilness of women and the reader learns at the end of his diatribe that he once desired Billing's daughter. The girl enticed Odin with fair words that ultimately led him into a trap.

Gylfi tells an old woman that because she has treated him like a king despite her meager belongings, he will give her as much of Sweden as she can plough with four oxen in twenty-four hours. When Gylfi and the woman part ways, the woman reveals that she is really the goddess Gefion. Gefion takes her four oxen sons to Sweden.





There she cuts a great piece of land which she drags into the water and names Zealand. The hole where the land once sat fills with water and is known as Malar.

These four myths are brief and a bit confusing. The purpose of Freyja's talk with Hyndla is not readily clear. The account of the lineage of the ancients is mentioned in the note on this myth as being very important to ancient cultures. People enjoyed hearing the listing of their ancestors and their great exploits. However, the relationship between Angantyr and Ottar is not clear. Neither is whether this Ottar is the same Otter who Loki kills in Myth 26. Thor's battle against Hrungrir is just another example of Odin's meddling and Thor's great strength. Odin's diatribe about the evils of women is only mildly interesting and serves to show the Allfather as a whiny brat no better than Freyr in Myth 11. The myth of Gefion serves to explain how Zealand was created but does little else.



# Chapter 22, The Lay of Harbard; Chapter 23, The Ballad of Svipdag; Chapter 24, Thor and Geirrod

## Chapter 22, The Lay of Harbard; Chapter 23, The Ballad of Svipdag; Chapter 24, Thor and Geirrod Summary and Analysis

Thor comes to a deep channel and calls to the ferryman on the other side to transport him across. The ferryman begins to taunt and insult Thor. Thor asks who the boat belongs to and to know the ferryman's name. The man identifies himself as Harbard and that the boat belongs to Hildolf the wolf. Harbard refuses to come across for Thor and the two continue to trade insults. They compare great deeds in an attempt to show up the other man. Thor appears thoughtful as Harbard mentions several of Thor's deeds that a simple ferryman should not know. Harbard tells Thor that he should really hurry home because his wife is entertaining a lover. Thor demands to be ferried across or told the way around. Harbard tells Thor how to get home but hurls a final curse as the god storms away.

Svipdag hurries through stench and cold to the gates of Niflheim where he calls to Groa. Svipdag tells his mother that his father has married a two faced woman. This woman has charged Svipdag with the quest of winning Menglad's love. Groa gives her son spells of protection and sends him on his way. Svipdag comes to a hall guarded by the giant Fjolsvid who refuses to grant entry. Svipdag asks Fjolsvid a series of questions and the answers reveal how access to the hall may be obtained. Fjolsvid also says that the hall belongs to Menglad. Fjolsvid says that Menglad is fated to marry one man and only he can make the gates burst open of their own accord. Fjolsvid says that the man's name is Svipdag. Svipdag announces that he is the man Menglad waits for and the gate springs open. Menglad welcomes Svipdag with open arms.

Loki borrows Frigg's falcon skin and flies into Jotunheim. There he is captured by a giant's servant. The giant, Geirrod, sees the falcon's eyes and knows the bird is a being in disguise. Loki refuses to tell Geirrod who he is and is imprisoned for three months in a cage. Finally when Loki is weak and starving he tells Geirrod his name. Geirrod says he will release Loki if the trickster agrees to bring Thor to the giant's hall without Mjollnir and his magic belt. Thor and Loki stay the night with Grid who tells Thor the truth about Geirrod. She gives him her own weapons to fight the giant. Geirrod is not home but his servant houses Thor and Loki in a goat shed. Thor falls asleep and awakens to find himself floating to the rafters. Thor pushes and crushes Geirrod's daughters who are lifting his chair toward the ceiling. Thor goes to meet Geirrod in a large fiery. Geirrod hurls a flaming rock at Thor but the god throws the weapon back and kills the giant.



Thor leaves the hall vowing to repay Loki who deceived him into visiting Geirrod's hall in the first place.

The Lay of Harbard showcases another round of gods tricking each other. Odin is the ferryman in disguise and he must be bored with life in Asgard again. The scene is comical because Thor constantly vows that he will cross the river one way or another in order to bash in the ferryman. If the water was shallow enough to allow Thor to cross on his own, then why is the ferryman's refusal to fetch him such an issue? The answer is because Thor is a god and demands to be treated as such instead of being made a fool of by a simple ferryman. Thor is able to redeem himself from this bit of humiliation in Myth 24. Loki has gotten himself in to a bind and can only be rescued sacrificing Thor to a giant. That Thor is so naive as to believe Loki when the trickster convinces him to leave his magic belt and hammer at home is astounding. There is a deeper connection between Loki and the gods that make them trust him even when they should not. Thankfully there is someone, as always, waiting in the wings to assist Thor and make sure the situation turns out in the god's favor.



# **Chapter 25, The Lay of Loddfafnir; Chapter 26, Otter's Ransom; Chapter 27, The Lay of Alvis; Chapter 28, Balder's Dreams**

## **Chapter 25, The Lay of Loddfafnir; Chapter 26, Otter's Ransom; Chapter 27, The Lay of Alvis; Chapter 28, Balder's Dreams Summary and Analysis**

At a gathering of men and women in Midgard, Loddfafnir stands and speaks the wisdom he received from looking into the Well of Urd. His speech is full of advice regarding how a man should conduct himself and live his life. At the end of the speech Loddfafnir reveals that he is really Odin in disguise. Odin announces that any who hear and listen will prosper.

Odin, Loki and Honir go exploring and find an otter beneath a waterfall. Loki kills the otter with a stone. The three gods seek lodging with a farmer but the farmer takes offense when he sees the dead otter in Loki's hands. Hreidmar and his sons, Fafnir and Regin, plot to attack the murders of otter who is their son and brother. Hreidmar agrees to let the gods try to pay a ransom for Otter's death. Loki is sent to collect enough treasure to cover Otter's skin. Loki gathers the red gold of Andvari the dwarf. The dwarf curses the gold and those who own it. Otter's bag is filled and covered with the red gold. Hreidmar frees Odin and Honir then Loki pronounces Andvari's curse over the gold.

The dwarf Alvis comes to Asgard seeking Thrud as his wife. Thor, Thrud's father, objects to the union and refuses to fulfill the promise of the gods to give Thrud to Alvis as payment for his work. Thor challenges Alvis to answer questions about the nine worlds. Thor asks so many questions of Alvis that the dwarf is still in Thor's hall as the sun comes up. The sun's rays turn the dwarf to stone.

Balder suffers from terrible dreams. The gods gather to try and find meaning to Balder's horrible dreams. Odin travels to Hel's hall in Niflheim in search of answers. Odin asks a seeress buried at the east door why Niflheim is decorated with gold. The seeress says preparations are made for Balder's arrival. Odin continues to question the seeress until she reveals that Hod will kill Balder. The seeress also says that Odin and Rind will conceive a child named Vali who will take vengeance on Hod. The seeress recognizes Odin and refuses to say any more. Odin turns Sleipnir toward Asgard with sadness and returns to tell what he has learned to the gods.

The story of Otter's ransom is well known among Norse scholars and interested readers. In this story Loki is able to redeem himself a bit for all the trickery he has thus

far enacted against the gods. Loki could have just as easily left Odin and Honir bound in Hreidmar's hall. However, he retrieves the required gold as payment for their release. This was Loki's chance to overthrow Odin and lay claim to the position of the mightiest of gods. Loki's decision to ransom Odin and Honir points to the theme of fate. Odin and Honir must be at Ragnarok. The end of the world must be a dramatic battle between all the forces of good and evil. If Loki had not obtained the red gold to cover Otter's skin, then the world would have been out of flux. For the men who believed in the gods and goddesses and the idea that a man's fate is determined at birth, a deviation from what is expected would be unfathomable.



# **Chapter 29, The Death of Balder; Chapter 30, Loki's Flyting; Chapter 31, The Binding of Loki; Chapter 32, Ragnarok**

## **Chapter 29, The Death of Balder; Chapter 30, Loki's Flyting; Chapter 31, The Binding of Loki; Chapter 32, Ragnarok Summary and Analysis**

In an effort to protect Balder, his mother, Frigg, travels the world asking all animals, plants, stones and water not to harm Balder. Finally satisfied that Balder is safe the gods and goddesses return to their normal lives. The gods make a sport out of testing Balder's invincibility. Loki does not like the game and seeks to ruin the fun. In disguise Loki visits Frigg and learns that she did not get a vow of no harm from the mistletoe because it is so young. Loki hurries to gather mistletoe from a field near Valhalla. Loki returns to the hall and finds Balder's brother, the blind Hod. Loki offers Hod a mistletoe dart and says he will aid Hod's aim. The dart pierces Balder's chest and the beautiful god falls dead. Frigg asks for someone to volunteer to travel to Hel and ransom Balder from death. Heremod steps forward and Odin gives him Sleipnir to ride. While Heremod rides into Hel, the rest of the gods prepare Balder's body for burial. Nanna, Balder's wife, falls dead of a broken heart and is laid beside Balder under the mast of his ship. Balder's ship is heaped with treasures and his horse is added to the pyre. Odin whispers final words to his son. The funeral pyre is lit as Thor speaks magic words over the body. Heremod rides for nine days before reaching Hel. Hel tells Hermod that she will release Balder if everything in the nine worlds will weep for him. Messengers are sent out to ask everything to weep for Balder. A giantess named Thokk is the only thing that refuses to weep for Odin's son. The gods are pained that Balder cannot be ransomed from Hell and are sure that Thokk is Loki in disguise.

The gods gather in Aegir's hall for a great feast. Loki becomes annoyed with Fimafeng and kills him. Loki flees the hall but returns a short time later and asks to be served. Loki then sets about verbally attack each of the gods. Loki calls Bragi a coward, Idun a whore and Odin unfair in battle. As Loki belittles each god or goddess in turn the truth is revealed that he is the one who prevented Balder from being rescued from Hel. The gods try to convince Loki to leave off his insults but he refuses to listen. Loki continues drinking and boasting until Thor. After hurling a few insults at Thor, Loki leaves the hall. The rest of the gods sit in stunned silence.

Loki is worried about his safety and flees from Asgard to live in a remote area of Midgard. During the day, Loki assumes the shape of a salmon and swims in a pool below a waterfall. Odin sits in his high seat watching the nine worlds and sees Loki's



hiding place. Several gods are sent to capture the Trickster. Kvasir sees the remnants of a fishing net in Loki's fire and sets about repairing it. The gods then drag the river and pool below the falls. Loki is captured and taken to a dismal cave. The gods gather Loki's sons, Vali and Narvi, and turn Narvi into a wolf. Narvi attacks Vali ripping his guts open. The gods take Narvi's entrails and use them to bind Loki to three rocks. A snake is hung above Loki dripping venom on his face. Loki's wife, Sigyn, holds a bowl over Loki's face to collect the venom. Each time she goes to empty the bowl venom strikes Loki and he shakes so violently it causes an earthquake. Loki and Sigyn will remain this way until Ragnarok.

Four ages will pass before the world ends. For three years Midgard will suffer terrible wars. The sun and moon will be caught by wolves and the stars will vanish from the sky. Fenrir will be set free, the warriors of Valhalla will awaken, the dead will rise and the giants will gather. The Midgard serpent will come onto land and Loki will be freed from his bonds. Surt will lead the evil creatures across Bifrost to gather on the plain of Vigrid. Heimdall will sound his horn to gather the gods and the vast host from Valhalla. The gods will clash with Surt's army at Vigrid. Each one will battle the one fate decrees he shall meet. Everything will die and the earth will sink into the sky. When the earth rises again from the sea Balder, Hod, Vldar, Vali, Modi, Magni and Honir will be there. They will remember the old days and find lost treasures. Lif and Lifthrasir, the two humans hidden deep in Yggdrasill, will bear children and repopulate the world.

Again the gods are shown to be vulnerable. They are not all mighty and everlasting. Although Frigg has the power to entice nearly everything in the world to vow to no harm against Balder, Loki's craftiness makes him more powerful. In many ways Loki has been working to orchestrate Ragnarok since the creation. His own offspring will bring death to the gods. Loki is almost seen as more powerful than Odin in these final chapters. Despite being caught and bound there is hope for Loki's final revenge. He has been wronged time and again by the gods and giants but when the world ends he will finally have his moment of glory. It is interesting to note that Odin and Loki each have a son named Vali. Odin's son is born to avenge his brother Balder while Loki's son kills his brother Narvi. Since Loki's son is turned into a wolf by the gods, it is reasonable to assume that the Vali who rises from the sea on the new born earth is Odin's son. However, the text is not clear on this point. The reader may entertain the idea that although the world is new, as it was at creation, there is still evil lurking nearby in the form of Vali. Perhaps the rebirth of Balder, the most beautiful of the gods, needs to be counteracted by the rebirth of Loki's son Vali, a new incarnation of trickery.



# Characters

## Odin

Odin is a member of the Aesir. He, along with his brothers Vili and Ve, construct the nine worlds from the body of Ymir. Odin is the head of the gods and holds the high seat from which he can view the happenings of the world. Odin gave one eye to learn the wisdom of Mimir's Well and hung himself from Yggdrasill in order to learn the secrets of the runes and gain more wisdom. Odin chooses the warriors that are slain in battle to gather in his great hall, Valhalla, where they await the battle of Ragnarok. Odin is married to Frigg, but several of the myths mention that he has relationships with other women and goddesses. Odin rides the eight-legged Sleipnir and will face the wolf Fenrir at Ragnarok. Both of these beasts are Loki's children. Odin spends his days interfering in the lives of men for his own pleasure. He often disguises himself to meet with men and will sometimes wear a disguise in order to enact some trickery on another god. Odin has two ravens who fly about the nine worlds bringing the head god information. One raven is named Huginn and Muninn and are synonymous with Thought and Memory.

## Thor

Thor is nearly important as Odin in the Norse pantheon. According to Crossley-Holland's glossary, Thor is Odin's son, though this detail is not expressly stated in the myths. Thor is married to Sif. Sif has long flowing golden hair that is cut off by Loki and, at Thor's insistence, replaced by actual gold tresses. Thor is the god of thunder. He carries a hammer called Mjollnir that is capable of smashing any giant. Thor also wears a magic belt of strength. With these two weapons Thor spends his days keeping order by patrolling the worlds bashing giants who may cause trouble. Thor rides a chariot pulled by two goats. These goats have the ability to be killed and then brought back to life. In this way Thor always has a ready food source. However care must be taken that no harm comes to the goat bones so that their recreation can be complete. Thor has a short temper and does not like to be the butt of jokes. Loki usually cause Thor to be caught in uncomfortable situations. Thor is dressed as a bride, engages in impossible contests, and faces a giant without his precious hammer. Thor always swears to exact revenge on Loki. Thor is the one to catch Loki in fish form so that the trickster can be bound to a rock.

## Loki

Loki is the trickster god. He is not content to enjoy life in Asgard alongside the rest of the gods. Instead Loki is constantly looking for ways to cause a bit of trouble and excitement. Loki cuts Sif's golden hair and must find a way to replace it. Loki tries to throw a bet with Brokk but ends up losing when Thor is pleased with the misshapen





Mjollnir. Loki is also a shapeshifter and able to take different forms. He uses this ability to turn himself into a mare and lure Svaldifari away from his work. The result of their union is the eight-legged horse Sleipnir. Loki also spends time with Angrboda, a giantess. They produce three evil children: Hel, Jormungand the Midgard Serpent, and Fenrir the wolf. Even though Loki spends time with other mistresses he is married to Sigyn. Sigyn is very loyal to Loki. When Loki is finally caught and bound by the gods for all the trouble he has caused and his role in Balder's death, Sigyn stays with her husband doing her best to keep the poisonous venom from falling on her husband. Loki will completely turn against the gods at Ragnarok. He will take sides with Surt and lead the evil creatures against the gods. Fenrir will slay Odin, Hel will lead the souls out of Hell and Jormungand will spew venom across the earth and kill Thor. Loki will battle Heimdall and the two will kill one another.

## Freyja

Freyja is a member of the Vanir making her a fertility goddess. Freyja owns a falcon skin that Loki borrows in order to fly around the nine worlds easier. It is not mentioned whether Freyja herself uses the skin. In Loki's Flyting, Freyja's fondness for having many lovers is mentioned. The boar that she rides on is said to be Ottar one of her lovers. Freyja agrees to spend four nights with the dwarfs who make the Brising necklace. Freyja has a penchant for beautiful things and will do almost anything to obtain them. Freyja's beauty is also well known and many men, giants, and dwarfs try to win her hand.

## Balder

Balder is the most beautiful of gods. Balder is the son of Odin and Frigg. When Balder dies, the myths state that his wife Nanna died of a broken heart and was laid on the pyre beside Balder. Balder has terrible dreams foretelling his own death. In an attempt to keep Balder alive, Frigg asks everything in the world to swear not to harm her son. Loki learns that Frigg did not obtain such a promise from mistletoe and uses a mistletoe dart to kill Balder. Balder waits in Hel for Ragnarok when he will return after the world's end to re-establish the new earth.

## Frigg

Frigg is Odin's wife. She is a mother earth figure and fertility goddess. Frigg and Odin often struggle with each other. In Myth 12 Frigg and Odin disguise themselves as an old peasant couple. When Agnar and his brother Geirrod wash up on an island, Frigg and Odin foster them for a year. Odin teaches Geirrod wisdom and Frigg coddles Agnar. Agnar is later found to be living in a cave while Geirrod assumes control of his father's kingdom. Frigg intervenes again to bring about Geirrod's death. Frigg is also the mother of Balder. She is the one to ask nearly everything in nature not to harm her son and also to ask for a messenger to try and ransom Balder from Hel.



## Idun

Idun is the goddess who holds the golden apples which give the gods their youth. In Loki's Flyting, the myth states that Idun is married to Bragi. Idun is persuaded to leave Asgard by Loki and is captured by a giant. While Idun is missing the gods begin to grow old and weak. Idun is finally rescued and the apples and youth are returned to the gods.

## Heimdall

Heimdall is the watchman of the gods. He watches over Bifrost the rainbow bridge. In Myth 5 Heimdall is said to travel the world spending three nights with various couples. In this way he helps to create the social order of man: thralls, peasants, and the aristocracy. At Ragnarok Heimdall will blow his horn Gjall to assemble the gods and call the Einherjar from Valhalla.

## Honir

Honir is one of the Vanir sent to the Aesir in order to seal the truce decreed following the war between the gods. Honir often accompanies Thor and Odin on their travels through Midgard. Honir does not take part in much of the action. Instead he seems to hang back unsure whether he should be a part of the trouble. Honir will survive Ragnarok. Along with Balder, Hod, Modi, Magni, Vidar and Vali Honir will restructure the new world.

## Utgard-Loki

Utgard-Loki is one of the more notable giants that Thor faces. Thor, Loki and two peasant children arrive at Utgard-Loki's stronghold where they must prove their worthiness. Thor engages in three contests in an attempt to show his strength. When Thor fails all the contests, Utgard-Loki reveals that he is also a powerful magician who has used magic to overcome Thor. Utgard-Loki is a trickster in his own right as evidenced by his shared name with the god Loki.

## Thrym

Thrym is another giant with whom Thor has a memorable encounter. Thrym manages to steal Mjollnir while Thor is sleeping. In exchange for the hammer Thrym asks for Freyja's hand in marriage. Thor is dressed in bridal attire and taken to Thrym's hall. Thrym and all the giants with him are destroyed when Mjollnir is laid in the bride's lap and Thor reveals his true identity.



# Objects/Places

## Yggdrasill

Yggdrasill is the World Tree. It stands over the nine worlds and its three roots reach into the three lands.

## Mjollnir

Mjollnir is Thor's short handled hammer. Mjollnir can crush any giant and always returns to Thor after being thrown.

## Asgard

The land where the gods live.

## Midgard

Midgard is created by the gods and given to man. Midgard and Asgard are connected by the rainbow bridge, Bifrost.

## Jotunheim

Jotunheim is the land of the giants.

## Midgard Serpent, Fenrir, Hel

The Midgard serpent, also called Jormungand, Fenrir the wolf, and Hel are the children of Loki and the giantess Angrboda. Jormungand is thrown into the ocean surrounding Midgard where he will remain until Ragnarok. Hel is banished to Niflheim to guard the dead. The gods bind Fenrir the wolf so that he cannot cause trouble until the end of the world.

## Sleipnir

Sleipnir is the eight-legged horse Loki bore after having relations with Svadilfari. Loki gifts Sleipnir to Odin.



## **Freyja's Falcon Skin**

Loki often borrows Freyja's falcon skin in order to speedily gain entry to far off lands or inaccessible halls. Loki is a shape-shifter and that is why he can utilize the skin so readily.

## **Valkyries**

These women are terrible in their beauty. They choose the men slain in battle who will fill Valhalla.

## **Norns**

The three fates who measure out a man's life. They are Urd, Skuld, and Verdandi.

## **Mimir's Well**

A well located under one of the roots of Yggdrasill. The well is protected by Mimir's head and gives wisdom to those who drink from it.

## **Audumla**

A cow created from the void of Ginnungagap.

## **Ginnungagap**

The void between Muspell and Niflheim before the world was created.

## **Aesir and Vanir**

The Aesir are a race of gods lead by Odin who inhabit Asgard. The Vanir are another race of gods who inhabit Asgard. The two groups merge after a fierce battle which neither side wins.

## **Muspell and Niflheim**

Muspell is a land of fire and Niflheim is a land of ice. The world is created in the void where these two lands meet.



# Themes

## Imperfect Gods

When one hears the word "god" the usual image conjured to mind is of the Christian God. This God is omnipotent, all-mighty and everlasting. He rules alone, does not resort to trickery or deceit and allows men to choose to believe in him. The gods and goddesses of the Norse pantheon are not like the Christian God.

When Idun and her golden apples disappear from Asgard, the gods are terribly upset. The golden apples provide the gods with their youth. The Norse gods and goddesses are not everlasting. They have the ability to wither and weaken. Similarly, when Ragnarok comes many of the gods will perish at the hands of their foes. These gods have a definite end to their lives. Only a select few will survive the horrific battle to live in and rebuild the new world.

The powers of the gods and goddesses are individualized and not all encompassing. Thor must have his belt of strength and special hammer in order to crush the skulls of giants. Loki, even though he is a shape-shifter, needs to borrow the falcon skin in order to fly into Jotunheim on several occasions. Odin must sacrifice an eye and his life in order to gain all the knowledge of the world. Thor can bring his goats back to life with the aid of Mjollnir but he cannot heal the goat's lame leg.

The Norse gods provide a source of entertainment and teach moral lessons. These gods and goddesses were worshiped by pagans, but they offered little solace or hope for life beyond Midgard. The advent of Christianity to the Scandinavian cultures brought hope that a man could change his station in life and that there was a promise of a better life after death. The Norse gods served a purpose but they could not carry the hope of the world forever.

## Immovable Fate

Fate is not expressly addressed in any of the myths. In Myth 4 when Odin sacrifices himself to himself mention is made of the Norns who measure out the life of a man on the day he is born. Other than this brief mention of how a man's life is structured, fate is not addressed. However, fate is a very important concept in Scandinavian culture. Before the advent of Christianity and the hope of a better life after death, the Norse people believed that the position into which a man was born was fixed and that there was nothing he could do to alter the course of events in his life.

The reader learns about the role of fate through careful attention to the action of the gods and through the story tellers references to Ragnarok. In Myth 7 the reader is told about Loki's three children. The Norns warn that these creatures will bring no good to anyone and will still be alive "at the kill" referring to Ragnarok. In accordance with the Norns prediction the gods do not immediately destroy Loki's children. Instead they help



fate a long by placing Hel in charge of Niflheim, Jormungand is thrown into the sea where he increases in size and Fenrir is kept as a pet in Asgard. Even when Fenrir becomes too strong and large to control the gods do not destroy him. There is an acknowledgment that Fate must be allowed to run its course and even the gods cannot intervene.

When Skirnir is sent to seek Gerd's hand for Freyr he is given Freyr's sword that would have warded off the flame throwing Surt at the end of the world. The myth says that Freyr lives to regret this act. No thought is ever given to asking Skirnir for the sword back and different payment given. There is also no alternative. Perhaps Skirnir could have wielded the great sword against Surt. Instead Fate must have long ago decreed that Freyr would battle Surt and be victorious with his sword. Now Freyr will lose to Surt and Ragnarok will come to a violent end. Fate could not be outrun or greatly altered. Any choice made by man or god in an attempt to alter fate appears to work for the worse instead of the better. Fate was not a favorable concept in pagan cultures. Fate would deal out her rule as she saw fit and with out regard to a man's station or deeds achieved in life.

## Trickery

Tricks, disguises, jokes, and innocent fun are all part of the gods regular daily activities. Loki is known as the Trickster and Odin uses many disguises and pseudonyms. While both of these gods engage in tricky activities there is a slight difference between their actions. Loki's jokes often prove injurious while Odin's disguises allow him to speak wisdom to many.

Loki is the fallen god. He has at some point in history performed a wrong that lowers him among the rest of the gods. Loki has not been thrown out of Asgard, and never is, but his personality appears more clouded than the others. Loki is responsible for Sif losing her beautiful flowing hair, for Idun's capture by a giant, the birth of three creatures who will be integral at Ragnarok, and he is responsible for Balder's death. Loki tricks because he enjoys seeing the others suffer and does not find delight in the more peaceable games played by the rest of the gods. When the end of the world comes Loki will be on the side of Surt leading the dead out of Hel. Loki is the mischievous child who begs for negative attention.

Odin is the head of the gods and should maintain a level of decorum. Odin cannot cavort around Asgard and Midgard like a pouting child upset because the others do not enjoy his company. Several myths begin with the mention of Odin's jealousy of Thor's escapades in Jotunheim or boredom at being stuck in Asgard. In order to enjoy a bit of fun while still upholding his All-Father image, Odin uses disguises to slip into the world of men or have some sport with other gods. However, Odin's interactions with humans usually result in a lesson being passed on. Odin takes the name of Loddafnir to impart wisdom to a hall of men and he fosters Geirrod giving him all the knowledge needed to rule well. Odin also disguises himself when meeting other gods. He is the ferryman



Harbard who refuses to give passage to Thor. The encounter detains Thor long enough to anger the god and allow his wife to have an affair with another god.

Loki and Odin are both tricksters. Loki is blatant and unabashed in his actions. Odin is refined and not harmful in his actions. Together the two gods form a complete personality. They are the two faces of man. One side wants to be evil and unapologetic while the other social side knows that decency must be upheld. The tales of these gods allow readers and listeners to live vicariously and experience each personality.



# Style

## Perspective

The Norse Myths are set forth like a series of fairy stories. The myths are entertaining. The reader may not initially realize that these myths were what pagan Scandinavians believed in prior to the advent of Christianity. The myths tell the origins of the world, why the sun and moon move in the sky, where earthquakes come from among other explanations. The myths also focus on the exploits of the gods. These gods are similar to those worshiped ancient Greeks and Romans. The gods provide man with wisdom, good fortune, victory in battle, and fertility.

The myths are entertaining and easily enjoyable. The myths move quickly despite some confusion as to exact chronology. Thor is said to have his hammer in early myths but the story of how he obtained Mjollnir is told several myths later. A reference is made to Balder's death early in the book but Balder does not die until a few chapters before the end. The reader truly interested in Norse mythology will be intrigued by the parallels that can be drawn between the Norse myths and other god legends. Kevin Crossley-Holland's edition of the myths is an excellent source for study and research. Crossley-Holland does not unnecessarily embellish the myths. He even retains many words unique to the Norse lexicon.

## Tone

The tone of the book is subjective. The myths read more like fictional stories instead of a work of non-fiction. There is no way for the reader to verify the facts of the myths themselves. However, the history behind the myths can be verified by checking other accounts like those of Snorri Sturluson. The reader is free to interpret the myths as he chooses. The reader may view them as interesting stories that contain no further meaning. The reader may also come to understand that the Norse myths are similar to Native American legends, Biblical scriptures and other cultural tales. The myths may or may not be true but the people who told these tales believed in them completely. Thor, Odin, and the other gods were deities to be worshiped for their protection, blessing, or to avoid curses. The myths explain the mysteries of the world to pagan culture. True or not the myths gave ancient pagans something to hold on to and give order to their lives.

## Structure

The Norse Myths is composed of an introduction, thirty-two myths, an extensive notes section, a glossary of names, a bibliography, and an index for easy reference. The introduction provides the reader with important background information on Norse mythology, life in Scandinavian times, and the importance of the myths to Norse culture. Each chapter is numbered and headed by a title that tells what the chapter is about. The majority of the thirty-two myths provide explanations for how the world is created, where





man came from, why the sun and moon move across the sky and where earthquakes come from. Each myth is further explained in the Note section. Each note discusses the manuscript where the myth was found and offers clarity for difficult passages. The glossary lists the names of gods, giants, places, and objects from the myths and is an easy reference guide for the reader. Readers interested in learning more about Norse mythology and Scandinavian culture can find further reading ideas in the bibliography.



## Quotes

"Burning ice, biting flame; that is how life began." Chapter 1, pg. 3

"They knew without her magic apples, they would wither and grow old." Chapter 8, pg. 41

"So the gods and goddesses swaddled Thor in a bridal veil." Chapter 14, pg. 72

"They lay down there but, now that Thor's hammer had failed him for the first time since it was forged by Brokk and Eitri, they were all too anxious as well as too hungry to be able to sleep." Chapter 16, pg. 85

"The ferryman paused and with his one eye peered into the shining water that stops for no man." Chapter 22, pg. 119

"My curse on that ring and that gold! It will destroy whoever owns it." Chapter 26, pg. 140

"The mistletoe flew through the hall and it struck Balder. It pierced him and passed right through him." Chapter 29, pg. 154

"He set fire to the pyre and at once a steady plume of smoke, twisting and spiralling, rose into the calm air." Chapter 29, pg. 157

"The bright gods caught you in bed with your own brother, and then, Freyja, you farted." Chapter 30, pg. 165

"In Loki's mind it was not a question of whether but of when the gods would catch up with him." Chapter 31, pg. 169

"The earth will rise again out of the water, fair and green." Chapter 32, pg. 175

"There will be life and new life, life everywhere on earth. That was the end; and this is the beginning." Chapter 32, pg. 176



## Topics for Discussion

Choose another creation story you are familiar with (Biblical, Oriental, Native American, etc.) to compare and contrast with the Norse creation myth.

Discuss Odin's role as the All-Father in relation the Christian ideal of the one true God.

Compare the burial of Balder with other burial scenes in Anglo-Saxon literature. How is it like the burial of Beowulf, of Boromir in Lord of the Rings?

Discuss the odd reality that the gods can grow old and are not eternal beings.

Thor is constantly battling the giants. Do you view his battles as necessity or sport?

Odin enjoys tricking the gods and using disguises with humans. How does Odin's trickery differ from Loki's?

How does the new earth after Ragnarok mirror the creation in the beginning?