

The Story of Grettir the Strong Short Guide

The Story of Grettir the Strong by Allen French

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Overview

French adapted the story of Grettir from the 1869 translation of Grettir's Saga by William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon. The original was written in Iceland during the early fourteenth century by an unknown writer.

chronicles the adventures of a strong, bold loner who was both scorned and envied by his society. Grettir protects his compatriots from various dangers— huge man-killing trolls; "berserks" (former warriors, crazed in battle, who no longer care whom they kill); a witch; and an "undead" man who escapes from his grave. Despite his heroic efforts, Grettir is condemned as an outlaw and forced to fend for himself in the hostile Icelandic wilderness.

Grettir's saga presents a well-rounded portrait of life in medieval Iceland—it examines the people's customs and superstitions, their pride in their pagan past, and their attempts to live by the tenets of a new religion, Christianity.

The book also serves as a good introduction to the Norse saga, a category of literature with which some readers may be unfamiliar.

About the Author

Allen French was born on November 28, 1870, in Boston, Massachusetts. He graduated from Harvard University in 1894 and for several years, beginning in 1908, taught English at his alma mater. His first interest, however, was history, and his contributions to historical writing are many and varied.

Of special interest to readers of his *Story of Grettir the Strong* are his books *Rolf and the Viking Bow*, and *Heroes of Iceland*, an adaptation of *Njal's Saga*.

Also of particular interest to young readers are his *Sir Marrok: A Tale of the Days of King Arthur*, *The Red Keep: A Story of Burgundy in the Year 1165*, and *The Lost Baron: A Story of England in the Year 1200*. The latter two books are illustrated by N. C. Wyeth and Andrew Wyeth.

A scholar of the American Revolution, French also wrote books about the battles at Concord and Lexington, and about the first year of the American Revolution; he wrote about the history of Concord, Massachusetts, as well. His interest in gardening helped him write *The Beginner's Garden Book* (1914). He was a charter member and officer of the National Thoreau Society. French died on October 6, 1946.

Setting

Christianity did not come to Iceland until A.D. 1000, and *The Story of Grettir the Strong*—like many Norse sagas—reflects the tension between pagan and Christian ideals that characterized Icelandic society at the time. Grettir is born in A.D. 997 and dies forty-four years later. The setting of the saga ranges from the small family farms of Iceland to the stormy seas of the North Atlantic and the courts of the earls of Norway. Grettir finally finds refuge on a small island off the coast of Iceland, well-stocked with tasty sheep but surrounded by high cliffs and an icy sea. The book closes in Constantinople (now Istanbul), Turkey, where Grettir's half-brother avenges the hero's death.



Social Sensitivity

Unlike modern society—in which law and order are served by the well-defined agents of police and courts—medieval Iceland was a land of blood feuds and frequent injustice. Only the strong and courageous managed to survive once involved in a feud. Leading citizens occasionally attempted to reconcile families and individuals by imposing fines or exile in cases where harm had been done, but these efforts were seldom successful. Many judgments of the land's major court, the Althing, were arrived at through a show of power or trickery. The Althing's judgments, both fair and unfair, were often doomed to break down.

The Story of Grettir the Strong shows how the hero struggles for his own rights, and how he struggles for peace in the face of constant turmoil. Ironically, although Grettir constantly defends others, society at large is unwilling to protect his rights or his life.

Literary Qualities

Saga narration traditionally concentrates on plot at the expense of in-depth characterization. Minor characters are killed off almost immediately after they appear, and even major characters are introduced in a matter of fact way: "There was a man named ..." is a standard formula. The characters in the book, like those in many Norse sagas, speak in understatement. For example, when Grettir's brother Atli is pounced upon by surprise and dealt a mortal wound, his only comment is, "Broad swords are becoming fashionable nowadays." The characters' dialogue is also laced with short ironic jabs directed at those who do not measure up to heroic standards.

French's version of Grettir's saga catches the reserved, ironic flavor of speech characteristic of the Norse saga without departing noticeably from modern narrative techniques. His narrative is swift-paced and dramatic. In many Norse sagas, one mark of the true hero is the ability to recite short, extemporaneous poems at crucial dramatic moments. In the original sagas, these poems are almost always very involved, but French skillfully renders them in simplified form.

Although an aura of tragedy permeates Grettir's story, the saga never turns

gloomy. The lonely hero is constantly befriended by sympathetic characters who try their best to help him, and Grettir never allows himself to grow discouraged.

Themes and Characters

Critics have proposed two theories regarding the composition of Norse sagas. The debate centers on the question of who gave artistic shape to stories that date back to the saga age in Iceland—roughly A.D. 930 to 1050. The "free prose" theory holds that sagas took shape gradually through a process of oral composition. The "book prose" theory holds that the sagas were crafted during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries by authors who pieced together scattered tales and traditions.

Free prose scholars tend to accept the historical accuracy of the sagas, whereas book prose scholars accept as historical only those elements that can be checked against other sources.

Iceland was settled during the eighth and ninth centuries by fiercely independent individuals and families who refused to accept domination by Norwegian earls. Once transplanted to new soil, these emigrants did not lose the pride that had prompted their departure from Norway. Survival and safety during the saga age depended on defense of the family honor—either by legal action or, if that failed, through violent revenge, frequently leading to blood feuds.

The protagonist of *The Story of Grettir the Strong* is a complex figure. Physically, Grettir is the strongest man ever to live in Iceland. He is fundamentally a man of good will, whose selflessness is illustrated time and again as he protects others from vicious men and threatening monsters. Nonetheless, Grettir is plagued by bad fortune. A short temper causes some of his troubles, but the jealousy and misunderstanding of others play a large part in his fate.

Grettir's life is noble and tragic, and in many ways resembles that of Achilles, the Greek hero of the Trojan War, another legendary warrior who paid dearly for his inability to tolerate petty or unfair treatment.

Grettir has the courage to face the supernatural, but this courage proves his undoing. He defeats the "undead" ghost of Glam, and as a result is haunted by Glam's curse for the rest of his life. When it comes his time to die, Grettir faces death with great courage and a sense of satisfaction in his accomplishments.

Although they disappear from the saga for extended periods, Grettir's mother and three brothers play important roles in the tale. On the occasion of Grettir's first departure from home, his mother sends him off with a trusty sword. Years later, she reacts bravely when presented with his severed head. Grettir's young brother, Illugi, sacrifices his own life rather than yield to his brother's murderers. And although he has only "thin arms," Grettir's half-brother Thorstein Dromund survives to avenge Grettir in far-off Constantinople—just as Grettir earlier avenged his older brother, Atli.

The evil character, Thorbiorn Angle, mercilessly hounds Grettir, calls on the services of an evil witch, and attacks the hero when he is deathly ill. Another character, Noise, is



aptly named and a fool. His ceaseless chatter sets him in sharp contrast with the ideal Icelandic hero—the strong warrior who says little but does much. Like most Norse sagas, the book also features a parade of minor characters, many of whom die violent deaths.



Topics for Discussion

1. Early in the book Grettir encounters Thorfinn and the ghost of Thorfinn's father. How does their greed impress Grettir? Do these characters provide an immediate contrast to Grettir?
2. Does Glam's behavior while alive foreshadow the fact that he does not lie quiet in his grave after his death?
3. Why does Glam drag Grettir out of the house so that the fight between them can take place under the moonlight?

Compare Glam's behavior to the behavior of the troll woman in chapter 10.

4. Does Olaf the Saint show Christian virtue in his treatment of Grettir?
5. In Icelandic law, a killing is only counted as murder if the killer does not report the deed. If the killing is reported, money can be paid as compensation to the family of the victim, and the case is considered closed. What are the effects of this system on Grettir's life? Does this system promote or prevent violence?
6. Although Grettir does not seem to pay much attention to religion, he helps a woman celebrate Christmas and recovers the bones of men from a troll cave. He performs both acts at great personal risk. What are Grettir's motives?
7. Why does Grettir spare the life of Gisli, even though Gisli proves himself a braggart and a coward?
8. Why does Grettir tolerate Noise, his shiftless companion on Drang Isle?
9. Why is Thorbiorn Angle's killing of Grettir especially shameful?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Compare the supernatural adventures of Grettir and Beowulf. Evaluate similarities in the locations of the adventures and the nature of the supernatural adversaries.
2. Look carefully at the attitudes of Icelanders toward non-Icelanders in *The Story of Grettir the Strong*. What might be the cause of highly developed national pride in early Iceland?
3. Notice that although Grettir has sisters, they "are not of account." His mother, on the other hand, is of great account. What is the attitude toward women in *The Story of Grettir the Strong*?
4. What role do ships and the sea play in the story? Compare Icelandic seamanship, or Norse seamanship, with early Greek seamanship.
5. One Icelandic in the saga age was reported to have said, "Christ is all right, but I want Thor when I go to sea." To what extent is early Christianity in Iceland colored by remaining pagan beliefs? Refer to *Njal's Saga*, especially the actions of Thangbrand, for the story of the conversion of Iceland to Christianity.

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