

## Nibelungenlied 1200.

### *The origins*

The origins of German literature lie in Norse and Icelandic saga, and embody rich traits: powerful mythological forces in conflict, an abundance of tense conflictual struggles—revenge, jealousy, lust—open battles to rule the world; subtle as well as eventual slaying--bellicose personal relations embodied inside a mythic dynamic, which leave the contemporary reader awestruck at the power of the present work, which has been called the Mediaeval *Iliad*. One might mention, just to have it before us, the extreme intricacy of plot.

### *The cultural tenor*

The greater part of the material is neither Christian nor drawn from Classical Antiquity and therefore opens us to perspectives on humanity and nature which have not been incorporated in the mainstream of Western culture. These valuable insights take us back to pre-Christian Europe, with its rich cache of 'pagan' (largely Norse) myths, and yet that stratum of early Germanic poetry is in the present epic itself blended with the growing chivalric tradition of Christian poetry, which is by the time of the *Nibelungenlied* proving to be a component of the 'Germanic life view.' Thus we find, in this epic collated and written down around 1200 A.D., a culturally blended creation, with work of extreme antiquity—dragon-slayer motifs as in the tales of Perseus in Ancient Greece--joined to Romantic chivalric love, jealousy, and vengeance.

### *The narrative material of the Nibelungenlied*

The work in question embodies historical memories that go back to the court of the Burgundians, who in the 4th century A.D. were foes of the declining Roman Empire; the plot continues on to incorporate elements of different stages of very late German mediaeval culture, as well as a great deal of fairy tale (*Maerchen*) and folk legend. (It might be added that the manuscript itself has been through numerous historical periods: lost entirely by the end of the 16th century; rediscovered in the 18th century in a manuscript dating from the 13th century. The consequence is that we cannot identify any specific author of the poem, which like *Beowulf*, comes out of the mists to us. ) If at times the epic seems to be bursting at its seams, and running over its edges in repetition and randomness, that is because the narrative pays homage to so many different traditions.

### *The forming of the material*

The present epic—2400 stanzas in 39 *Aventuren*- is thought to have been written, but then to have incorporated the writers' desire to make the epic seem to have been orally composed. (Can one think of the example of Longfellow, in *Hiawatha*, an epic composed in trochaic tetrameters, to simulate the effect of a hypnotically repetitive archaic poem.) The consistent verse structure—four rhyming lines, each divided by a caesura, the fourth line consistently longer by one stress; over an extent of 10,000 lines—serves wonderfully to keep the ear focused on the stanzaic structure. An uptick of attention dominates each line, and builds up before the caesura; the final line is a metrical foot longer than the lines which precede it, guaranteeing a small emotional charge as an inflection to the whole stanza. The device of the elongated final line is thought to suggest derivation from a more sophisticated tradition within Germanic epic.

### *The main characters of the epic*

The narrative centers on a few main characters—whose force, and sharp profiles, hold the fabric together. Siegfried the dragon slayer is an archaic form, the hero ready for action but prudent and ultimately a tragic victim; the hero who has rendered himself invincible—except for one tiny Achilles' heel—by bathing in the blood of the dragon he has slain; Siegfried's eventual bride, Kriemhild, whose beauty and primal sense for revenge—she avenges the murder of her husband, Siegfried—are from archaic legend; the villain hero Hagen, who is both a image of faithful vassalage, and of unreserved brutality; the dwarf Alberich, to whom the treasure of the Niebelungs is confided, and who is himself right out of the jester entourage of any mediaeval prince; the crafty Etzel (Attila the Hun, in fact) at his Hungarian court, the center of the intrigue which undergirds the second Part of the poem. In this lengthy and passionate pastiche of plots and sub plots, in which love, treachery, magic and courage compete for our fascination, we are immersed in the world of mediaeval Germanic feeling, nostalgic and contemporary pride mixed, and find ourselves engaging with those fierce archaic virtues of pride, independence, vengeance and stubbornness which were uncompromising to a degree fascinating to our more 'complex' age.

### *The Plot*

The plot of the *Nibelungenlied* is divided into two parts, and has already been briefly sketched.

The poem opens at the Court of the Burgundian Kingdom, Kriemhild, the virgin sister of King Gunther and his brothers, has a dream of a falcon which is killed by two eagles. She takes it that her husband is intended by the falcon, and she determines not to marry. In the background, however, an awesome hero, Siegfried, is approaching; Hagen, one of the vassals of King Guenther, tells Guenther about the feats of Siegfried, who has killed, and taken the land of, two brothers—one of them called *Nibelung*—whose treasure he took, in the course of which he slew a dragon, and left a dwarf, Alberich, in charge of the treasure. One can see how much local detail enters into the summary of such an epic.

After slaying the dragon, Siegfried bathes in the dragon's blood, to render himself invincible; but during that bloody bath a single leaf from a linden tree falls on his back, and remains, forever, his dangerous 'Achilles heel.' In this way the poem keeps casting forward portents, and accumulates around itself the weight of destiny. At the present point, in the narrative, Siegfried is prevented from seeing his intended love, Kriemhild.

In the immediate future Siegfried joins the Burgundians on a voyage to Iceland, where Siegfried will aid Gunther, the brother of Kriemhild, to conquer the love trials imposed on him by the Icelandic Queen, Brunhild. Here we see the magic Siegfried, wrapped in his cloak of invisibility, which confers on him the strength of twelve men. He conquers, with Wagnerian power, giving Gunther a bride, and himself too, the Kriemhild who now yields to him.

The remainder of the epic plays out—suspense must be factored in here, for our reader's sake—around a number of key themes—the fantasy rape of Brunhild by Siegfried, the growing suspicion of Brunhild toward the social rank of Siegfried, Kriemhild's husband, the murder of Siegfried by Hagen, one of King Gunther's vassals, and the blood bath revenge of Kriemhild, who has remarried into the court of Hungary, and whose own death is preceded by her decapitation of Hagen, the murderer of her husband.

### *The German Iliad?*

The material of the *Nibelungenlied* has played to many tunes: Wagnerian opera, in which the soaring tones of the ensemble suggest the vast depths of myth and power from which the epic rises; National Socialist self-glorification; and today, of course, cartoons and pop Siegfried songs. In the end all of these efforts miss the intra-secular richness of this historical pastiche, which has been called the German *Iliad*, in the sense that like Homer the anonymous author of this German lay brings together passionate historical materials and personages from many different versions of his own culture.

Betrayal, jealousy, and revenge all play central roles in the *Nibelungenlied*. It is as though, even in the fairly 'archaic' literary milieu of this work, the drivers are all drawn from deep human passions. Can you isolate the elements that seem to you most clearly part of the 'archaic' world? Can you do a little research on the Burgundians, whose role as enemies of the Romans in the 5th century, takes us into classical antiquity?

We noted that the *Nibelungenlied* has been called the Iliad of Germany. Do you feel that this German epic, like Homer's, concentrates on a single topic—like The Battle of Troy—and makes salient points about that topic, like the moral decision facing Achilles at the end of the epic? Or is the *Nibelungenlied* more diffuse than the Iliad? Less in control of its diverse assembled materials?

*Excerpt from the beginning of the epic: Project Gutenberg text*

In the Netherlands there grew the child of a noble king (his father had for name Siegmund, his mother Siegelind), in a mighty castle, known far and wide, in the lowlands of the Rhine: Xanten, men called it. Of this hero I sing, how fair he grew. Free he was of every blemish. Strong and famous he later became, this valiant man. Ho! What great worship he won in this world! Siegfried hight this good and doughty knight. Full many kingdoms did he put to the test through his warlike mood. Through his strength of body he rode into many lands. Ho! What bold warriors he after found in the Burgundian land! Mickle wonders might one tell of Siegfried in his prime, in youthful days; what honors he received and how fair of body he. The most stately women held him in their love; with the zeal which was his due.

Men trained him. But of himself what virtues he attained! Truly his father's lands were honored, that he was found in all things of such right lordly mind. Now was he become of the age that he might ride to court. Gladly the people saw him, many a maid wished that his desire might ever bear him hither. Enow gazed on him with favor; of this the prince was well aware. Full seldom was the youth allowed to ride without a guard of knights. Siegmund and Siegelind bade deck him out in brave attire. The older knights who were acquaint with courtly custom, had him in their care. Well therefore might he win both folk and land.

Now he was of the strength that he bare weapons well. Whatever he needed thereto, of this he had enow. With purpose he began to woo fair ladies; these bold Siegfried courted well in proper wise. Then bade Siegmund have cried to all his men, that he would hold a feasting with his loving kindred. The tidings thereof men brought into the lands of other kings. To the strangers and the home-folk he gave steeds and armor. Wheresoever any was found who, because of his birth, should become a knight, these noble youths were summoned to the land for the feasting. Here with the youthful prince they gained the knightly sword. Wonders might one tell of this great feast; Siegmund and Siegelind wist well how to gain great worship with their gifts, of which their hands dealt out great store. Wherefore one beheld many strangers riding to their realm. Four hundred sword-thanes (4) were to put on knightly garb with Siegfried. Many a fair maid was aught but idle with the work, for he was beloved of them all. Many precious stones the ladies inlaid on the gold, which together with the edging they would work upon the dress of the proud young warriors, for this must needs be done.

The host bade make benches for the many valiant men, for the midsummer festival, at which Siegfried should gain the name of knight. Then full many a noble knight and many a high-born squire did hie them to the minster. Right were the elders in that they served the young, as had been done to them afore. Pastimes they had and hope of much good cheer. To the honor of God a mass was sung; then there rose from the people full great a press, as the youths were made knights in courtly wise, with such great honors as might not ever lightly be again. Then they ran to where they found saddled many a steed. In Siegmund's court the hurtling waxed so fierce that both palace and hall were heard to ring; the high-mettled warriors clashed with mighty sound. From young and old one heard many a shock, so that the splintering of the shafts reechoed to the clouds. Truncheons were seen flying out before the palace from the hand of many a knight. This was done with zeal. At length the host bade cease the tourney and the steeds were led away.

## Study guide

The poet of the present epic drew widely on oral materials widespread among the Germanic tribes gradually coalescing after the fall of the Roman Empire. Do you feel the presence of a single author, or the footprint of one governing intelligence behind the poem? Would the discovery of such a voice be simplified by looking at a single theme, like revenge, which so starkly penetrates both parts of the epic? Or—and this study question concerns the identification of authors in literature—would we be more on track to look at distinctive metrical features—like number of syllables in a stanza, or the question whether the cesura is normally preceded by a feminine or a masculine emphasis. All of these micro issues go into the construction of an authorial presence in a text. Can you identify further areas deserving attention, in a text of which you are trying to determine the author?

What is the main theme of the poem? Important candidates would be: nobility and rank; revenge, magic—as in the cloak of Siegfried, which confers on him the power of many men; destiny—which from the time of Kriemhild's initial dream, seems to haunt the Burgundians. What place do you think themes, of these sorts, play in the creative imagination of a writer such as the writer of the *Nibelungenlied*? Does such a writer conceive of his material in terms of the themes that will recur in it? Or is to say that too academic? Does the writing act respond to a variety of blended impulses—memories, dreads, hopes—which ultimately coalesce into themes? For that matter, what is the special importance, in the case of Germanic epic, of the fact that the performance of it is accompanied by stringed and percussion instruments? Does the resulting *Gesamtkunstwerk*. (*Composite Artwork*) constitute anything like a pre opera? *What do you think led Wagner to the power of this work? Does his work—enjoy passages of his Nibelungenlied in moving form, on UTube—align with the written epic we have been discussing?*

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