

# Heroes in germanic literature



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In the ancient Germanic world, heroes are strong men who exude defining personality characteristics that pose them as a threat to others. These traits are what make them formidable, but they are also what drive these heroes to their death. For example, in *The Nibelungenlied*, Siegfried appears as the confident, omnipotent hero; he is rendered almost invincible by a dragon's blood and kills men left and right using this power. In the Icelandic epic *Njáls saga*, Gunnar seems to be a parallel character to Siegfried: he also is virtually undefeatable with his magic halberd and kills men everywhere he goes. Even though they are both physically powerful, Siegfried and Gunnar represent opposite poles of heroism. Certainly, they are both considered heroes in the traditional sense, but their relationships with their loved ones and enemies demonstrate that these men have vastly different values: Siegfried values power and strength, whereas Gunnar values loyalty and honor. For both, however, the values that make them heroes also bring them to their deaths. Like all great heroes, Gunnar and Siegfried are portrayed as the greatest fighters in the land. Despite his parents' concerns, Siegfried journeys to Burgundy in the very beginning of the story and immediately threatens to start a fight and take over the land. Even though he is the intruder, Siegfried intimidates the men of Burgundy with his confidence in the face of danger. Hagen warns that, " We must receive this young lord with more than usual honour, lest we incur his enmity" (page 28). Similarly, the first description the readers get of Gunnar is that: He was big and strong and an excellent fighter. He could swing a sword and throw a spear with either hand, if he wished... and there was no sport in which there was any point in competing with him and it was said that no man was his match.

(34)Physically, Siegfried and Gunnar seem to be strong, heroic men.

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However, at one point in *Njáls saga*, Gunnar says, “ What I don’t know... is whether I am less manly than other men because killing troubles me more than it does them” (page 93). It is this hesitance to kill that marks the key difference between Siegfried and Gunnar. Siegfried is strong and confident and is willing to kill. Because of this, he utilizes his relationships and strength to obtain more power and disregards the value of other lives. Gunnar, on the other hand, honors the value of each human and thus honors the relationships he has. Siegfried and Gunnar each have a deep friendship with another character in the book. For Siegfried, it is Gunther. For Gunnar, it is Njál. On the surface, both pairs seem to have the same relationship dynamics in that they both stick up for their friends whenever they need help. However, this is not entirely true. Siegfried, being a power-hungry hero, does not have a genuine relationship with Gunther. A king’s power comes from his honor, but Siegfried basically usurps all of Gunther’s power by fighting his battles for him and taking his wife’s virginity. If Siegfried were merely helping out his friend, he would not take the ring and the garter as a consolation prize for raping his friend’s wife. Siegfried does not really need Gunther as a friend; he is just using him. On the other hand, Gunnar and Njál both need each other, which is why they have such a close friendship. Njál is not a fighter, and Gunnar is not as wise as Njál. Together as a team, they are able to get peacefully past the quarrel between their wives and the frequent troubles that Gunnar gets himself into. Although Siegfried defends Gunther’s power, Gunnar defends Njál’s honor. When Hallgerd forces Sigmund to write a poem mocking Njál and his sons, Gunnar becomes angry and says to Sigmund: You are foolish and unable to follow good advice if you are willing to slander Njál’s sons, and even worse, Njál himself, on top of what you have

already done to them, and this will lead to your death. And if any man here repeats these words he'll be sent away, and bear my anger besides.

(74)Gunnar further proves his loyalty to Njál by saying this, showing that words can be a powerful testament to friendship. Although both men claim to be in love with their wives, Siegfried and Gunnar each have very different relationships with their women. For a man with such a big ego, it seems odd that Siegfried would go to such great lengths to obtain a woman. But in fact, his pursuit of Kriemhild is perfectly in line with his ego. His motive is not to take over Burgundy or obtain more riches, but solely to win over Kriemhild. We already know that Siegfried wins the greatest treasures from Alberich and already has the highest ranking in his land. What he does not have is a woman. Siegfried doesn't fall in love with Kriemhild; he falls in love with the idea of obtaining the one great treasure he doesn't have. This is evident from Siegfried's intense longing for Kriemhild before he even saw her.

Siegfried declares that: I shall take Kriemhild the fair maiden of Burgundy... on account of her very great beauty, since even if the mightiest emperors wished to marry, I know he would not demean himself in loving the fair princess. (23) He had the knowledge that she was a rare beauty and was a woman that many suitors hoped to woo. Knowing only this, Siegfried sees Kriemhild as the ultimate prize for his ego, the final piece of the puzzle that would bring him greater renown. In contrast, Gunnar is genuinely attracted to his wife, Hallgerd, and wants to marry her despite all the warnings that he was given. Unlike Siegfried, who was determined to marry Kriemhild before he even met her, Gunnar and Hallgerd had “ talked aloud for a long time” (page 53). Even though “ Hrut told Gunnar... everything about Hallgerd's character, and thought it seemed to Gunnar at first that there were many

faults, it finally came about that they made an agreement” (page 54). This shows that Gunnar knew that Hallgerd was not perfect, but loves her regardless because he sees her as a person rather than a prized object, as Siegfried saw Kriemhild. Ironically, both heroes were ultimately brought to their ends by none other than their own wives. Siegfried, being an egotist, is too confident in his strength, and this causes him to be careless in using his power. Since he only sees Kriemhild as a weak object, he never stops to think that she would ever be powerful enough to do anything. Hence, he feels comfortable telling her about the one spot on his shoulder that is not invincible. Hagen knows that Siegfried is overly confident and would feel safe exposing his weakness to his wife, and thus, Hagen uses this knowledge to manipulate and kill Siegfried. Hagen challenges Siegfried to a race, appealing to Siegfried’s competitive nature, and even eggs him on by saying that he, Hagen, is no match for Siegfried. Through this ego boost, Siegfried refuses to win the normal way: he purposely handicaps himself. Siegfried tells Hagen that he “ will lie down in the grass at your feet, as a handicap... [and] will carry all my equipment with me, my spear and my shield and all my hunting clothes” (page 130). Hagen deliberately does not provide wine for the whole day so that after the race, Siegfried gets tired and thirsty and takes a drink from the brook. This is exactly the vulnerable position that Hagen wants him to be in, and he takes the opportunity to attack Siegfried from behind and kill him. Ultimately, it is Siegfried’s relationship with Kriemhild that acted as the catalyst for his death. Whereas Siegfried dies because he is overly confident about his strength, Gunnar dies because of his stubborn attachment to being loyal and honorable. During the famine, “ Gunnar shared hay and food with many people, and everybody who turned

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to him got supplies as long as there were any” (page 79). He continues his generosity until he runs out of supplies and then goes out to go buy some from Otkel. Njál recognizes Gunnar’s generosity by saying that, “ There is no hope for others if men like him cannot get supplies” (Page 80). Meanwhile, Hallgerd gets the slave to steal food from Otkel. When Gunnar finds out, he slaps her on the face. Even though he had heard all the stories Hrut told him about Hallgerd’s previous husbands, Gunnar does not hold back because he finds it so shameful that his wife would do such a dishonorable deed. Later on, Gunnar has a battle with Gizur and Elif and his brothers. Gunnar is on the brink of winning when he decides to shoot their own arrow at them. He wants to do this because he believes that “ it [would] shame them to be hurt by their own weapons” (page 129). Even though his mother urged him not to, Gunnar still insists on doing so, because he feels that shame would cut them deeper than any physical attack. This attack, however, provokes them to attack him back and ultimately kill him. When he asks Hallgerd to help, she refuses because of that slap. Ultimately, it is Gunnar’s deep value of honor that kills him. Both heroes, at times, appear to make decisions that seem incongruous to their actions. However, these incongruities only serve to hide their true motives. In *The Nibelungenlied*, Gunther becomes stressed out when Liudegast and Liudeger threaten to invade his country. Siegfried self-sacrificially says to Gunther, “ If you are looking for friends I shall assuredly be one among them, and I trust I shall acquit myself honourably till the end of my days” (page 35). In this instance, it seems like Siegfried’s true motive is to help out his friend. This “ honor” he would gain, however, is only a means to an end. He is only using his strength in helping Gunther to gain more power for himself. His later actions (e. g., raping Brunhild) prove that

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Siegfried does not truly value honor like he says he does. At one point in the Njáls Saga, Gunnar goes out raiding and killing men for over a year. The book graphically describes Gunnar killing people left and right and taking their money. In this case, Gunnar seems to be driven solely by the appeal of power and money. With this large amount of treasure, Gunnar gains the respect of King Harald Gormsson who offers him even greater power and wealth. At this point, Gunnar shows his true colors. He refuses the King's offer, saying that he " wanted to return to Iceland to see his kinsmen and friends" (page 51). Upon his return back home, Gunnar shares his new wealth with his friends. He also tells Njál that he " wants to get along well with everyone" (page 52). Here, Gunnar shows that his pillaging and killing was only a way to gain respect and honor from those around him. He does not actually enjoy the killing, as he later confides in Njál about feeling guilty whenever he kills men. As with Siegfried, Gunnar's contrasting actions are only a means to an end. Unexpectedly for heroes, both Siegfried and Gunnar die very early on in their stories. Ironically, it is their heroism that causes their downfalls, and this makes the two very similar. Siegfried is a hero in that he is confident and uses this confidence to get what he wants.

Eventually, his ego gets the best of him. Hagen is able to manipulate Siegfried's ego and his relationship with his wife to put him in a vulnerable position. Similarly, Gunnar meets his death when he breaks his agreement to be exiled from his friends and his people. He also falls at the hands of his wife when she refuses to rescue him. Strangely, in both cases, these heroes die because of their relationships with others. Both heroes cause their own demise, yet they do so differently. Siegfried dies because people are jealous of his tremendous strength and power. Gunnar dies because of his loyalty to

his powerful and influential friends. So, as with all fallen heroes, greatness ultimately becomes the greatest imperfection.