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The Power and Symbolism of a Sword

The sword has been the pinnacle of warfare from the bronze age all the way to the first world war. It is an effective weapon and one of the first symbols many cultures use to signal warfare and fighting in general, however the symbolism of the sword goes way beyond that. Many swords in both history and literature are passed down from generation to generation, gaining names, power, recognition, and even becoming more famous than their bearers. Swords like Honjo Masamune, a famous historical katana passed down from one Shogun to the next, or Excalibur, the famous sword wielded by the mythical king Authur, both of which have arguably become more famous than their wielders. In literature, famous swords have even more parts to play, highlighting parts of the characters that wield them through symbolism and metaphors. One such famous example is the Norse mythology sword Gram, given to the line of Sigmund from Odin himself. However, over the course of the story told in the The Saga of the Volsungs, the sword is broken in conjunction with the decline of the Volsung clan. Gram therefore becomes a symbol for the power of the Volsung clan over the course of the story. A very similar story is told with the breaking and reforging of Narsil in Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings. Tolkien may have taken inspiration from The Saga of the Volsungs with Narsil as a symbol for the line of kings, but he changed the circumstances revolving around the breaking and reforging of Narsil in order to highlight Aragron’s worthiness to wield the sword and in turn become a worthy king.

Both Gram and Narsil share a very similar story in their own respective tales. The sword Gram is used by Sigmund to build himself a kingdom. He wins many battles and grows his kingdom, eventually being herald as “the greatest champion and king in ancient times. (The Saga of the Volsungs, 10 Concerning the Volsungs)” This is all done with Gram at his side. In contrast Elendil bore the sword Narsil away from the downfall of Numenor, to eventually form the kingdoms of Gondor and Arnor, the greatest kingdoms of men in Middle Earth after the sinking of Numenor. Both of these forefathers to our main characters used these swords to forge an empire from nothing. Both Sigmund and Elendil fought a final battle against a mythical foe, which in turn turned out to be their doom. Sigmund fell against King Lyngvi when Odin, disguised as a spear-wielding warrior, broke Gram upon the spear. In the battle of the last alliance, “Elendil fell, and Narsil broke beneath him;” (Tolkien, J.R.R.. The Lord of the Rings: One Volume p. 243),” after fighting with Sauron. Once again our hero faces against unbeatable odds, goes toe to toe with a mythical warrior and loses. In this process the sword is broken as is the power that came with it. It is not till much later that the sword is reforged for an heir of the line and given a new name. Gram was not named before this instance, but it is given to Sigurd reforged to destroy the dragon Fafnir. Sigurd does just this and brings glory and riches back to the Volsung clan. In contrast, Aragorn received a reforged Narsil and named it Andúril, before reclaiming the throne of Gondor and bringing his forefather’s kingdom back into its former glory. The base story for Narsil and the line of kings closely follows the story of Gram and the Volsung clan. However, both Gram and Narsil are much more than a sword, they represent the power of the bloodlines they represent.

The fall and rise of the line of kings and the Volsung clan are perfectly aligned with the breaking and reforging of the swords. In The Saga of the Volsungs, Sigmund sees the downfall of his clan with the breaking of Gram saying: “Many a man lives where there is little hope, but my luck has forsaken me, so that I do not want to let myself be healed. Odin does not want me to wield the sword since it is now broken. I have fought battles while it pleased him.” (The Saga of the Volsungs, 12 Hjordis Remarries). Sigmund realizes that his time in the light has set with the breaking of the sword. Odin gave it to him and as such has seen fit to take it away from him. Although not all is lost as Sigmund wishes for his wife to “Guard well the broken pieces of the sword. From them can be made a good sword, which will be called Gram. Our son will bear it and with it accomplish many great deeds, which will never be forgotten.” (The Saga of the Volsungs, 12 Hjordis Remarries). The line of the Volsungs, at least for now, has been diminished. It is not till much later in life that Sigurd receives a reforged Gram, goes off on many adventures and wins glory, riches and accomplishments. Narsil and the line of kings go through the same process. It was Elendil and Gil-galad that fell to Sauron: “I beheld the last combat on the slopes of Orodruin, where Gil-galad died, and Elendil fell, and Narsil broke beneath him;” (Tolkien, J.R.R.. The Lord of the Rings: One Volume p. 243).” Henceforth the line of kings was tainted as Isildur the son of Elendil took the One Ring. Isildur was then “betrayed by it to his death; and so it is named in the North Isildur’s Bane… And ever since that day the race of Númenor has decayed, and the span of their years has lessened.” (Tolkien, J.R.R.. The Lord of the Rings: One Volume p. 243-244). Although it took many generations for the line of kings to be gone from the kingdom of Gondor, the men were never as great nor as powerful as Elendil. It is pretty clear that Tolkien took inspiration from the story of Gram and its connection to the Volsungs as a template for Narsil and the line of kings, however Tolkien strengthened the symbol by taking it a step further.

One of the main points of The Lord of the Rings is the questionable righteousness of Man. The ring itself is called Isildur’s Bane, was the downfall of Isildur in the end, “the Ring slipped from his finger as he swam, and then the Orcs saw him and killed him with arrows.” (Tolkien, J.R.R.. The Lord of the Rings: One Volume p. 52). The wise of the world counseled Isildur to destroy the Ring, but he refused saying “But for my part I will risk no hurt to this thing: of all the works of Sauron the only fair. It is precious to me, though I buy it with great pain.” (Tolkien, J.R.R.. The Lord of the Rings: One Volume p. 253). The very first man to meet the Ring and we immediately see the fault of man. Isilbur was corrupted by the Ring and took it as his own. The line of kings failed both in strength of arms against Sauron, and also against strength of will against the Ring. This happens at the same time as the breaking of Narsil. As the sword breaks, so does the strength of the characters to do the right thing. We see this further during the battle, Disaster of Gladden Fields. Seaking the council of Elrond Isildur took the shards of Narsil, the Ring and a company of men to Rivendell. However they were ambushed and the shards were stored in Rivendell for the rightful king to emerge. Once Isildur shows that he is not worthy of the sword as he was too preoccupied with the Ring. Thus Narsil is able to become a symbol for not only the breaking of the line of kings, but also the strength of men.

Here is where the differences in the two swords become evident. The Volsung clan does not appear to have the same moral issue as the line of kings did. Unlike Sauron, whose one objective is to rule Middle Earth, Odin only requires warriors for Ragnarok, and does not necessarily care about how he gets them.[[1]](#footnote-0) Sauron is a force of evil, while Odin is more selfish, but not necessarily evil. His actions, while might be considered bad and sometimes outright unfair, are to prevent Rangnarok from happening.[[2]](#footnote-1) In turn the actions of our heroes are different as well. There is no failing of Sigmund’s purpose or fall from grace, except that, at this time and place, Odin decides that he needs Sigmund to go to Valhalla. Sigmund may be one of the heroes in The Saga of the Volsungs, but the story is not one of good and evil, but more of glory and great deeds. Odin’s intentions, although hidden to the reader, do not point towards a major character flaw that Isilbur has, and in fact after learning more about Odin’s intentions the less likely that is true. It is much more likely that Sigmund had reached the peak of his power and as such Odin found it a good time to take the mighty warrior to his hall. Either way the breaking of Gram signifies a breaking of the Volsung bloodline, but not necessarily its worthiness, or at least not in the same way Tolkien uses the breaking of Narsil in The Lord of the Rings. In both stories, eventually the sword and the bloodline come back, and a similar change to the circumstances of the reforging of the sword is made in Tolkien’s mythology.

In Tolkien’s mythology the time for Narsil to be reforged comes about again after 3000 years of decline in the kings of men. By the time of the fellowship of the Ring, Aragorn is currently the lost heir of the kings of men and last of Elendil’s bloodline. He was given the shards of Narsil at a very young age, but it was not until much later that he made the decision to bring it back. It was the circumstances for this decision that set the story of Narsil apart from Gram. On the edge of war for the ring, and faced with the very thing that made his line fall, Isildur’s Bane, Aragron made the decision to come out of the darkness and into the light. As Frodo learns about Aragorn’s true lineage, he offers the Ring to Aragorn believing it to belong to him, but Aragorn responds with, “It does not belong to either of us.” (Tolkien, J.R.R.. The Lord of the Rings: One Volume p. 247). He denies ownership of the Ring, knowing full well that it would consume him. With “the world is changing once again. A new hour comes. Isildur’s Bane is found. Battle is at hand. The Sword shall be reforged. I will come to Minas Tirith.” (Tolkien, J.R.R.. The Lord of the Rings: One Volume p. 248). This immediately sets Aragorn apart from the rest of his line as he claims he is “but the heir of Isildur, not Isildur himself.” (Tolkien, J.R.R.. The Lord of the Rings: One Volume p. 248). Aragorn was able to rise above all his forefathers and resist temptation to take the Ring. It is in this instance that the shards of Narsil become Andúril, The Flame of the West. Not only was the bloodline reforged with the sword, but Aragorn proved that he was better than Isildur and earned the right to wield the sword. Throughout the story there are many more instances proving Aragorn’s right to rule before reclaiming his throne. Before Eomer, Aragorn proclaims “I am Aragorn son of Arathorn, and am called Elessar, the Elfstone, Dúnadan, the heir of Isildur Elendil’s son of Gondor. Here is the Sword that was Broken and is forged again! Will you aid me or thwart me? Choose swiftly!’ Gimli and Legolas looked at their companion in amazement, for they had not seen him in this mood before. He seemed to have grown in stature while Éomer had shrunk;” (Tolkien, J.R.R.. The Lord of the Rings: One Volume p. 433). Here Aragorn proclaims his right with Andúril at his side as proof. Yet again at the paths of the dead, getting the dead to help him in the war, something only the rightful heir could do. Before the gates of Minas Tirith he did not want to overshadow the Stewards that protected it for so long, “and I fear that if I enter it unbidden, then doubt and debate may arise, which should not be while this war is fought. I will not enter in, nor make any claim, until it be seen whether we or Mordor shall prevail. Men shall pitch my tents upon the field, and here I will await the welcome of the Lord of the City. (Tolkien, J.R.R.. The Lord of the Rings: One Volume p. 861). Finally, the most important test was facing Sauron on the Palantir, putting Aragorn’s strength of will against Sauron’s, “I had both the right and the strength to use it, or so I judged. The right cannot be doubted. The strength was enough – barely.” (Tolkien, J.R.R.. The Lord of the Rings: One Volume p. 780). Aragorn did not say anything, but let the fact that he was alive and he had the power to wield Andúril speak for him. This allowed Aragorn to have the strength of will to win back the Palantir from Sauron’s. This even further showed Aragorn’s right to wield the sword, both as the heir to it and the correct character.

Sigurd, however, does not have this grand test of character through his story. The beginning of Sigurd’s tale was a challenge, Regin believes that Sigurd “ha[s] too little wealth. It vexes me that you run around like a messenger boy. But I can tell you where there is great wealth to be had. And it is likely that there would be honor in seeking it and glory should you acquire it.” (The Saga of the Volsungs, 13 Birth of Sigurd). It is established early in Sigurd’s tale, that the things driving him are not to save the world or defeat evil, but glory, riches and honor. In fact Sigurd’s[[3]](#footnote-2) character is very difficult for the reader to relate to as he is constantly ignoring his own problems. Such as the entire situation of ignoring the problem of Brynhild, and even his pride being his own downfall when falling in battle against Gutthorn. Sigurd’s motivation throughout the story is for his own personal status, and while this is an honorable goal to strive for, this makes the reforging of Gram much less of a symbol than Andúril. The remaking of Andúril signified not only the coming of the king, but the rebirth of the great strength of men. Gram simply signified the reforgning of the Volsung clan.

Gram and the line of Volsungs may have set the path for using a sword as a symbol, Tolkien improved on the metaphor by expanding its significance with Narsil and eventually Andúril. Both Gram and Narsil became symbols for the rise, fall and eventually the rise again of their respective bloodlines, but the extra symbolism revolving around the right to rule with Narsil, sends the metaphor further than it could be expanded with Gram. The reforging of Andúril does not just signify that the kings of old are coming back, but that the person wielding it has the correct righteousness, virtue and character traits that are needed to be a good king.

1. Harbardsljot (The Sayings of Harbard aka Odin in Disguise, Crawford) [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Voluspa (The Seeress’s Prophecy, Crawford) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. "Volsunga Saga" and Narn: Some Analogies, Gloriana St. Clair [↑](#footnote-ref-2)