

= The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs =

The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs (1876) is an epic poem of over 10 000 lines by William Morris that tells the tragic story , drawn from the Volsunga Saga and the Elder Edda , of the Norse hero Sigmund , his son Sigurd (the equivalent of Siegfried in the Nibelungenlied and Wagner 's Ring of the Nibelung) and Sigurd 's wife Gudrun . It sprang from a fascination with the Volsung legend that extended back twenty years to the author 's youth , and had already resulted in several other literary and scholarly treatments of the story . It was Morris 's own favorite of his poems , and was enthusiastically praised both by contemporary critics and by such figures as T. E. Lawrence and George Bernard Shaw . In recent years it has been rated very highly by many William Morris scholars , but has never succeeded in finding a wide readership on account of its great length and archaic diction . It has been seen as an influence on such fantasy writers as Andrew Lang and J. R. R. Tolkien . The Story of Sigurd is available in modern reprints , both in its original form and in a cut down version , but there is no critical edition .

= = Synopsis = =

= = = Book I : Sigmund = = =

The poem opens with the marriage of king Volsung 's daughter Signy to Siggeir , king of the Goths . The bridal feast is interrupted by the arrival of a stranger , the god Odin in disguise , who drives a sword into a tree trunk . Though everyone tries to draw the sword , Volsung 's son Sigmund is the only man who can do it . The disappointed Siggeir takes his new wife home , inviting Volsung to visit him . When Volsung does so he is killed by Siggeir , and his sons are taken prisoner . While in captivity they are all killed by a wolf , apart from Sigmund who escapes into the forest . Signy sends Sigmund her two sons to help him in avenging their family , but Sigmund only accepts Sinfjotli , the hardier of the two . Sigmund and Sinfjotli kill Siggeir and burn down his hall , then return to their ancestral home , the hall of the Volsungs . Sigmund marries Borghild , while Sinfjotli goes abroad with Borghild 's brother , quarrels with him , and kills him . On his return Sinfjotli is poisoned by Borghild , and she is turned out by Sigmund , who instead marries Hiordis . Sigmund is killed in battle , and the pregnant Hiordis is taken to live in the hall of King Elf in Denmark .

= = = Book II : Regin = = =

There she gives birth to Sigurd . Sigurd is raised by Regin , a cunning old man , and when he grows to manhood he asks for a horse from King Elf . Elf bids him choose the one he likes best , and Sigurd takes the best horse , and names it Grani . Sigurd is now urged by Regin to attack Fafnir , a dragon who guards a hoard of gold . This treasure is a curse to all who possess it . Fafnir , Regin says , was originally a human being ; indeed , the dragon was Regin 's brother and thus the gold rightfully belongs to Regin . He tries and fails to forge an adequate sword for Sigurd , but Sigurd produces the shattered fragments of Odin 's sword , which he has inherited from Sigmund , and from these fragments Regin forges a mighty sword , named " the Wrath " by Sigurd . Sigurd makes his way to Fafnir 's lair , kills him , drinks his blood , and roasts and eats his heart . This gives him the power to understand the voices of birds and to read the hearts of men . He now understands that Regin intends to kill him , and so he kills Regin and takes Fafnir 's treasure for himself . On his journey homeward Sigurd comes across an unearthly blaze on the slopes of Hindfell . He rides straight into it and comes unharmed to the heart of the fire , where he finds a beautiful sleeping woman clad in armour . He wakes her , and she tells him that she is Brynhild , a handmaiden of Odin whom he has left here as a punishment for disobedience . They pledge themselves to each other , Sigurd places a ring from Fafnir 's hoard on her finger , and he leaves .

= = = Book III : Brunhild = = =

The scene changes to the court of Giuki , the Niblung king . Giuki 's daughter Gudrun has a dream in which she encounters a beautiful but ominous falcon and takes it to her breast . Anxious to learn the meaning of the dream she rides to visit Brynhild , who tells her that she will marry a king , but that her life will be darkened by war and death . Gudrun returns home . Sigurd revisits Brynhild and they again declare their love for each other . He then rides to the Niblung court , where he joins them in making war on the Southland , winning great glory for himself . The witch Grimhild , Gudrun 's mother , gives Sigurd a potion that makes him fall in love with Gudrun . Completely under her spell , he marries her and sets out to win Brynhild for Gudrun 's brother Gunnar . Visiting Brynhild again , this time magically disguised as Gunnar , and again penetrating the fire that surrounds her , he reminds her that she is promised to whoever can overcome the supernatural fire , and so deceives her into reluctantly vowing to marry Gunnar . Brynhild goes to the Niblung land and carries out her promise . She is distraught at this tragic outcome , and doubly so when Gudrun spitefully tells her of the trick by which Sigurd deceived her into an unwanted wedding . Brynhild now urges Gunnar and his brothers Hogni and Guttorm to kill Sigurd . Guttorm murders Sigurd as he lies in bed , but the dying Sigurd throws his sword and kills Guttorm as he leaves . Brynhild , filled with remorse , commits suicide so that she and Sigurd can be burned on a single funeral pyre .

= = = Book IV : Gudrun = = =

The widowed Gudrun now marries Brynhild 's brother , king Atli , but as the years pass by her memories of Sigurd do not fade , and she longs for vengeance . She reminds Atli of Fafnir 's hoard and urges him to win it for himself . Atli invites the surviving Niblung brothers to a feast , and when they arrive he threatens them with death if they do not give him the treasure . Gunnar and Hogni defy him to do his worst , and a battle breaks out in Atli 's hall . The Niblung brothers are overwhelmed by superior force , tied up and killed . Atli holds a victory @-@ feast , at the end of which he and all his court lie sleeping drunkenly in the hall . Gudrun , having lost everyone she loves , burns down the hall , kills Atli with a sword @-@ thrust , and throws herself from a cliff to her death .

= = Genesis = =

Morris first came across the story of the Volsungs , " the grandest tale that ever was told " as he later called it , as a young man , when he read a summary of it in Benjamin Thorpe 's Northern Mythology , which became a favourite book of his . In his The Earthly Paradise (1868 ? 70) he included a versification of the story of Sigurd 's daughter Aslaug , which he may have taken from Thorpe . In 1868 he began to learn Old Norse from the Icelandic scholar Eiríkr Magnússon , and embarked with him on a series of collaborative translations from the Icelandic classics . In 1870 they published Völsunga Saga : The Story of the Volsungs and Nibelungs , with Certain Songs from the Elder Edda , claiming uncompromisingly in the preface that " This is the Great Story of the North , which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks " .

= = Composition = =

While still working on the prose translation Morris wrote to Charles Eliot Norton :

I had it in my head to write an epic of it , but though I still hanker after it , I see clearly it would be foolish , for no verse could render the best parts of it , and it would only be a flatter and tamer version of a thing already existing .

Morris visited Iceland in 1871 and 1873 . Also in 1873 he was aware that Richard Wagner was writing Der Ring des Nibelungen , and wrote :

I look upon it as nothing short of desecration to bring such a tremendous and world @-@ wide subject under the gaslights of an opera : the most rococo and degraded of all forms of art ? the idea of a sandy @-@ haired German tenor tweedledeeing over the unspeakable woes of Sigurd , which

even the simplest words are not typical enough to express !

Morris began work on Sigurd the Volsung in October 1875 , completing it the following year . In the end the poem extended to over 10 ,000 lines . He took both the Volsunga Saga and the corresponding poems of the Poetic Edda | Elder Edda as his basic sources , but felt free to alter them as he thought necessary . The poem is in rhyming hexameter couplets , often with anapaestic movement and a feminine caesura . In keeping with the Germanic theme Morris used kennings , a good deal of alliteration , and wherever possible words of Anglo -Saxon origin . This resulted in a difficult and archaic diction , involving such lines as :

The folk of the war -wand 's forgers wrought never better steel

Since first the burg of heaven uprose for man -folk 's weal .

and

So they make the yoke -beasts ready , and dight the wains for the way .

= = Critical reception = =

According to Morris ' daughter May it was the work he " held most highly and wished to be remembered by " . Contemporary reviewers mostly agreed . In America The Atlantic Monthly compared it to Tennyson 's Idylls of the King , writing that

Sigurd , the Volsung is the second great English epic of our generation ... and it ranks after Tennyson 's " Arthuriad " in order of time only . It fully equals that monumental work in the force and pathos of the story told , while it surpasses it in unity and continuity of interest .

Edmund Gosse , in The Academy , enthused : " The style he has adopted is more exalted and less idyllic , more rapturous and less luxurious ? in a word , more spirited and more virile than that of any of his earlier works . " The Literary World agreed that it was " the manliest and the loveliest work of Mr. Morris 's genius " , going on to predict that " Whatever its immediate reception may be , William Morris 's Sigurd is certain eventually to take its place among the few great epics of the English tongue . " The note of caution as to the reaction of the 19th century reading public was sounded more strongly by several other critics . Theodore Watts wrote in The Athenaeum , " That this is a noble poem there can be no doubt ; but whether it will meet with ready appreciation and sympathy in this country is a question not so easily disposed of . " He thought it " Mr. Morris 's greatest achievement " , but worried about the choice of metre , which he thought monotonous in effect . In an unfavourable review for Fraser 's Magazine , Henry Hewlett complained that " The narrative seldom rises above mediocrity ... the memory finds little to carry away , and the ear still less to haunt it . " He was particularly repulsed by the Dark Age outlook he believed Morris to have adopted :

A poem ... which , like Sigurd , reflects , with hard , uncompromising realism , an obsolete code of ethics , and a barbarous condition of society , finds itself irreconcilably at discord with the key of nineteenth -century feeling . Deprived of its strongest claim to interest , a sympathetic response in the moral and religious sentiment of its readers , it can only appeal to the intellect as a work of art , or as a more or less successful attempt at antiquarian restoration . It may be admired and applauded by the lettered few ; but it will not be taken to the nation 's heart .

By contrast , the North American Review believed it to be Morris 's method " To reproduce the antique , not as the ancients felt it , but as we feel it , ? to transfuse it with modern thought and emotion . "

After Morris 's death interest in his poems began to fade , but a few enthusiasts for Sigurd the Volsung continued to speak out in its favour . Arthur Symonds wrote in 1896 that Sigurd the Volsung " remains his masterpiece of sustained power " , and in 1912 the young T. E. Lawrence called it " the best poem I know " According to the philologist E. V. Gordon Sigurd the Volsung is " incomparably the greatest poem ? perhaps the only great poem ? in English which has been inspired by Norse literature " , and George Bernard Shaw went so far as to call it " the greatest epic since Homer " . However the novelist Eric Linklater , while acknowledging that " Morris tells his story with endless invention , with a brilliant profusion of detail " , complained that the poem 's " Thames -side heroism " conveyed too facile a sense of tragedy . It has never had a wide readership , and contemporary judgements on Sigurd tend to depend upon the judge 's opinion of Morris 's verse in

general . Some find its length and archaic diction off @-@ putting , but many modern critics agree with Morris that it is his finest poem .

= = Editions = =

The poem was published by Ellis and White in November 1876 , although the date appeared on the imprint as 1877 . They issued a second edition in 1877 and a third in 1880 . The book was brought out again in 1887 by Reeves and Turner , and in 1896 by Longman . In 1898 , two years after Morris 's death , a revised text was published by the Kelmscott Press in an edition limited to 160 paper copies and 6 vellum copies , with wood cuts by Sir Edward Burne @-@ Jones . In 1910 Longman issued an edition in which some passages were replaced with prose summaries by Winifred Turner and Helen Scott . In 1911 the same firm reprinted the original version as volume 12 of The Collected Works of William Morris , with an introduction by May Morris ; in the absence of a critical edition this is the one generally cited by scholars . In recent years Sigurd the Volsung has been frequently reprinted , sometimes in the Turner and Scott abridged version .

= = Influence on later fantasy writers = =

Magnússon and Morris remained the only English translation of Volsunga saga until Margaret Schlauch 's version in 1930 . As such it influenced such writers as Andrew Lang , who adapted it in his Red Fairy Book , and J. R. R. Tolkien , who read it in his student days . In a letter , Tolkien mentions that he wished to imitate Morris 's romances , and indeed among his works is a version of the Sigurd story , The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun (published posthumously in 2009) . Stefan Arvidsson compares Morris 's Sigurd and Tolkien 's Legend :

In contrast to Morris 's work , written as it is in heavily archaic , difficult @-@ to @-@ penetrate prose , Tolkien 's recently @-@ published draft was closer in both style and content to the heroic sagas of The Poetic Edda .

Other authors have been inspired more or less directly by the Volsung cycle , following Morris ' lead . For example , Kevin Crossley @-@ Holland published his own translation of the myths , Axe @-@ age , Wolf @-@ age .

= = Fight for Right = =

In 1916 , during World War I , composer Edward Elgar set to music words taken from The Story of Sigurd , producing the song " Fight for Right " . It was dedicated to Members of the Fight for Right Movement , a pro @-@ war organisation dedicated to continuation of the war until victory . William Morris ' words were deemed fitting to express this idea .