



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 21
Number 2

Article 14

Winter 10-15-1996

Volsunga Saga and Narn: Some Analogies

Gloriana St. Clair

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

St. Clair, Gloriana (1996) "*Volsunga Saga* and Narn: Some Analogies," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 21 : No. 2 , Article 14.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol21/iss2/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSUTM

Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



Abstract

"Narn", one of the works in the Unfinished Tales, has many parallels with the thirteenth-century Old Norse Volsunga Saga, which Tolkien read and studied. This paper will assess comparisons between the heroes, women, dragons, plots, and tokens for their contribution to understanding Tolkien's relationship to his sources, and will note Tolkien's craft in source assimilation.

Additional Keywords

Aerin; Beowulf; completeness; dragons; dwarves; Fafnir; girdles; Glaurung; helms; mythology; "Narn"; Sigfried; Sigurd; swords; Tolkien: influences upon; Túrin; Volsunga Saga; Richard Wagner

Volsunga Saga and Narn: Some Analogies

Gloriana St. Clair

Abstract: “Narn”, one of the works in the *Unfinished Tales*, has many parallels with the thirteenth-century Old Norse *Volsunga Saga*, which Tolkien read and studied. This paper will assess comparisons between the heroes, women, dragons, plots, and tokens for their contribution to understanding Tolkien’s relationship to his sources, and will note Tolkien’s craft in source-assimilation.

Keywords: Aerin, *Beowulf*, completeness, dragons, dwarves, Fafnir, girdles, Glaurung, helms, mythology, “Narn”, Sigfried, Sigurd, swords, Tolkien: influences upon, Túrin, *Volsunga Saga*, Richard Wagner

In a letter to Milton Waldman, a potential publisher of a combined *Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien says, “There is the *Children of Húrin*, the tragic tale of Túrin Turambar and his sister Níniel – of which Túrin is the hero: a figure that might be said (by people who like that sort of thing, though it is not very useful) to be derived from elements in Sigurd the Volsung, Oedipus and the Finnish Kullervo [*Kalevala*]” (Tolkien, 1981, p. 150). This paper discusses the relationship between the “Narn i Hîn Húrin” and the *Volsunga Saga*, the story of Sigurd the Volsung. My thesis is that the “Narn”, an Unfinished Work, shows less polish and craft than *The Lord of the Rings*, revealing its debts to the originating work more clearly. Tolkien pulled his works out of the cauldron of his imagination. This study investigates what was in that cauldron and how it was served up in this tale. While Tolkien did not find such studies particularly useful, I believe this one does offer a glimpse into his relationship with his materials and his craft. First, I’m going to outline the versions for the two stories, then discuss the characters, survey some similar tokens, note some peculiar unfinished aspects, and draw some conclusions.

Versions of the Stories

Tolkien’s story about the Children of Húrin exists in several versions: “The Lay of the Children of Húrin” is an alliterative poem written in 1918 and existing in two separate manuscripts, combined by Christopher Tolkien and published in *The Lays of Beleriand* (Tolkien, 1985, pp. 3-130). “Turambar and the Foalókë” is a prose version of the story apparently written by the middle of 1919 while Tolkien was working on the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Tolkien, 1984, pp. 69-143). The dating is derived from Humphrey Carpenter’s discovery of a passage written on a scrap of proof for the Dictionary in one of Tolkien’s early alphabets (Tolkien, 1984, p. 69). Another version of the tale appears as “Of Túrin Turambar” in *The Silmarillion*. “Narn i Hîn Húrin” in *Unfinished Tales* provides the most comprehensive telling of the story.

“Sigurd the Volsung” has a number of versions – four may be important here: the *Eddas*, the *Volsunga Saga*, *Beowulf*, and the *Nibelungenlied*. The *Poetic Edda* (800-1050 AD) is the oldest repository of poems telling the Northern Myths. *The Prose Edda*, written by Snorri Sturluson in the thirteenth-century, tells these stories more fully from an educated point of view. Snorri also wrote the history of the kings of Norway and several sagas. Written by an unknown Icelandic author in the thirteenth-century, the *Volsunga Saga* recreates in prose the stories from the poetic *Elder Edda* in order to glorify the heroic past of the Norse people in their golden age on the Rhine (*Volsunga Saga*, 1971, p. 18). The *Volsunga* author makes heavy use of his copy of the *Elder Edda* in the same way that Tolkien handily employed the materials he had written already about Middle-earth. Tolkien’s interest in creating a mythology for England paralleled the *Volsunga Saga* author’s purpose.

The eighth-century Old English poem *Beowulf* uses material from the *Volsunga* legend as one of seven interpolated narratives. However, the *Volsunga Saga* lacks the craft that makes *Beowulf* notable. *Volsunga*’s author does not bring to his task the level of genius in the moulding of scenes, the construction of story, the portraying of details, or the creation of character that the *Beowulf* poet does. The *Volsunga Saga* does not catch and hold our interest or suspend our disbelief with the power of the most exalted pieces of literature.

Written at about the same time as the *Volsunga Saga*, the *Nibelungenlied* is a long German poem composed in a complicated rhymed strophe. The poem was apparently designed to be performed by a bard in a princely court. The medieval manuscript had been forgotten until it was rediscovered in the eighteenth-century, in the same way that the *Kalevala* and the *Elder Edda* were (*The Nibelungenlied*, 1961, pp. xi-xiii).

The contrast between the German poem and the Norse saga is stark. Like *The Lord of the Rings*, the *Volsunga Saga* is filled with action while *The Nibelungenlied* dwells at length on descriptions of costumes, arms, and feasts. So pronounced

is the interest in clothing that the reader might imagine the author to be a cloth merchant's wife. The hardihood, individual strength, and fearlessness of the *Volsunga Saga* are replaced with courtliness, vast armies, and treacheries. The earlier tales of the Volsunga kin, the revenge for King Volsung, and the winning of the gold are foregone in favour of expanded telling of the revenge for Sigfried (Sigurd). The love story, which provides an uncomfortable motivation in the *Volsunga Saga*, is refined and magnified in *Nibelungenlied*.

Because Wagner's Ring cycle was being used by the Nazis for propaganda, Tolkien makes a number of disparaging remarks about it in the *Letters*. Wagner made active use of the same sources Tolkien did. Elizabeth Magee, in *Richard Wagner and the Nibelungs*, notes that Wagner based the first version, "Der Nibelungen-Mythus," on the *Eddas*, *Nibelungenlied*, *Thidreks Saga*, and *Das Lied vom Hürnen Seyfrid*. In 1848, Wagner had not yet read the *Volsunga Saga* itself and knew it only through other works derived from it, such as the *Amelungenlied* and Wilhelm Grimm's *Deutsche Heldensage*. Between 21 October 1848 and 1 January 1849, Wagner borrowed von der Hagen's translation of *Volsunga Saga* from the Royal Library at Dresden. His particular debts to it include Siegfried's ancestors, history of the sword, the conception of Odin the Wanderer, much material in the second version of *Die Walküre*, and the wolf motif. Much other Volsung material came through Fouqué's dramatic poem "Sigurd der Schlangentödter" (Magee, 1990, pp. 67, 124, 154, 160, and 214). Tolkien may have known Wagner's *Ring* but he did know Wagner's primary sources and perhaps also his German works based on Nibelung matter. Wagner's interpretation of all these materials does not seem to have specifically influenced the "Narn".

Characters

Several characters in the "Narn" seem to have antecedents in the *Volsunga* materials. I'm going to discuss the heroes (Túrin and Sigurd), Sigurd's mother Signy and Túrin's aunt Aerin, the dragons Glaurung and Fafnir, and the dwarves. In both plots, a sister and brother are involved (Sigmund and Signy; Túrin and Nienor); a highborn maiden (Brynhild is a Valkyrie daughter of Odin; Finduilas, an elf) loves a mortal hero; a compromise solution (Brynhild's marriage to Gunnar; Nienor's possible marriage to Brandir) fails because the hero demonstrates hubris.

Túrin and Sigurd: The heroes of these tales are not very admirable; it is fairly difficult for the reader to care whether they triumph or not. Neither of them has ever earned my sighs or tears. Túrin is prideful and stiff-necked. He rushes from justice even though he is innocent of the murder of Saeros. He refuses to return to King Thingol's court even though a great deal has been sacrificed to bring him news of his pardon. He ignores his commitment to Finduilas and

Gwindor even though he has been warned of negative consequences. Repeatedly, he attempts to start over by putting everything behind him and taking a new name. Successively, he calls himself Túrin, Neithan, Agarwaen, Thurin, Mormegil, Wildman of the Woods, and Turambar. Had he acknowledged his unlucky fate and attempted to cope with it, he would not have brought so much woe to so many. As in the sagas, where character development is sketchy, Túrin's character is described when he is a child; he never grows beyond it. Several times Tolkien mentions his fatal pride and that of his mother, who would not humble herself to be an alms-guest even of the King. In pronouncing judgment in the death of Saeros, King Thingol says that Túrin is too proud for his state (Tolkien, 1980, p. 83). Pride as a motivating force has one of its greatest expressions in the Greek play *Oedipus*, which Tolkien acknowledges as an inspiration for this work (Tolkien, 1981, p. 150). However, Oedipus is an appealing character while Túrin is not.

These same criticisms can be levelled at the *Volsunga Saga*. Sigurd is equally unwilling to face up to his problems. He remembers finally that he had plighted troth to Brynhild, but instead of making some provisions for the eventual unmasking of that secret, he goes ahead with his regimen of hunting and combat. His pride leads him to give that same troth ring Brynhild had had to his wife Gudrun. When he knows that Brynhild has discovered that he disguised himself as Gunnar, he merely suggests that Gudrun not taunt her about it. Thus, Sigurd dies at the hands of his brother-in-law Gutthorm, but not before the hero can cast his sword Gram into his slayer¹ (*Volsunga Saga*, 1971, p. 189). Like Túrin, Brynhild kills herself with her own sword and is laid on Sigurd's funeral pyre with him.

It is clear that Túrin is an apprenticeship character for Tolkien. Motivations in the work are diverse: the curse on the family of Húrin; the curse on the sword; the evil of Morgoth and his creatures Glaurung and the orcs. These externals and Túrin's own pride provide some complexity of motivation in the story. In the "Turambar and the Foalókë" version Melko (Morgoth) tells Túrin's father that his son's career will bring both Elves and Men to grief as a punishment for Húrin's steadfastness against evil. Tolkien apparently abandoned this statement of motivation in order to balance fate with pride (Tolkien, 1984, p. 71). Túrin is consistently unwilling to face up to his fate and to turn and fight against it. He gets into a bad situation, makes a mistake like chasing Saeros to the brink of a cliff, and is too proud to explain the circumstances of his actions.

Aerin and Signy: The theme of a woman with divided loyalty is a recurring one in Northern literature, and it does provide an interesting and dramatic situation, which is only incidental in the "Narn". The characters of Lady Aerin in the "Narn" and of Signy, Sigmund's sister and Sigurd's aunt in the *Volsunga Saga*, provide another parallel between the

¹ After Gunnar eggs Gutthorm on to kill Sigurd, the dead hero, his three-year-old son, and his killer Gutthorm are laid upon a blazing pyre. In a missed dramatic moment, the author narrates: "thereto was Brynhild borne out, when she had spoken with her bower-maidens, and bid them take the gold that she would give; and then died Brynhild, and was burned there by the side of Sigurd, and thus their life days ended" (*Volsunga Saga*, 1971, p. 201). Compared with the death of Denethor, this scene lacks narrative building, descriptive adornment, and dramatic power.

tales. Although Túrin urges Aerin to accompany him as he goes in search of his mother and sister, she refuses in characteristic Norse fashion. She chooses the fate of burning in the house with her husband as Signy does in the saga. In *Volsunga Saga*, after Sigmund her brother and Sinfjotli her son begin to burn her husband's hall, they beg Signy to come out. She reminds them of her sacrifices to bring about the revenge on her husband for having killed her father and her brothers. She has killed her weakling sons, made herself into a witch woman to seduce her brother, and thus bred a son worthy to be Sigmund's partner in revenge. But she is loyal to her husband, too, and chooses not to live long after his death but to die in the burning house with him. In the "Narn", Túrin looks back in his flight from his old home, sees the hall ablaze, and learns from his companions that Lady Aerin has courageously burned herself in the house with her husband. The companion makes this epitaph for Aerin: "She did much good among us at much cost. Her heart was not faint, and patience will break at the last" (Tolkien, 1980, p. 109). Aerin shares her nobility and the dual call on her loyalties with Signy.

Dwarves: The dwarf Mîm from the "Narn" story is the most caricatured of Tolkien's dwarves. The incident could be lifted out of the tale and inserted into a Norse saga without the reader's adverse notice. In the "Narn", the dwarf Mîm is particularly stiff-necked; caught by Túrin's outlaw bands, he wishes to go home but refuses to leave his sack as surety. The outlaws have killed Mîm's son, for whom weregild is offered and accepted. Mîm curses the killer and is cursed in return.

Mîm's reluctance to leave his sack recalls the dwarf Andvari who is connected with the treasure in the *Volsunga Saga*. In the story, Hreidmar has three sons – Regin, Otter, and Fafnir. Regin tells Sigurd that his brother shifted into the shape of an otter. While the otter was eating fish from the river near the dwarf Andvari's gold, the god Loki, in company with Odin and Honir, kills Otter with a stone. The gods carry off the otter skin to Hreidmar's house, where Hreidmar recognizes his son's skin and demands weregild for his death. Loki returns to the river, casts a net, and catches the dwarf Andvari in the shape of a pike. Loki requires a ransom – the entirety of the dwarf's great golden treasure. When Loki demands a final gold ring as part of the ransom, the saga-writer says, "then the dwarf went into a hollow of the rocks and cried out, that the gold-ring, yea and all the gold withal should be the bane of every man who should own it thereafter" (*Volsunga Saga*, 1971, p. 130). When the gold is spread over the otter's hide, Hreidmar notices that one whisker is uncovered. Odin draws the ring Andvari's Loom from his finger and covers the whisker. Tolkien found this detail of the story fascinating and mentions it twice in his 1962 letters about the publication of *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*. In the poem "Bombadil goes Boating", a reference, "Your mother if she saw you, / she'd never know her son, unless 'twas by a whisker," involves identification by a whisker. In a letter, Tolkien says, "I am afraid it [a second poem about Tom Bombadil] largely tickles my pedantic fancy, because of its echo of the Norse

Niblung matter (the otter's whisker)" (Tolkien, 1981, p. 315), and "the otter's whisker sticking out of the gold, from the Norse Nibelung legends" (Tolkien, 1981, p. 319). That Tolkien makes no use of this favourite detail – the whisker itself – in the "Narn" is typical of his relationship with his material. His pattern of borrowing was unpredictable and elements borrowed were changed to meet his own purposes.

Dragons: Each of these sets of stories also employs a dragon. In *Volsunga Saga*, Fafnir, the brother of the smith Regin, has become a dragon because he has brooded too long over the gold treasure the gods paid as weregild for the wrongful death of Otter. In the "Narn", the dragon's genesis is less interesting; he is the first of the fire-drakes of Morgoth (Tolkien, 1977, p. 116). Fafnir warns Sigurd that the treasure will be his downfall, but Sigurd replies that he would lose all his wealth if that meant he would never die, but all men must die (*Volsunga Saga*, 1971, p. 147). The dragon Glaurung's power to put humans into trances reduces their retorts to his conversations. Tolkien uses this device several times in the "Narn". Túrin is in a trance while the dragon redirects his energies from the rescue of Finduilas to a vain solicitude for his mother's safety. Glaurung then creates the mist that Morwen disappears into; at the same time casting a spell of forgetfulness on Nienor. Fafnir also reminds Sigurd that many times each will be the other's bane. While Sigurd escapes Fafnir himself, the ring is his undoing and that of many others. Glaurung plays with Túrin in a like manner.

The plans for the dragon's demise are similar in the "Narn" and the *Volsunga Saga*. In the saga, Regin has suggested that Sigurd should dig a pit and stab the dragon in his soft underbelly as he passes over. Regin plans for Sigurd to kill the dragon whose venomous blood will at the same time destroy Sigurd, leaving the treasure for Regin's use. Fortunately, Odin in the disguise of an old man advises Sigurd to dig several connected pits and thus escape drowning in dragon blood (*Volsunga Saga*, 1971, pp. 141-142). Túrin chooses a narrow ravine for his attack upon the dragon. As Glaurung crosses the perilous river, Túrin can shove his sword into the dragon's soft underside. This approach from the underside also occurs in *Beowulf*. With traditional understatement, the *Beowulf*-poet describes Wiglaf's stroke as "a little lower down." Then Beowulf and Wiglaf cut the worm in half. In the *Volsunga Saga*, Sigurd thrusts under the left shoulder (*Volsunga Saga*, 1971, p. 142). Further, the heroes have boasted to kill the dragon or die. Túrin says: "The die is cast. Now comes the test, in which my boast shall be made good, or fail utterly. I will flee no more. Turambar indeed I will be, and by my own will and prowess I will surmount my doom – or fall. But falling or riding, Glaurung at least I will slay" (Tolkien, 1980, p. 126). Beowulf's speech is much more eloquent.

In addition, Tolkien turned to the *Beowulf* poet to treat the fate of the coward in a dragon encounter. In the "Narn", Brandir kills the cowardly Dorlas who has feared to bring news that would have saved Nienor's life. In *Beowulf*, ten companions who fear to meet the dragon are ostracized. Later in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien will have Aragorn set

the fearful to less daunting tasks – a more compassionate alternative to cowardice.

Glaurung is much more anthropomorphic than *Beowulf's* dragon or even Fafnir, who is, of course, a man whose greed has turned him into a dragon. Glaurung's commanding ability to collect orcs to him and to direct them in battle makes the dragon seem more a part of an organized pattern of evil. In *The Hobbit*, Smaug is an entrepreneur for evil; he is independent from the evils of Sauron. Smaug is content in guarding his treasure hoard and has not been regularly ravaging the countryside until Bilbo steals his cup. While Glaurung is more clearly tied into the evils emanating from Morgoth, Smaug operates more like the Balrog and Shelob, who are entirely or mainly independent from Sauron. In a letter to Naomi Mitchison, who had written in praise of *Farmer Giles of Ham*, Tolkien acknowledges the relationships among the dragons of Northern literature: "I find 'dragons' a fascinating product of imagination. But I don't think the *Beowulf* one is frightfully good. But the whole problem of the intrusion of the 'dragon' into northern imagination and its transformation there is one I do not know enough about. Fáfnir in the late Norse versions of the Sigurd-story is better; and Smaug and his conversation obviously is in debt there" (Tolkien, 1981, p. 134). Glaurung seems to have been a good start for Tolkien's quest for a greater dragon. Glaurung carries on better conversations than Fafnir but his range of emotions is limited. Glaurung's persecution of the Children of Húrin derives from his kinship with the evil being Morgoth, who despises Húrin's courage in the face of his overwhelming evil power. Glaurung's powers are limited to casting spells on Húrin's children, making Túrin's natural hubris more effective, and threatening to kill them outright. The urbanity and emotional range of the worldly but wicked Smaug are yet to be realized.

Tokens

Generally, the argument can be made that the tokens are medieval in nature rather than peculiarly Northern or particularly from the *Volsunga Saga*. However, a number of the more important devices do have recognizable and important antecedents in the story of the Volsungs. I'll mention three: the Helm, the embroidered girdle, and the broken sword. The troublesome ring from *Volsunga* has its impact on *The Lord of the Rings*.

The idea for the Helm of Hador may have come from the Helm of Awe, which Sigurd wins from the dragon in the *Volsunga Saga*. No particular use is made of this token in that story, but a dragon-helm and its attendant invisibility do play a significant role in Wagner's Ring. Tolkien apparently liked the idea and began to play with it in the "Narn". The image on the dragon-helm is to be that of Glaurung, who was supposed to taunt Túrin about the mastery implied by wearing the helmet. Túrin's reply points out that the helmet represented scorn rather than allegiance to the dragon. As the story exists in *The Silmarillion* and the *Unfinished Tales*, Túrin receives the helm from King Thingol, wears it in battles until the orcs capture him, and does not use it again.

Christopher Tolkien conjectures from remaining notes that Tolkien intended for the helm to reappear during Túrin's adventures. Túrin would not wear the Helm, then, "lest it reveal him," but he was to wear it in confrontation with Glaurung. While the Helm serves to protect Túrin from the dragon's deadly gaze, the worm's taunting has its effect: "But being thus taunted, in pride and rashness he [Túrin] thrust up the visor and looked Glaurung in the eye" (Tolkien, 1980, p. 155). The Helm was also to figure in the denouement with Glaurung when Túrin would reverse the dragon's words about mastery.

The concept of a peaceful zone created by the power of an elven queen is well-defined in *The Lord of the Rings*. There, Galadriel has created the beautiful realm of Lórien by the power of her ring; however, she warns that when the One Ring is destroyed, Lórien will also fail. In the "Narn", Tolkien tries, not very successfully, to arrange some dramatic tension from concepts of entering and exiting from this zone. Túrin and Morwen both complain to King Thingol that they were reluctant to enter into the Girdle of Melian because they did not want to have to remain there forever. Queen Melian explains twice that the Girdle is open and the relatives of Húrin may leave or stay at their will. While some intimations of this concept also appear in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien does not elaborate on it. The idea of calling this zone the Girdle may have been suggested by Brynhild's embroidered girdle in the *Nibelungenlied*. However, the more famous girdle in works that Tolkien knew well is the green girdle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. There, the hero Gawain is given the girdle to protect him against an axe blow from a green giant (Tolkien and Gordon, 1967). The idea of protection is clearer from the *Sir Gawain* story than from the *Nibelungenlied*.

The unlucky sword used in the killing is a key implement in the "Narn". Beleg has received the sword as a gift from King Thingol for his delivery of the King's pardon to Túrin. Beleg, who wants a sword of worth against increasing orc attacks, chooses the sword Anglachel, which was made by the smith Eöl the Dark Elf. The sword has been given unwillingly as bride-payment for the elf's wife. Eöl's counterpart may be Regin, the smith-tutor whose machinations set in motion the multiple curses and adventures in the *Volsunga Saga*. As Thingol starts to give the sword to Beleg, Queen Melian remarks that the sword still has the malice of its smith's dark heart in it (Tolkien, 1977, p. 202). After Beleg is buried, they notice that the blade of the sword has turned black, dull, and blunt, as if it mourns for Beleg. Just as the broken sword Gram is reforged for Sigurd's use in the *Volsunga Saga*, this sword takes on a new identity: "The sword Anglachel was forged anew for him by cunning smiths of Nargothrond, and though ever black its edges shone with pale fire; and he [Túrin] named it Gurthang, Iron of Death" (Tolkien, 1977, p. 210). The sword partakes of the characteristics of heroic-literature swords which cannot be sheathed without first drinking blood.

At the end of his tale, Túrin realizes that he has hated Brandir, who loved Túrin's sister-wife Nienor, unjustly. Túrin addresses the sword and asks if it will slay him swiftly.

The sword replies: "Yea, I will drink thy blood gladly, that so I may forget the blood of Beleg my master, and the blood of Brandir slain unjustly. I will slay thee swiftly" (Tolkien, 1977, p. 225). The evil, perceived in the sword by good Queen Melian, has indeed played a pervasive role in the tales of the Children of Húrin. Although the dragon has perished from the sword, many others have also been lost: Mîm, Beleg, and Brandir were slain by the sword; Nienor and Finduilas have died because Túrin was involved in matters relating to the sword; and Túrin himself dies on its dark edge. Fortunately, talking swords are not common in Northern literature, and, again fortunately, Tolkien did not repeat this transparent, didactic device.

Unfinished Aspects

What is particularly worthy of critical attention about the "Narn" is its unfinished aspects. In incident after incident, details are unresolved and left dangling. One of the greatest joys of *The Lord of the Rings* is its completeness. Questions are answered, fates are revealed, pieces are pulled together. I believe that Tolkien's repeated inspired revisions of *The Lord of the Rings* gave that work cohesion. I wish he had had the opportunity to do the same for this work because the potential for another great masterpiece lies within it.

Here are some of the pieces that he could have pulled together:

- The knife given as a gift to the boy Túrin could have played a significant role when Túrin returned to his home.
- Mîm's curse doesn't get fully carried out.
- Túrin's proclivity for falling into trances is difficult to understand and justify as a plot device. His trancelike state

recalls Brynhild's sleep on the magic mountain, but her trance is a punishment for disobedience to Odin.

- Túrin's character flaw is not well enough defined. He suffers from hubris but also from a kind of unbecoming fecklessness, which is not quite of tragic quality. All of this is equally true of Sigurd.

- Fate and character as the operators in the story are not so well handled as in *The Lord of the Rings*, in *Oedipus*, or in *Beowulf*.

- Brandir's lameness serves no plot purpose and duplicates Sador's lameness. Neither seems to provide a significant insight into character.

- The incest theme seems underused; its plot significance in the *Volsunga Saga* is much more compelling.

Conclusions

Comparisons between the stories of Sigurd the Volsung and that of Túrin son of Húrin do seem to have some value. Seeing characters and tokens in their original settings shows the basic materials that went into Tolkien's cauldron of story. Little went through that cauldron unchanged. At every opportunity, Tolkien's own imagination and creativity moulded, shaped, and sculpted elements from earlier stories to fit the needs of his own tales. In the instance of an early and never-finished work, such as the "Narn", the pieces borrowed are much more recognizable than those found in the later, polished master work, *The Lord of the Rings*. In a comparison of the "Narn" with Sigurd the Volsung, the reader has an unusual opportunity to observe the process of Tolkien's creativity. And people who like that sort of thing can see the elements of Sigurd the Volsung.

References

- Magee, Elizabeth. 1990. *Richard Wagner and the Nibelungs*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- The Nibelungenlied*. 1961. Trans. Margaret Armour. New York: Heritage Press.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. 1977. *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. 1980. *Unfinished Tales*, ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. 1981. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. 1985. *The Lays of Beleriand*, ed. Christopher Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. 1984. *The Book of Lost Tales*, part II, ed. Christopher Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. and Gordon, E.V. (eds.). 1967. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, second edition, ed. Norman Davis. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Volsunga Saga: The Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs*. 1971. Trans. William Morris. New York: Collier Books.