"THE LOVERS OF GUDRUN," SIGURD THE VOLSUNG, AND THE HOUSE OF THE WOLFINGS:

Three Chapters in a Tale of the Individual and the Tribe

Dennis Balch
Reviewing Browning's *Men and Women* in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, William Morris noted "a strange sympathy for the lonely knight" in "Childe Roland" and said, "I think I love this poem the best of all in these volumes." Morris' own work includes similar figures who face imposing odds and collapsing social codes: Guenevere defends herself amid the rubble of the Round Table; Sir Peter Harpdon clings to the hopeless English cause and is victimized by his ignoble cousin Lambert. Like Roland, these characters are alone and bereft of a stable social order that would define human purpose. The fascination with forlorn figures adrift and without moral support demonstrates an important point about Morris, whose literary work has sometimes been criticized for dodging social issues: like many of his contemporaries, he recognized that an increasing alienation of individuals from "community" structures represented a major crisis in nineteenth-century British life. His *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* associates, echoing social critics like Carlyle, Mill, and Arnold, pronounced their sense of unrest in "an unsettled transitional period" characterized by "perpetual change" and "a whirl of conflicting principles." This sense of change and social confusion produced a literature of doubt and alienation exemplified by the narrator of Arnold's "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse," whom we find "Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born." Far from avoiding significant contemporary issues,
Morris joined the mainstream interest in the transitional character of the Victorian period, portraying isolation and disrupted community in his early work, describing a healthy interplay between individual and society in his later work. This trend is evident in "The Lovers of Gudrun," Sigurd the Volsung, and The House of the Wolfings, works that progress both thematically and structurally toward a vision of social stability.

"Gudrun" tells of introspection and self-interested, destructive love; Sigurd recounts heroic action in which self-interest is at least partly subordinated to greater concerns; The Wolfings depicts tribal life in which individual desires bow to community interests. This thematic progression from self-interest to community interest parallels a structural progression from a pattern that emphasizes catastrophic change to one that emphasizes continuity. In "Gudrun" the pattern is linear; a single catastrophe--destruction of the communal bond between Bathstead and Herdholt--results from the conflicts among three lovers. In Sigurd a wavelike pattern of repeated catastrophe--the destruction of King Volsung, Sigmund, Sigurd, Brynhild, and the Niblungs--charts a heroic struggle that will someday culminate in Ragnarok, the Norse day of doom. In The Wolfings the catastrophe never occurs; the old order is not overthrown. Instead the Markmen meet the challenge of Roman invasion and return to peace. The pattern here is neither linear nor wavelike, but circular, revolving from peace to war to peace again, describing a test of the social order rather than its destruction, and thus emphasizing the continuity of the Wolfing community. This progression demonstrates that Morris' literary work does in fact confront rather than avoid the transitional malaise and social dissolution of the nineteenth century.
"Gudrun," a complex treatment of willful love and its social consequences, emphasizes individuals, lonely folk "yearning for love, striving 'gainst change and hate," and develops an unmistakable personal tenor not present in its source, the Laxdæla Saga. May Morris notes that her father "tell[s] us what is moving beneath the surface"; he fills the tale with "the subtleties of modern love--passion, hatred, jealousy, doubt of the reality of life itself," adding psychological interest to the laconic saga description. As Oscar Maurer has indicated, this treatment sacrifices some of the hardness and grimness of the original, but creates characters with introspective tendencies, so that "the study of motive and analysis of individual conduct" become the focus of the tale.

The subjects of this study of motives, the unfortunate lovers, Bodli, Kiartan, and Gudrun, move in a social context that shifts from mutual love and peace to hatred and murderous strife. In fact, it is the lovers' personal misfortune that precipitates this social ruin. Both Kiartan and Bodli, Kiartan's cousin and friend, love the beautiful but unlucky Gudrun, already twice wed, once divorced, and once widowed. When Bodli returns from Norway without Kiartan, giving what he believes to be a true report that Kiartan intends to marry Olaf Tryggvison's sister, he marries the disappointed Gudrun and goes to live at Bathstead. When an unwed Kiartan returns to Herdholt and suspects treachery, the long-standing peace and goodwill between Herdholt and Bathstead are threatened and eventually destroyed by the passion, hatred, jealousy, and doubt that May Morris lists as "the subtleties of modern love."

The usual love triangle creates at least one injured party; when mutual admiration exists among the parties, as in "Gudrun," all three are often injured. The love between Kiartan and Gudrun is frustrated when Gudrun
marries Bodli; the love between Kiartan and Bodli is destroyed by Gudrun's chagrin at having lost Kiartan. Thus all are dissatisfied and have ample motivation for bitterness that might cause hostility. The real basis for the personal and social catastrophe in "Gudrun," however, is not simply the unfortunate marriage of Bodli and Gudrun, but the very nature of love and the lovers. For Bodli, Kiartan, and Gudrun, love is an inexorable and often destructive force. Guest the Wise gives the first hint of love's threat; having interpreted Gudrun's dreams, he foresees "love slaying love" (V, 269). Refna, whom Kiartan marries when he loses Gudrun, speaks of love as a persistent craving: "'nought can allay the soul / Of that sad thirst, but love untouched and whole!'" (V, 355). There is no controlling this force, as Kiartan explains to Bodli:

"Doubt not but thou art helpless, and the tool
Of thy mad love, and that ill comes from ill."

(V, 353)

At the end of the tale the aged Gudrun likewise recognizes both the irresistible appeal of love and its contradictory destructiveness, saying to her son,

"... thou ask'st of love!
Long folly lasteth; still that word doth move
My old worn heart--hearken one little word,"

... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

"I did the worst to him I loved the most."

(V, 395)

Acting on their irrational compulsions, the lovers create the typical modern love situation, one characterized by misunderstanding and brooding withdrawal into self. Assuming that he has consciously betrayed Kiartan by lying to her, Gudrun shuns Bodli, consigning
him to a virtual limbo

'twixt the dark night and the day,
'Twixt good and ill, 'twixt love and struggling hate,
The coming hours of restless pain to wait.

(V, 331)

Like Bodli, Gudrun often finds herself in lonely despairing thought, cut off from the life around her. As though "deaf, dumb, and blind," she seems "to face / Some huge blank wall within a lonely place" (V, 342). Even Kiartan, whose active nature usually contrasts with Bodli's Hamlet-like introspection, becomes moody and withdrawn upon discovering Gudrun's marriage; he sits brooding over his loneliness "mid the clamour of the hall, / Where few men knew his heart" (V, 339). The "wall of shame and wrong" (V, 336) between Gudrun and Kiartan in fact separates all three lovers, from the world as well as each other.

The blind pursuit of love and the consequent personal ruin of Kiartan, Bodli, and Gudrun takes its toll on the social order of the Laxdalers. To Bodli, both his "curse and his delight" (V, 370), Gudrun is like Helen, as Morris suggests when he compares Gudrun's birth to "hers who erst called Tyndarus her sire." Like Helen and Paris, Morris' lovers jeopardize an entire social order in attempting to satisfy their desires. The tale tells not only of the hearts, but also of the roof-trees Gudrun fires; not only of the hearts, but also of the hearths she leaves cold (V, 252). The story demonstrates that Morris' early adherence to personal subjects, to studies of motive and individual conduct, has important social implications even though social themes are not the primary focus of attention.

Like "Gudrun," Sigurd describes the overthrow of social order as the result of self-interested desire.
longer poem has greater scope and complexity, however, adding greed to the destructive power of love, yet at the same time countering self-interest with selfless heroic purpose.

The chief love-complication of Sigurd is the hero's desire for Brynhild and his marriage to Gudrun. The jealousy of the two women--Brynhild's because Sigurd has married Gudrun, Gudrun's because Sigurd still loves Brynhild--spawns a sequence of events leading to Sigurd's death, events precipitated by the ring of Andvari, that "thrice-cursed burden of greed" (210). Sigurd wins the ring from Fafnir, gives it to Brynhild, later (while disguised as Gunnar) receives it again from Brynhild, and finally gives it to Gudrun, who taunts Brynhild with the proof that Gunnar could not ride Hindfell's fire. Gunnar's need to avenge his wife's insult brings to the surface longings that he has scarcely dared admit to himself, desire for "the measureless Gold, / And the Flame of the uttermost Waters, and the Hoard of the kings of old" (204), for "the gain of the ruddy rings" in the elf-treasure won by Sigurd (216). Thus are the themes of love and greed entwined in the central love-complication of the poem.

The concatenation of love and greed repeatedly effects social dissolution in Sigurd. When Siggeir the Goth comes to wed King Volsung's daughter Signy, he desires also a treasure--the sword that Sigmund pulls from the Branstock. His greedy desire frustrated, Siggeir plots against the Volsungs. The poet's lament employs the empty hall as an image of social ruin, an image that repetition builds into a powerful symbol:

Woe's me for the boughs of the Branstock and
the hawks that cried on the fight!
Woe's me for the fireless hearthstones and
the hangings of delight,
That the women dare not look on lest they see them sweat with blood!

Woe's me for the carven pillars where the spears of the Volsungs stood!
And who next shall shake the locks, or the silver door-rings meet?
Who shall pace the floor beloved, worn down by the Volsung feet?
Who shall fill the gold with the wine, or cry for the triumphing?
Shall it be kindred or foes, or thief, or thrall, or king? (16)

When Sigmund and Signy eventually retaliate, Siggeir's defeat, like that of the Volsungs, is described in more than merely personal terms: self-interest has important social consequences. The symbol of the Goths' social order, the hall that "the Goths and the Gods had builded to last for evermore," is utterly destroyed by fire:

... King Siggeir's roof-tree upheaved for its utmost fall,
And its huge walls clashed together, and its mean and lowly things
The fire of death confounded with the tokens of the kings. (41)

In a later episode, greed and love are even more tightly interwoven: a woman is actually the treasure that Sigmund and Lyngi vie for. Sigmund wins Hiordis but loses his life in battle soon after, and the poet seizes the occasion of Sigmund's death to focus attention again on the Volsung hall as a symbol of social order, pointing out the consequences of Lyngi's self-interested greed. "To what end was wrought that roof-ridge?" asks the poet, lamenting that "the Gods have fashioned a folk
who have fashioned a house in vain." The house is
likened to a "noble oak" that

stands in the forest, an exceeding glorious
thing:
Then come the axes of men, and low it lies on
the ground,
And the crane comes out of the southland, and
its nest is nowhere found,
And bare and shorn of its blossoms is the house
of the deer of the wood. (58)

Bereft of an inheritance save for his father's name
and a sword forged from the shards of the Branstock
weapon, Sigurd must seek a new social order within
which to fulfill his heroic destiny. The Burg of the
Niblungs supplies this need. Sigurd eventually weds
Giuki's daughter and swears brotherhood with two of
Giuki's sons, a brotherhood violated in spirit if not in
actual deed when Gunnar and Hogni allow the third son,
Guttorm, to murder Sigurd; thus Sigurd's death, pre-
cipitated by Gudrun's jealous love and Gunnar's greed,
represents a collapsed code of honor that in turn pre-
figures the fall of the Niblungs. Gudrun's curse of her
husband's murderers clearly emphasizes this moral dis-
solution by playing on the idea of troth broken for the
sake of greed:

"O hearken, hearken Gunnar! May the dear Gold
drag thee adown,
And Greyfell's ruddy Burden, and the Treasure
of renown,
And the rings that ye swore the oath on! yea,
if all avengers die,
May Earth, that ye bade remember, on the
blood of Sigurd cry!
Be this land as waste as the trothplight that
the lips of fools have sworn!

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May it rain through this broken hall-roof, and
snow on the hearth forlorn!
And may no man draw anigh it to tell of the
ruin and the wrack!" 

The social ruin invoked by Gudrun's curse materializes when her family compels her to marry Atli, a king who "craves as the sea-flood craveth" (255), whose power and wealth are exceeded only by his longing for "the utmost increase of all that kings desire" (246). Gudrun uses Atli's greed as an instrument of her vengeance, stirring up his desire for the elf-treasure until at last he invites the Niblungs for a visit and plots their destruction. On the eve of the Niblungs' departure, the theme of the ruined burg appears again. Outside the walls the field-folk are troubled: "the cry and the wail" within and the windows that shine "blood-red through the dark" (261) are ominous signs. At the feast inside, Gunnar acknowledges the possibility of ruin:

"What then shall be left to the Niblungs if we return no more?
Then let the wolves be warders of the Niblungs' gathered store!
On the hearth let the worm creep over where the fire now flares aloft!
And the adder coil in the chambers where the Niblung wives sleep soft!
Let the master of the pine-wood roll huge in the Niblung porch,
And the moon through the broken rafters be the Niblungs' feastful torch!"

Atli does not fail to bring about the ruin that these passages describe. The Niblung order is swallowed up by another order, also represented by a magnificently crafted building. In the dim expanse of Atli's hall, a house "with gates all brazen, and roof of ruddy gold,"
so huge that lamps hang in the roof "as stars in the misty even" (276), the Niblungs fall before streams of Atli's warriors. Nor does the destruction stop with the Niblungs; as Gudrun's love for Sigurd compels her to avenge the greedy troth-breaking of her brothers, so her Niblung heritage drives her to avenge Atli's treachery. The symbol of the order that swallowed up the Niblungs is itself swallowed up by fire, as Siggeir's hall was. While Gudrun's fires engulf the "carven work of the roof" and shrink the wall hangings "in a moment of space," a terrible drama of social collapse is played out among Atli's retainers:

They cried, and their tongues were confounded, 
and none gave answer again:
They rushed, and came nowhither; each man beheld his foe,
And smote as the hopeless and dying, nor brother brother might know,
The sons of one mother's sorrow in the fire-blast strove and smote,
And the sword of the first-begotten was thrust in the father's throat,
And the father hewed at his stripling; the thrall at the war-king cried,
And mocked the face of the mighty in that house of Atli's pride.

Thus ends a tale of "the death of kings and of kindreds" (306); the compounded destructive power of self-interested love and greed effects not only the deaths of kings like Volsung, Siggeir, Sigmund, Sigurd, Gunnar, Hogni, and Atli, but also the destruction of their social orders, symbolized by architectural structures.

Yet this tale is more than simply an account of social destruction wrought by self-interest, for Sigurd's destiny is "the righting of wrong" (74), as he
announces when he first greets Giuki:

But short is mine errand to tell, and the end of my desire:
For peace I bear unto thee, and to all the kings of the earth,
Who bear the sword aright, and are crowned with the crown of worth;
But unpeace to the lords of evil, and the battle and the death;
And the edge of the sword to the traitor, and the flame to the slanderous breath:
And I would that the loving were loved, and I would that the weary should sleep,
And that man should hearken to man, and that he that soweth should reap. (154-55)

Briefly put, Sigurd's goal is social justice. When he fares to war with the Niblungs, the minstrels sing of "the lowly man exalted and the mighty brought alow," of coming days when "the sheaf shall be for the plougher, and the loaf for him that sowed" (158), of "the prison's rending," the "golden thieves' abasement, and the stilling of the churl" (161). Sigurd is "the redeemer, the helper" whom the Niblungs betray in the end (232). He is the hope of the future, the "Victory yet to be" (66), for "the day that Sigurd hath sped" is Ragnarok and the regeneration that will follow when "the new sun beams on Baldur" (244). To promote this future victory, Sigurd subordinates his personal desire as long as he may, concealing his personal distress when Brynhild comes to marry Gunnar:

So he spake as a King of the people in whom all fear is dead,
And his anguish no man noted, as the greeting words he said:
And Sigurd sat with the Niblungs, and gave ear to most and to least, And showed no sign to the people of the grief that on him lay; Nor seemeth he worser to any than he was on the yesterday.

Even after the insults between the queens and the decay of the alliance for justice between himself and the Niblungs, Sigurd performs his kingly duties, though the Niblung brothers withdraw to brood:

. . . Sigurd sits in the hall mid the war-dukes' company:
Alone of the Kings in the Doom-ring, and the council of the wise,
By the street and the wharf and the burg-gate he shines in the people's eyes;
Stately and lovely to look on he heareth of good and of ill,
And he knitteth up and divideth, with life and death at his will.

But even Sigurd's heroic selflessness falters; he proposes to put Gudrun away and wed Brynhild, placing personal desire above "the pride and the glory of Sigurd, and the latter days' increase" (223). This surrender to self-interest does not indicate an abject failure, however, for Sigurd is victory yet to be. It is his destiny to speed the day of regeneration, not to accomplish it. Moreover, the compromise of his heroic purpose is not allowed to proceed far; Brynhild refuses him and demands his death of Gunnar, in effect halting Sigurd's slide into unheroic self-interest.

Though like "Gudrun" in showing the destructive power of self-interest, Sigurd explores more fully the connection between this power and social dissolution,
and Sigurd's heroic purpose shifts the emphasis from the personal tenor of "Gudrun" to a more social tenor. This trend is carried further in The Wolfings, which Morris "meant to illustrate the melting of the individual into the society of the tribes." The emphasis of this late romance clearly contrasts with that of "Gudrun." The lovers and their problems dominate the early work; disruption of social order is a significant result of the love intrigue, but the poet's attention focuses on the motives and conduct of individuals. In the late work, the social order of the Mark, the centerpiece of which is the House of the Wolfings, dominates the scene; Thiodolf's personal struggle is a significant part of the tribe's struggle, but the primary subject is the entire folk—the HOUSE of the Wolfings—rather than a select group of individuals.

Two central symbols govern The Wolfings, delineating the concern with individualism and self-interest on the one hand, and communal unity and selflessness on the other. The dwarf-wrought hauberk that Wood-Sun has Thiodolf wear is a badge of self-interest; the Wolfing Roof, the hall of the folk, symbolizes the communal life to which the Markmen subordinate their individual interests. The opposed values represented by the hauberk and the Wolfing Roof also surface in the military struggle between the Romans, who represent the forces of greed and self-interest, and the Markmen, who embody the values of communal life.

As Barbara Bono has noted, the hauberk represents a threat within the Mark that parallels the Roman threat without. The two threats are closely linked: Wood-Sun gives Thiodolf the hauberk as protection against the Romans, in effect offering him the same ethic of self-interest that the invaders embrace. Thiodolf is suspicious of the hauberk from the first, asking,
"What evil thing abideth with this warder of the strife,  
This burg and treasure chamber for the hoarding of my life?"  
(XIV, 23)

Thiodolf's later conjecture that "this mail is for the ransom of a man and the ruin of a folk" (XIV, 111) is correct, for when he wears the hauberk into battle, he swoons and is unable to lead his men. The individualism that the hauberk represents temporarily propels Thiodolf outside the social circle of the Markmen into a state of self-absorption: "now must I tell thee a hard and evil thing; that I loved them not, and was not of them, and outside myself there was nothing: within me was the world and nought without me" (XIV, 169). The hauberk, we learn later, bears a curse, so that

". . . . whoso weareth the same,  
Shall save his life in the battle, and have the battle's shame;  
He shall live through wrack and ruin, and ever have the worse,  
And drag adown his kindred, and bear the people's curse."  
(XIV, 172)

In short, the hauberk protects Thiodolf's life but sunders his bond with the folk. When he wears the hauberk, Thiodolf becomes somewhat like the Romans, who "have forgotten kindred" (XIV, 45) and are ruled by mighty men acting out of self-serving motives, as the example of the Roman captain illustrates:

He was both young and very rich, and a mighty man among his townsmen, and well had he learned that ginger is hot in the mouth, and though he had come forth to the war for the increasing of his fame, he had no will to die among the Markmen, either for the sake of the city of
As the captain's self-interest prevents any thought of dying for the sake of Rome, so the hauberk takes away Thiodolf's will to fight and die for the folk; it is, as Thiodolf fears, "a treasure chamber for the hoarding of . . . life" and is therefore inconsistent with the communal principles of the Markmen, which demand the spending of individual lives so that the folk may survive.

The hauberk is a shelter for the individual; the Wolfing Roof is a shelter for an entire folk. True to his name, Thiodolf (Folk-Wolf) subordinates self-interest by rejecting the compromising protection of the hauberk and dying in defense of the Roof that holds "the memories of the generations and the very life of the Wolfings and their hopes for the days to be" (XIV, 30). Unlike the Roman society, controlled by a few powerful men like the invading captain, the society sheltered by this Roof is one of equals: "nor were there many degrees amongst them as hath befallen afterwards, but all they of one blood were brethren and of equal dignity" (XIV, 5). Moreover, the Markmen take most pleasure in matters of common interest: "the fairest place of all the house and the best-beloved of the folk" is a gathering place at the large hearth before the dais, for "there were tales told, and songs sung, especially if they were new: and thereto also were messengers brought if any new tidings were abroad: there also would the elders talk together about matters concerning the House or the Mid-Mark or the whole Folk of the Markmen" (XIV, 7). The manner of his death clearly indicates Thiodolf's melting into the society represented by the Roof, for he dies at the symbolic heart of the Mark, on the dais of the Wolfing hall beneath the spot where the revered
lamp, the Hall-Sun, customarily hangs. Moreover, Thiodolf gets his death wound by performing what amounts to a final obeisance to the social order of the Mark—he clears the doorway so that fires in the hall may be extinguished, then enters to free several captives. These acts in themselves demonstrate that Thiodolf places the welfare of the folk above personal safety, but the simple act of entering the hall also requires a symbolic gesture, for the doors are "not so high that a man might stand on the threshold and his helmcrest clear the lintel; for such was the custom, that a tall man must bow himself as he came into the hall" (XIV, 5-6). Although the narrator suggests that the custom "maybe was a memory of the days of onslaught when the foemen were mostly wont to beset the hall," it seems likely, in the context of a tale that emphasizes in numerous other ways the primary importance of the society over the individual, that the bow is also a gesture of humility, a way of recognizing that individuals must bend before the interests of the folk. Thiodolf's death exemplifies the selfless action that May Morris quite accurately finds central to this tale: "Love of the tribe and the kindred is the keynote. . . . The effacement of personal happiness in service of the people hangs over all the action in The Wolfings."12

Thiodolf's final bow is but one example of typical Wolfing behavior founded on the conviction that no individual is as important as the tribe. When Hall-Sun (the keeper of the lamp by the same name) sends out two maidens to spy on the Roman advance, she advises suicide rather than betrayal of the folk (XIV, 92). This advice is neither given nor taken lightly: the Roman captain's military intelligence is poor, "and though he had taken those two women in the wastes, yet had he got no word from them, for they did as the Hall-Sun bade them, when they knew that they would be questioned
with torments, and smiting themselves each with a little sharp knife, so went their ways to the Gods" (XIV, 134). These incidents demonstrate that defense of the Mark is predicated on a cooperative rather than an individual effort: the goal is collective, not individual survival. Thus when he is chosen war leader, Thiodolf reminds the Markmen of their cooperative strategy: "it is oftenest the custom when ye go to war to choose you two dukes, and I would it were so now. No child's play is the work that lies before us; and if one leader chance to fall let there be another to take his place without stop or stay" (XIV, 69). Likewise, when during the fighting the second war duke would send a message to Thiodolf, he tells the messenger, "take thy fellow Viglund the Woodman with thee, lest if perchance one fall, the other may bear the message" (XIV, 118).

Clearly, what matters most in The Wolfings is the survival of the folk. As Lionel Munby has indicated, in the late romances "it is society that is the real subject of Morris' interest, even when the place of the individual in society looms large in the story."13 Thus Thiodolf's personal struggle is most significant as it affects the welfare of the folk. Thiodolf fails when he dons the hauberk and assumes an attitude of self-interest; he triumphs as he melts into the society of the tribe. In The Wolfings Morris presents an alternative to the all-consuming self-interest of "Gudrun" and shows how social stability is best preserved by corporate action rather than by the actions of an irreplaceable hero like Sigurd. This thematic progression from self-interest to community interest is complemented by a structural progression from a pattern of catastrophic change to one of continuity, the patterns reflecting the shift from the instability of lives governed by volatile individual interests to the relatively greater stability of life governed by community interest.

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Compared to that of Sigurd and The Wolfings, the structure of "Gudrun" is relatively simple, following the developmental line of Gudrun's career and bounded by its limits. The dreams that foretell her unlucky loves involve separate episodes, yet Gudrun notes that they are "four dreams in one" (V, 255); in short, the thread of her life unifies the events of the tale, creating a linear pattern. When the complications of Gudrun's loves conclude, the purpose of the tale is fulfilled; the narrator ends not with a comment on the future implications of the lovers' actions, but with a description of Gudrun brooding over her past. The pattern emphasizes catastrophic change involving the deaths of lovers and the immediate social consequence. The tale does not make this catastrophe part of a historical pattern--the fleeting comparison of Gudrun to Helen is left undeveloped.

Sigurd has a historical perspective that "Gudrun" lacks, extending beyond the limits of Sigurd's career to embrace Sigmund's life before and the fall of the Niblungs after. The propriety of a structure including elements outside Sigurd's life has been a point of contention. J. W. Mackail complains that "For the purpose of an epic it is almost obvious that the story begins far too early, and has epic unity only from the point at which Sigurd's own conscious life begins." John Drinkwater, on the other hand, argues more plausibly that Sigurd has unity precisely because of its wide-ranging form:

The story of Sigurd, showing in the beginning the Volsung heritage to which he is born and in the end the fall of the Niblung house that comes of his death, with his life set between these, satisfies the requirements of epic poetry as, perhaps, does no other. We have the first necessities of
architectural form satisfied—the beginning, the development, the close. 15

I should like to explore the unity of the Sigurd structure in a slightly different way. As the thematic discussion has already shown, the poem presents a series of social disasters brought about by self-interested love or greed; the end of Sigurd's career is but part of a wavelike pattern of repeated catastrophe that will end with Ragnarok and regeneration. Moreover, though Sigurd is the most nearly perfect example of the hero who speeds the day when "the new sun beams on Baldur" (244), Sigmund, Brynhild, Gudrun, even Hogni and Gunnar, play important roles in the struggle against the forces of evil. Thus, elements that Mackail regards extraneous to the Sigurd story are actually part of the same process. In fact, Sigurd's epic stature is enhanced rather than diminished, his importance to the history of his race made clearer, by the enveloping episodes that show his career to be part of a cultural struggle, more than an anomalous individual achievement. Additionally, the episodes of catastrophe share imagery that binds them together, lends a sense of aesthetic closure to the entire work, and reinforces the theme of ultimate doom, so that even if Sigurd is not unified by the continuing presence of a single figure as Mackail would have wished, it nevertheless possesses an impressive motivational unity.

The primary motive for Sigurd is fire, which links the first and last sections of the poem to those that describe Sigurd's life. The conflagration of Siggeir's hall, the ring of fire on Hindfell, Sigurd's funeral pyre, and the firing of Atli's hall suggest its broad outline, but the fire motive is far more complex than these four examples indicate. I would like to demonstrate the pervasiveness of the fire imagery before showing how it
actually motivates the poem's development. Images of fire are consistently used to describe the heart, the heart's desire (e.g., the Gold of Andvari), and the means of winning or defending that desire (i.e., the sword). Thus, as Signy awaited news of her captive brothers' fate, "silent in her bosom she held her heart of flame" (18), and as she plotted revenge, "fierce then in the heart of Signy a sudden flame 'gan burn" (27). Sigmund recounts the ordeal of watching wolves eat his brothers in this way: "when those first were murdered my heart was as blood and fire" (163); Sigurd's love for Brynhild is "a flaming fire" (205). Gunnar learned of his wife's inexplicable despondence and "the flame of his anger burned" (216). While Gudrun schemed to avenge Sigurd's murder, "the fire that burned within her by no child of man was seen" (256). When the over-wise Grimhild dies, the "baneful fire" of her heart is cold (272). Hogni sums up this emotional imagery, referring to the heart as "the forge of fond desires" (292). Similarly, the object of desire is surrounded by fire imagery. The elf-treasure that Reidmar desires is "the Flame of the Waters" (80); Fafnir kills his father to possess this "Candle of the Deep" (86). Part of the treasure, the ring, provokes strife between Gudrun and Brynhild, which the poet anticipates when the ring is given to Gudrun: "Yea, thereof, from the Gold of Andvari, the spark of the waters wan, / Sprang a flame of bitter trouble" (196). We last see the gold when the Niblungs dump it into a lake:

Down then and whirling outward the ruddy Gold fell forth,
As a flame in the dim grey morning, flashed out a kingdom's worth. (264)

The sword that Sigurd uses to win the gold is both an object of desire and a means of winning that desire.
The Wrath of Sigurd, forged from the shards of the weapon Sigmund drew from the Branstock, the weapon Siggeir desired but could not win, is surrounded by flame imagery. When he owns the sword, Sigmund is known as "the King of the Flame of Strife" (35); when Elf surveys the field on which Sigmund died, he points out the work of Sigmund's "war-flame" (57). When Regin reforges the sword, it is "like the sun and the lightning mingled"; Sigurd brandishes it and stands "in the ring of its fire" (95). It lies between Sigurd and Brynhild and is described as

The Light that had lain in the Branstock, the hope of the Volsung Tree,  
The Sunderer, the Deliverer, the torch of days to be.  

(193)

Similarly, Gunnar's sword is called "the war-flame of the Niblungs" (219), and in his final battle Gunnar fights so that "Giuki's sword outburst, / As the fire-tongue from the smoulder" (282). These examples merely demonstrate a striking frequency of fire images. It remains to show how this imagery actually propels the poem to its conclusion and provides aesthetic closure.

Morris begins his translation of the Volsunga Saga (1870) with a prologue in verse explaining that the tale will tell "of how from dark to dark bright Sigurd broke" (VII, 290). This image of brightness bounded by darkness describes Morris' poetic recreation of the saga six years later in Sigurd better than it describes the translation, for in Sigurd Morris makes the imagery of fire and light more prominent than it is in the saga. With regard to its motivational imagery, Sigurd is a tale of the kindling and extinction of flame. The poem opens, and the narrative flame is kindled, with a description of the Volsung hall, which is "as a rose in the winter season, a candle in the dark" (1). This "candle"
lights other flames that are extinguished one by one as the poem draws to its conclusion. In the Volsung hall Odin leaves the weapon that becomes the war-flame of Sigmund and Sigurd, the weapon that awakens greed that almost extinguishes the Volsung candle. When of his brothers Sigmund alone survives to take refuge in the woods, "his forge's glimmering light" (24) signals that the Volsung flame is not dead. Indeed, it still burns in both Sigmund and Signy, flaring up in Sinfiotli, their son who thinks it good "to look on the bale-fires' light" (32) and who aids Sigmund in firing Siggeir's hall. The candle of the Volsung heritage is again almost extinguished when Sigmund is killed in battle and the Light of the Branstock is shattered, but his new wife Hiordis carries two dormant flames from the battlefield—the shards of the war-flame and the yet-to-be-born Sigurd. These flames flare up when the "eye-bright" Sigurd (93) has Regin reforge the sword and uses the rekindled war-flame to kindle another flame by bringing the treasure of Andvari to light. The flames of both sword and treasure figure in Sigurd's first meeting with Brynhild, when he uses the sword to kindle life and love, shearing away first her armor, freeing "a river of sun-bright hair," and bringing a flush to her face (123). He also gives her the Ring of Andvari, from which springs "a flame of bitter trouble" (196). Later, Sigurd inadvertently kindles the flame of love in Gudrun; his treasure kindles the admiration, then the greed, of her brothers. The ring focuses these emotional tensions to bring about Sigurd's death and to initiate the extinction of the flames that have been lit. With the splendid conflagration of Sigurd's bale, the Volsung candle finally burns out, the Light of the Branstock is destroyed, and Brynhild's frustration, earlier symbolized by the fire on Hindfell, comes to an end. Other flames—the elf-
treasure, the Niblung pride, and Gudrun's desire for vengeance—still burn. Insofar as narrative development is concerned, the treasure's flame is extinguished when the Niblungs dump it into a deep lake. The cold, dead "forge of sorrow" (272) that was Grimhild's heart signals the beginning of the Niblungs' destruction. A chill imagery of extinction is prominent as in Atli's hall the Niblung champions are "swept by the leaping iron, as the rock anigh the shore / By the ice-cold waves of winter" (280). Their wounds grow cold during the pauses in battle (283, 285), and their defeat is likened to a sinking ship (286). After Gunnar dies in the snake pit, his heart "chilled for ever by the sleepless serpent's sting" (299), only the flame in Gudrun's heart remains to be quenched. Her desire for vengeance, this time for her brothers, flares up in the final conflagration of Atli's hall, then is abruptly extinguished when she leaps into the sea (306), ending the fire motive begun by the description of the Volsung hall, the "candle in the dark."

Not only does the prominent fire imagery bind together the waves of catastrophe in Sigurd and effect aesthetic closure by completing a progress from kindling to extinction, but it also reinforces the theme of impending doom and the notion of Sigurd as one who speeds the day of regeneration beyond Ragnarok. In Norse myth, the chaos of Ragnarok ends with fire spread over the earth; the conflagrations that occur periodically in Sigurd may be said to prefigure the fires of Ragnarok, for the poet's thought is never far from the theme of the final day. As the poem opens there are rumors of "the last of the latter days" (1); drawing the sword from the Branstock, Sigmund announces that he is "the hired of Odin, his workday will to speed" (8); Signy plots vengeance against Siggeir, thinking
"of men's lives' changing, and the uttermost ending of earth" (28); Brynhild speaks to Sigurd of "the fate that abideth the earth" (128); Gunnar sings of "the fight of the uttermost day" (284). The holocaust is a necessary prelude to regeneration, and the flame spread by Sigurd's action speeds the day when "the new sun beams on Bal­dur" (244). Sigurd is also associated with regeneration by sun imagery linking him to Baldur. As soon as Sigurd is born, "his eyes look straight on the sun" (62); at his death "the broad day fell on his visage" (231); sunbeams flash on the Helm of Aweing and the Wrath of Sigurd as the hero lies on bale (243). This identification with Bal­dur makes Sigurd the symbol of victory yet to be, but it is important to note that victory yet to be is victory postponed. Sigurd is unable himself to bring about the day of regeneration; his effectiveness as a campaigner for social justice is hampered by the forces of self­interest, to which he himself eventually surrenders.

From the linear pattern of the single catastrophe and the wavelike pattern of repeated catastrophe, Mor­ris turns to a cyclic pattern emphasizing continuity. The Wolfings tells not of social dissolution, but of challenge and endurance. This tale begins with the folk at peace, advances to the challenge of self-interest, and concludes with the tribe at peace again and honoring its dead. The cyclic narrative pattern reflects the pattern of life in the Mark, life attuned to seasonal process: the Wolfings worship "the kind acres which they themselves and their fathers had made fruitful, wedding them to the seasons of seed-time and harvest, that the birth that came from them might become a part of the kindred of the Wolf, and the joy and might of past springs and summers might run in the blood of the Wolfing children" (XIV, 30). This sense of community with nature is evident in the custom of holding important councils at "Thing-Steads in the Wood aloof
from either acre or meadow. . . . in memory, belike, of the days when as yet there was neither house nor tillage, nor flocks and herds, but the Earth's face only and what freely grew thereon" (XIV, 7). The use of seasonal detail to pinpoint time further suggests the Wolfings' closeness to the earth: news of the invasion first comes on "an evening of summer, when the wheat was in the ear, but yet green," when folk are merry with the "promise of the harvest" (XIV, 8-9). The circular progress of the overall narrative is also reiterated by the movements of the lamp called the Hall-Sun, like the hall itself a symbol of the continuing life of the folk. The lamp's keeper takes the "ancient and holy thing" (XIV, 8) to a sanctuary in the woods when the Romans attack the hall, then immediately replaces the lamp when the Romans are defeated so that it "gleamed in its due place once more, a token of the salvation of the Wolfings and the welfare of all the kindreds" (XIV, 194). It is the continuity of life in the Mark, based on the cycles of the seasons and symbolized by the departure and return of the lamp, that gives Thiodolf a vision of immortality as part of the tribe:

"I am Thiodolf the Mighty: but as wise as I may be
No story of that grave-night mine eyes can ever see,
But rather the tale of the Wolfings through the coming days of earth,
And the young men in their triumph and the maidens in their mirth;
And morn's promise every morning, and each day the promised morn,
And I amidst it ever reborn and yet reborn."

(XIV, 109)
The society of the Mark and Thiodolf's vision of corporate immortality illustrate, as Morris intended, the "melting of the individual into the society of the tribes," presenting a strong contrast to the forlorn individualism of Kiartan, Gudrun, and Bodli, whose self-interest makes them instruments of social destruction rather than preservation. Sigurd occupies a middle position in Morris' treatment of the interplay between individual and society, going beyond "Gudrun" by recognizing the importance of subordinating individual interests to greater social concerns. However, Sigurd is still only an individual, and even heroic individuals die. To base social order on the hero is to invite waves of creation and destruction that advance and recede as heroes come and go; thus Sigurd implies the inadequacy of social order based on a heroic ethic and prepares the way for consideration of a more stable communal order in The Wolfings, an order whose strength relies on the combined effort of many individuals who subordinate personal interests to social concerns. In this tale Morris presents a solution for the unrestrained individualism of "Gudrun" that is more viable than the heroic ethic of Sigurd. Contrary to critical cliches that insist on Morris' escapism, these three works demonstrate his continuing exploration of topics highly pertinent to his own age, an age of rapid change in which the password was too often every man for himself, an age in which the idea of the hero commanded attention as a possible solution to the problem of social disorder, an age in which the seemingly more close-knit social orders of a medieval past seemed to offer hope for the future. Morris is indeed a "dreamer of dreams," but of dreams that impinge on the waking world. We should recall the defense of dream that he places in the mouth of an Earthly Paradise Wanderer:
A dream it is friends, and no history
Of men who ever lived; so blame me nought
If wondrous things together there are brought,
Strange to our waking world—yet as in dreams
Of known things still we dream, whatever gleams
Of unknown light may make them strange, so here
Our dreamland story holdeth such things dear
And such things loathed, as we do; else, indeed,
Were all its marvels nought to help our need.

(V, 23)

Notes

2. Cf., for example, Carlyle's numerous comments on social change in *Signs of the Times*, Mill's observation in an *Examiner* essay that "mankind have outgrown old institutions and doctrines, and have not yet acquired new ones" (the *Examiner* essays of early 1831 have been compiled as *The Spirit of the Age*, ed. Frederick A. von Hayek [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942]), and Arnold's comment in "Heinrich Heine" concerning "the sense of want of correspondence between the forms of modern Europe and its spirit" (*Essays in Criticism, First Series*).
3. [Cormell Price], "Lancashire and 'Mary Barton,'" *OCM*, July, 1856, p. 443.
(London: Longmans, 1910-15), V, 250. Subsequent volume and page references in the text are to this edition.


9. Tyndarus, or Tyndareus, a mortal, is the presumed father of Helen of Troy; her real father, of course, is the immortal Zeus.


