The Structure of 

Sigurd the Volsung

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THE STORY OF Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs (1876) is an important transitional work in William Morris' literary career, a major Victorian experiment in epic form, and the most significant attempt in English to render "the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks." For these reasons alone the poem merits detailed and respectful critical examination. To date, Sigurd has received neither the quality nor the quantity of attention that it deserves; indeed, what criticism of the poem does exist is characterized to a remarkable degree by inattention to the evidence of Morris' authorized text. One of the earliest modern commentators, Dorothy Hoare, maintains her argument that Morris diverts sympathy from Gunnar and Hogni in Book III by disregarding the central and heroic position which they occupy in Book IV. Moreover, she bases her contention that Morris "destroys the tragic atmosphere" of the Volsunga saga largely on a passage which Morris deleted from his text before publication. E. P. Thompson adopts Hoare's generalizations wholesale and imitates her critical faux pas by using a passage that appears only "in Morris's first version" to show how "Morris, on occasion, consciously used the old story as a vehicle for contemporary themes." In their more recent treatments, Hartley S. Spatt, by misunderstanding Morris' use of solar imagery, and John Goode, by emphasizing the disparateness of the poem at the expense of its unifying principles, create textual distortions similar to those made by Hoare and Thompson. Other studies which merit more serious consideration (notably

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those of Jessie Kocmanova, J. W. Blench, and Charlotte Oberg)\(^5\) provide helpful observations on many topics—structure, meter, diction, setting, imagery, characterization, theme, and genre—without making the systematic examination that any one of those topics demands. In keeping with the tendency of the best contributions to the recent collection The After-Summer Seed: Reconsiderations of William Morris's The Story of Sigurd the Volsung,\(^6\) which combine textual fidelity with a properly restricted scope, the present study will, therefore, focus solely on the structure of Sigurd, and more specifically on Morris' use of book divisions and of repeated patterns of action.

In his early biography of Morris, J. W. Mackail writes:

The whole of the life of Sigmund, which fills the first of the four books of the poem, is a separate story. . . . No art or skill can make this earlier epic either subordinate to, or coherent with, the epic of the After-born. . . . It is as though the epic of Troy opened with a recital of the epic of Thebes.\(^7\)

As his reference to Homeric epic demonstrates, Mackail expects that the story of Sigurd will be told with the techniques of “the epic of Troy,” and that classical and neoclassical conceptions of coherence and subordination are the standards by which Morris' work is to be judged. While Morris makes Sigurd analogous in scope and function to classical epic, his structure has features which are indebted to non-classical sources: Sigurd is based on the Volsunga saga, the Elder Edda, and the Nibelungenlied and is inspired by Morris’ extensive work with Erikr Magnusson in reading, translating, and adapting Icelandic literature. Modern studies of medieval literature, beginning with the impressive Epic and Romance of Mackail’s contemporary W. P. Ker, have isolated structural principles which are epic in their concern with comprehensiveness, but which are characteristically Teutonic. These principles offer a fruitful context for discussing Morris’ poem.


Among the structural features which Theodore M. Andersson, for instance, discusses in The Icelandic Family Saga, three have a broad affinity with the structure of Sigurd. Saga writers frequently use an apparently extraneous prologue to add historical scope and “to foreshadow the main plot with an introductory episode . . . placed in an earlier generation” (Andersson, p. 8); in Mackail’s terms, they begin “the epic of Troy . . . with a recital of the epic of Thebes.” In Morris’ poem, the suffering and heroism of Sigmund, which at first appears to be “a separate story,” bears a figurative or typological relation to the heroism of Sigurd in Book III and Gunnar in Book IV. The patterns of “parallel, contrast, and repetition” (Andersson, p. 44) which are central to saga structure figure prominently in Morris’ structure as well: Books I, III, and IV present parallel tragic, or disintegrative movements, with a recurring pattern of physical dislocation, ambush, and heroic death, while Book II offers a contrasting comic or integrative movement. Finally, as in the pyramidal structure of the saga, where “episodes are linked in a sequence leading up to the climax of a saga or leading down from it” (Andersson, p. 33), Morris’ structure is balanced on Sigurd’s heroic career in Book II and on the central tragic encounter of Sigurd, Brynhild, and Gudrun in Book III.

Like the Icelandic saga writer, Morris attains epic comprehensiveness by framing the career of his principal figures with the experience of preceding and succeeding generations. While Anthony Ugolnik states that “Morris’ choice of the title indicates his decision to focus the epic more singlemindedly upon the fortunes of a single hero,” Morris’ title (especially in its unabbreviated form) reveals rather a determination to present “the fortunes of a single hero” in the light of their full significance for the ethnic continuity and vision of his people. Thus Dennis Balch speaks much more to the point in arguing that “Sigurd has a historical perspective . . . extending beyond the limits of Sigurd’s career to embrace Sigmund’s life before and the fall of the Niblungs after” (p. 108). Sigurd’s identification as “the Volsung” in the title indicates immediately that his fortunes are inseparable from those of his race; as Balch correctly maintains, it is Sigurd’s Volsung nature which makes the “life of Sigmund” in Mackail’s “earlier epic” relevant to “the epic of the After-born.” With its reference to “the Fall of the Niblungs,” moreover, the title implies that the story of the Niblungs (which might well be attacked on Mackail’s grounds as appearing after the fact) is intimately linked with that of the Volsungs. In the consecutive deaths of three major character groups (of Sigmund and Signy, of Sigurd and

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9“The Victorian Skald: Old Icelandic and the Evolution of William Morris’ Sigurd the Volsung,” in The After-Summer Seed, p. 56.
Brynhild, and of Gudrun, Gunnar, and Hogni), Morris presents a prestatement, a statement, and restatement of his tragic theme. His concern with the interrelationships of family groupings through time therefore gives birth to his essentially tripartite structure.

Morris divides Sigurd—in a far more schematic or perhaps even classical manner than is generally found in the sagas—into three main divisions: the time before Sigurd (Book I), the time of Sigurd (Book II and Book III), and the time after Sigurd (Book IV). The form of his poem resembles a triptych in that the principal and most extensive action is framed on both sides by smaller related actions. J. W. Blench is thus correct in stating that Morris places "the main tragic story of Sigurd and Brynhild" in the context of a prologue and an epilogue. He is also justified in maintaining that "Morris gives shapeliness to his narrative" by judicious selection of events (p. 3); Morris himself found the Volsunga saga "somewhat disjointed . . . from its having been put together from varying versions of the same song"\(^{10}\) and therefore uses his book divisions to make the parallels of his story more clearly defined and architectonic. Nevertheless, Blench's assertion that Morris, in framing his topic, "does not reduce its scope to that of the true epic, which would be concentrated more narrowly on the central story of Sigurd and Brynhild" exhibits a culturally restricted view of epic similar to Mackail's, while his statement that Morris' "comparative amplitude is romantic rather than epic" misses the full significance of Morris' structure (p. 3). The recurring patterns of the work are parallel not primarily because they follow the linear and sequential patterns of romance, but because they are arranged (as in the Icelandic sagas) to create an epic whole, through proleptic and retrospective reference to each other.

The principle of parallel structure illuminates the significance of Morris' book divisions. The dislocation and ambush of the Volsungs in Book I parallel the destruction of the Niblungs in Book IV. In each case conflict begins with a wooing (of Signy by Siggeir and of Gudrun by Atli). In each case an invitation to visit a foreign kingdom is advanced, and a pledge to accept that invitation is honored in the face of almost certain death. Each visit ends with the massacre of the visitors and the murder of the resident king by his wife (Siggeir by Signy, with the aid of Sigmund and Sinfiotli, and Atli by Gudrun). The first appearance of this pattern signals the eventual extinction of the Volsungs, the second the destruction of the Niblungs (see Oberg, pp. 87-88).

Just as the prestatement of Book I (life before Sigurd) is linked with the parallel restatement of Book IV (life after Sigurd), the action of Book II (the

rise of Sigurd) is linked for purposes of contrast with the action of Book III (the fall of Sigurd). In Book II the triumphant Sigurd traverses the wavering fire to revive the sleeping Brynhild. His act serves to further his true nature and heroic identity. His cohabitation with Brynhild is thus the moment of resolution which marks the apex of his personal fortunes, appropriately and symmetrically demarcated by the division between Books II and III. In Book III Sigurd crosses the fire a second time. This time the feat is accomplished not through prowess and courage but through the magic of Grimhild; it results not in the establishment of a true identity but in deception and in Brynhild's false betrothal to Gunnar. The act which was Sigurd's crowning triumph in Book II is parodied by an externally similar act which is in large measure the source of Brynhild's revenge and of his own downfall in Book III. Clearly, no individual book can be fully understood except as a prefiguration or resolution of conflicts contained in other books.

Book I ("Sigmund") opens with an imposing portrayal of the Volsung hall and the Branstock oak. Whereas in the Volsunga saga the Branstock hall is introduced simply as a wonder of King Volsung's making, in Sigurd both the hall and the tree are given larger symbolic overtones. The hall represents the ethnic continuity of the Volsungs; as the Volsungs are extinguished one by one, the physical settings of the action in the poem move progressively away from it. Morris' use of the building as ethnic symbol reflects his growing interest in national architecture: "Our ancient buildings are not mere ecclesiastical toys," he wrote to The Athenaeum in 1877, "but sacred monuments of the nation's growth and hope" (Letters, p. 86). The gold roof of the hall links it imagistically with crafted treasures, Andvari's ring and Fafnir's hoard, and with the solar pattern which images the underlying rhythm of birth, fruition, and decay. The Branstock, endowed with religious and totemic significance, fittingly represents the Volsungs, who are forest-dwellers (unlike the mountain-dwelling Niblungs) and whose leaders are metaphorically identified with trees (Blench, p. 8). Around it, the Volsung feasts are held, and the "Tales of the framing of all things" which embody the myths of the Volsungs are told. During one of these feasts, at the outset of the poem, Odin, "One-eyed and seeming ancient," appears mysteriously and thrusts a sword into the Branstock (I, p. 5). His miraculous gift serves to increase Siggeir's destructive envy of Sigmund. The Branstock thus becomes the scene not only of the direct encounter of man and god which helps to sustain the Volsungs and their heroic ethos, but also of the act which initiates the Volsungs' downfall.

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11Book I, p. 4. All references to Sigurd are to Volume XII of the Collected Works. All subsequent references give book and page numbers respectively.
Morris' depiction of the Volsung hall as "a rose in the winter season, a candle in the dark" (I, p. 1) indicates immediately that the social unity represented by the hall and the tree is physically threatened. With the initiating actions of the epic, Odin's gift and Siggeir's marriage proposal, the potential threat becomes realized. The disintegrative movement of Book I takes the form of physical dislocation from home: first, in the taking away of Signy; second, in the disastrous voyage of the Volsung nobility to the land of the Goths; and third, after a return to the land of the Volsungs, in the voyage of Sigmund to the Isle-realm to woo Hiordis. The effect of dislocation is reflected physically in the deaths of Volsung and his sons, of Sinfiotli, and of Sigmund, and in the disintegration of the Branstock sword. It is rendered imagistically as the felling of a "noble oak" when Sigmund is slain (I, p. 58). Its effect is nevertheless countered by the heroic vision of the Volsungs in their adversity: of Signy, who marries Siggeir in spite of "the wrack and the grief" she knows her marriage will cause (I, p. 3); of Volsung, who walks into an ambush in order to avoid breaking a vow (I, p. 11); and of Sigmund, who graciously accepts death at the hands of his benefactor Odin (I, pp. 54-56). Thus, while the first book establishes an irreversible physical movement away from the Branstock, it also establishes the heroic ethos which overcomes dislocation and which becomes the controlling vision of the epic.

If the death of Sigmund in a foreign land completes the tragic movement of disintegration and dislocation which typifies Book I, the embryonic existence of his son Sigurd initiates the comic movement of reintegration in Book II ("Regin"). In the final chapter of the opening book, Hiordis uses disguise and imposture as means of self-preservation. The subsequent comic disclosure of her disguise by Elf leads to his offer of matrimony and to the safe birth of her son. Elf provides the harmonious landscape—"Peace" is the initial word of Book II—which is the setting of Sigurd's rise to fame: Book II begins (in the sheltered pastoral landscape of Helper's kingdom) and ends (in Brynhild's bower) with images of peace. The image of the fallen oak is replaced by that of the "stripling fair and slender," Sigurd (II, pp. 101, 113), while the shattered Branstock sword is refashioned. Odin, Sigmund's destroyer, again turns benefactor when he presents to Sigurd the horse Greyfell. Armed with the wisdom of Gripir and the craft of Regin, Sigurd performs the deeds which are the basis of his reputation, the slaying of Fafnir and the crossing of the wavering fire.

The significance of Sigurd's heroic actions cannot be properly evaluated in isolation from the overall pattern of Sigurd. John Goode misreads Book II when he argues that its beginning marks a transition "from

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12Blersch (p. 25) argues that Morris' revisions of Sigurd highlight this sense of peacefulness in Sigurd's upbringing.
the saga of the heroic community to the romance hero." Sigurd, he
maintains, becomes "an episodic hero" whose success "is not one which
creates a social world out of the triumph": "We have moved completely,
with the hero, into a world in which the main task of life is a struggle for
existence by the isolated individual through cunning or violence or both"
(pp. 241-242). Goode confuses the inclusion of romance elements in an epic
with a transition from epic to romance; he fails to see how (in W. P. Ker's apt
phrasing) "episodes of romance . . . may have their place, along with all
other human things, in the epic scheme." He seriously misreads the social
function of Sigurd's adventures. When Sigurd comes to the Niblungs, he
becomes "the redeemer, the helper, the crown of all their worth" (III, p.
232). Indeed, his social effectiveness continues despite the dwindling of his
personal fortunes in Book III:

It was most in these latter days that his fame went far abroad,
The helper, the overcomer, the righteous sundering sword;

The eye-bright seer of all things, that wasteth every wrong,
The straightener of the crooked, the hammer of the strong.

(III, pp. 205-206)

Because his heroic stature has such profound social implications, Sigurd's
rise to fame in Book II is accompanied by universal images of regeneration.
By "sunder[ing]" good and evil, his slaying of Fafnir brings about a
metaphoric noon (II, p. 116). His ascent to Brynhild is paralleled by the
minute progressions of the dawn (II, pp. 120-124), while their climactic
meeting is greeted by Brynhild's hymn to light (II, p. 124).

The apex of Sigurd's career is marked by the symmetrical division of
the books of Sigurd's life (II and III) and of the entire work (I and II, III
and IV). It is placed geographically in Brynhild's bower on the top of
Hindfell and is imaged in the perfection of the ring of Andvari, "The shapen
ancient token, that hath no change nor end, / No change, and no beginning"
(II, p. 130). But the ring has a double significance: while it images the heroic
perfection of Sigurd, it represents also the greed of Regin, which overtakes
the Niblungs in Book III and Atli in Book IV, and the curse of Andvari from
which Sigurd is unable to extricate himself in the second half of the poem.
Brynhild's vision of the future at the end of Book II (p. 128) therefore
encompasses, even in a moment of triumphant peace, the entire tragic story
of Books III and IV: "the love of women" (the conflict of Gudrun and
Brynhild), "the fall of mighty houses" (Atli's ambush of the Niblungs), "the
friend that falters and turns" (Gunnar's treachery towards his blood brother
Sigurd), "the hand that repenteth its stroke" (Gunnar's acknowledgement

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of his injustice towards Sigurd), "the grief that endureth for long" (Gudrun's grief for the slain Sigurd), "the lurking blinded vengeance" (Gudrun's plot against her brothers), and man's ability to "measure it all, the wrath, and the grief, and the bliss" (the heroic visions of Gunnar in the hall and snake-pit of Atli). Just as the tragic movement of Book I contains the seeds of comic reintegration, the good fortune of Sigurd contains the seeds of his destruction; his two great triumphs in Book II are the causes of his downfall in Book III. His successful capture of Fafnir's hoard brings upon him the curse of Andvari's ring, while his love for Brynhild results in his own murder.

The description of the Niblungs which opens Book III ("Brynhild") functions as the description of the Volsungs does at the beginning of Book I: the mountain hall of the Niblungs parallels the forest hall of the Volsungs, while the heroic tales which the Niblungs tell "amid their high-tides" (III, p. 131) parallel the tales told under the Branstock. As in Book I, the portrayal of a unified society in its own home provides an effective contrast to an ensuing dislocation and extinction. In Book III the Niblungs destroy the last member of the Volsung race. In Book IV they themselves will be destroyed when they repeat the action of Book I by accepting Atli's invitation and will undergo the ethnic disintegration earlier experienced by the Volsungs. Since the first of these two patterns (Sigurd's destruction) and ultimately the second (the annihilation of the Niblungs by Gudrun's revenge) are initiated by the triangular love affair of Sigurd, Brynhild, and Gudrun, Gudrun's dreams of Sigurd at the beginning of Book III play a parallel part in inciting a tragic action to that which Siggeir's wooing plays in Book I. Gudrun, like Signy at the opening of the poem, manifests a somber mood in the midst of rejoicing; she explains to her nurse: "if I wend the summer in dull unlovely seeming, / It comes of the night, O mother, and the tide of last night's dreaming" (III, p. 132). The rare feminine rhyme of "seeming" and "dreaming" forbodes an imminent turn of fortune. The summer season which accurately reflects the well-being of both Sigurd and the Niblungs is about to yield to a season of destruction, first of Sigurd and then of his mountain hosts.

Sigurd's downfall begins when he leaves the bower that he shares with Brynhild in Lyndale, where his life is embodied by art in Brynhild's "web of gold" (III, p. 145), and faces "the change of Heaven and the chance of worldly war" (III, p. 148). His winter journey to the Niblungs, which follows the westward path of the sun (III, p. 151), concludes in the mingling of his gold color with the predominant black color of the mountain dwellers. By drinking Grimhild's potion he entraps himself in "a tangle of strange love, / Deep guile, and strong compelling" (III, p. 166). Subjected to enchantment and forgetfulness, he is forced to pose as Gunnar and to repeat to Gudrun the pledges he has made to Brynhild. The frustration which
Sigurd feels after drinking the potion is expressed in a gesture of impotent unacceptance when he unconsciously rides at midnight to Brynhild's burg, returning unawares to the Niblung hall the next evening (III, pp. 168-169). His gesture is repeated structurally later in the book by Brynhild when she has discovered the treachery of Gunnar and Sigurd:

she fled through the summer night,
And unwitting around she wandered, till again in the dawning light
She stood by the Burg of the Niblungs, and the dwelling of her lord.

(III, p. 213)

Gudrun's escape into the woods after Sigurd's murder (III, p. 237) is a third instance of the pattern which shows the frustration, shared by all three members of the love triangle, engendered by the "tangle of strange love."

For Sigurd and Brynhild, this tangle ends with death. When Sigurd learns of Gudrun's taunting of Brynhild, he explains to Gudrun the complications caused by Grimhild's enchantment and their unravelling:

Brynhild was my beloved in the tide and the season of youth;
And as great as is thy true-love, e'en so was her love and her truth.
But for this cause thus have I spoken, that the tale of the night hast thou told,
And cast the word unto Brynhild, and shown her the token of gold.
—A deed for the slaying of many, and the ending of my life,
Since I betrayed her unwitting.—Yet grieve not, Gudrun my wife!
For cloudy of late were the heavens with many a woven lie,
And now is the clear of the twilight, when the slumber draweth anigh.

(III, p. 214)

Whereas the dying Sigurd of the Volsunga saga thinks immediately of his young son, the childless Sigurd of Morris' treatment thinks not of revenge or of the perpetuation of his line, but of the end of the deception which his sojourn with the Niblungs has forced upon him. Brynhild too feels constraint in the land of the Niblungs—of her the sagacious Hogni says, "She came to dwell among us, but in us she had no part" (III, p. 240)—and sees death as a means of release, whereby she can follow Sigurd to "the gates of Valhall" (III, p. 242). On the funeral pyre at the end of Book III the two lovers are reunited. Their cremation, accompanied by images of light (a noon setting, the glare of the Branstock sword, and the prophecy of the time when "the new sun beams on Baldur" [III, pp. 243-244]), is a moment of final release and resolution.

Since Gudrun, forced to outlive her lover, is not allowed to share that resolution, the first major movement of Book IV ("Gudrun") is the story of her isolation and revenge. At the beginning of the book Gudrun is still in seclusion after the murder of Sigurd. Her Niblung brothers, when conveying Atli's marriage proposal, unwittingly speed their own downfall by prompting Gudrun's act of revenge; at that time, the narrator says, "her father's heart rose in her, and the sleeping wrong awoke" (IV, p. 250). Ironically, her Niblung nature ("her father's heart") causes her to kill her brothers: Gudrun fulfills herself as Niblung by arranging the extinction of
the Niblungs. Throughout the planning of her revenge, Gudrun, like Signy in Book I, maintains silence: “She answered not with speaking, she questioned not with eyes, / Nought did her deadly anger to her brow unknotted rise” (IV, p. 251). At the slaying of her brothers she remains silent and impassive. While Dorothy Hoare maintains that “Gudrun becomes merely a statue, looking on passively at the struggle which she has brought about, but taking no part in its action nor showing any faint interest in it” (p. 70), Gudrun’s portrayal as “a carven image” (IV, p. 251) is a sign not of Morris’ carelessness in character delineation but of his deliberate art. Gudrun’s silence serves not only to point up the violence of what follows, as Kocmanova argues (pp. 172-173), but also to establish an important structural link between the restatement of Book IV and the prestatement of Book I. Gudrun shares with Signy a fierce loyalty, an unequivocal desire for revenge, and an heroic resolve to accept the inevitable. Her self-consuming revenge, like Signy’s, ends in suicide. After her swift murder of Atli, Gudrun casts herself into the sea, complaining of “the bitter wrong of [her] birth” (IV, p. 306). By eliminating the incidents from the Volsunga saga of the rescue of Gudrun and the marriage of Swanhild, Morris ends his closing book with a note of finality similar to that effected by Sigurd’s childlessness in Book III.

While Morris’ poem ends with the lament of Gudrun, its overarching vision is the epic vision of Gunnar, which climaxes the second major movement of Book IV, the death of the Niblungs. The Niblungs are portrayed at the opening of the book “in glorious state” (IV, p. 244), much as the Volsungs are in Book I. Just as the integrity of the Volsungs is challenged by Siggeir, the “glorious state” of the Niblungs is challenged by Atli; the encounter between the Volsung “oak” and the Goth “bramble” in Book I (p. 4) is matched in Book IV by the meeting of “the Westland lords” with “the King of the Eastlands” (p. 257). Like the Volsungs, the Niblungs accept the invitation from the foreign king, which results in the removal of the people from their home. Because of this acceptance, Gunnar and Hogni come to face the same problem which Sigmund faces, the maintenance of unified vision in spite of ethnic destruction. Gunnar is the last to die; in the same manner that Sigmund is forced to remain in the world after the murder of his brothers, Gunnar is left to be the last hero-artist of his race. During the ambush in Atli’s hall, he presents a vision of the future which stresses the common fate and the common world view of the Volsungs and the Niblungs: “We shall look on Sigurd, and Sigmund of old days,” he exclaims, “And see the boughs of the Branstock o’er the ancient Volsung’s praise” (IV, p. 283). While John Goode begrudgingly grants the Niblungs “an heroic stature in their struggle against Atli,” he insists that theirs is a “heroism of reparation for guilt” (p. 243). But common notions of guilt and atonement are foreign both to Gunnar’s outlook in particular and to Sigurd in general; indeed, in
keeping with Morris' understanding of Icelandic culture, clear understanding is given a more prominent position in the poem than right action. The importance of Gunnar, then, is that he is the first to comprehend and express the completed pattern of Sigurd's epic action:

It was Sigurd, child of the Volsungs, the best sprung forth from the best:
He rode from the North and the mountains and became my summer-guest,
My friend and my brother sworn: he rode the Wavering Fire
And won me the Queen of Glory and accomplished my desire;

I sat night-long in my armour, and when light was wide o'er the land
I slaughtered Sigurd my brother, and looked on the work of mine hand.
And now, O mighty Atli, I have seen the Niblungs' wreck. (IV, p. 291)

Gunnar embodies this pattern in his epic song in the snake-pit (IV, pp. 297-299), which, as Kocmanova rightly maintains, "sums up the themes of the whole poem" (p. 173).

The placement of Gunnar's short epic song at the end of Morris' long epic emphasizes features central to an understanding of Sigurd. In the pattern of Gunnar's song, which moves from a creation myth to an apocalyptic vision of Valhalla, Morris demonstrates the highly patterned nature of his own poem. By making the downfall of the Niblungs parallel to the downfall of the Volsungs, and by stressing that Gunnar shares the fate of Sigmund and Sigurd, he provides epic amplitude and manifests, in Aldous Huxley's phrase, "the whole truth" of epic.14 Morris' strong sense of pattern is thus integrally linked with his desire for epic scope and inclusiveness. Rather than tracing one movement of integration or disintegration (as in a comedy or a tragedy), he incorporates several such movements within an epic framework: with Gunnar's death, the ambusher becomes the ambushed, the persecutor the victim. Gunnar's explicit recognition of his dual position (quoted above) in turn emphasizes the centrality of contemplation and clear vision in Morris' poem; as "in all the stories of the North," so in Sigurd, "failure is never reckoned as a disgrace, but it is reckoned a disgrace not to bear it with equanimity."15 Faced with imminent death, Gunnar sings the epic story of the universe. It is his function as actor-visionary not only to play a part in the tale of the Volsungs and the Niblungs but to shape that story as well. That he does so with the aid of art is consistent with the overall design of Sigurd and links his song with the other art symbols of the poem, each of which mirrors in a limited scope the comprehensive patterning of the larger work: the epic tales of the Volsungs and the Niblungs, the "shapen ancient token" of Andvari, Gripir's crystal "ball that imaged the earth" (II, p. 98), and Brynhild's "web of gold."

This last symbol, which embodies in static form a miniature epic narrative of Sigurd's heroic career, offers a tempting analogy between Morris' literary work and his interest in visual arts; indeed, Morris is reported to have said that "a chap [who] can't compose an epic poem while he's weaving tapestry . . . had better shut up" (Mackail, I, 186). Many similarities do exist between the two endeavors: attention to physical detail, the use of recurring patterns in an overall design, the spatial segmentation of separate actions (for which the metaphor of the triptych has already been used above), and the transformation of fluxional objects to static form. The visual metaphor for literary art can be helpful, however, without excluding the temporal aspect of the reader's encounter with Sigurd. Morris' poem, like the Icelandic sagas it in some respects broadly resembles, is both concerned with time and constructed in time. Characters and events which are at first encountered discretely become, through the reader's acquired experience of the history of subsequent generations, assumed into larger figurative patterns: in a typological sense, Signy becomes Gudrun, Siggeir becomes Atli, and Sigmund becomes both Sigurd and Gunnar, while the Volsungs become the slayers of Sigurd, the Niblungs. Viewed from either its visual or its temporal aspects, the structure of Sigurd gives the impression of a deliberate artistry on Morris' part which has not yet received adequate recognition. This artistry calls into question E. P. Thompson's assertion that the poem is "a medley of different elements" (p. 189) and provides for Sigurd what Carole G. Silver has found in The Earthly Paradise, a sense of Morris' "architectonic power." 16