CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

The Story of Burnt Njal (Njal's Saga)

Anonymous (Old Norse) · *13th century · George Webbe Dasent, 1861*

The great Icelandic saga of Gunnar of Lithend and Njal of Bergthorsknoll, of law and feud, and of the burning. Sir George Webbe Dasent's 1861 English, as printed in the later edition hosted here (Project Gutenberg #17919), is complete through the last chapters. It is a story of friendship, of a bad marriage's long wake, and of a house set on fire.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

When law, friendship, and a wise man's counsel cannot hold back a feud, what remains of honor in the burning of a house, and in the vengeance that follows?

"Fair is the Lithe; so fair that it has never seemed to me so fair; the corn fields are white to harvest, and the home mead is mown; and now I will ride back home, and not fare abroad at all."

Gunnar of Lithend · The chapter of Gunnar's horse-fall, looking back at Lithend

Gunnar, thrown from his horse, looks back at the Lithe and will not go abroad as the atonement required. That refusal leads toward his last stand. Njal, his friend, is later burned in his house with his sons and Bergthora. Dasent's English is complete. Teach the beauty of the land, the failure of the law, and the cost of the feud, together.

KEY CHARACTERS

Njal of Bergthorsknoll
The wise friend, who cannot finally turn the feud from his own house

Gunnar of Lithend
The admirable man who looks back at the Lithe and will not fare abroad

Bergthora
Njal's wife, who will not leave him in the burning

Hallgerda
Gunnar's wife, whose quarrel with Bergthora feeds the long feud

Skarphedinn
Njal's son, terrible in the later fighting

Kari
The son-in-law who escapes the fire and carries the later vengeance

Kolskegg
Gunnar's brother, who warns him not to break the atonement

THE LITHE, AND THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

> *"Fair is the Lithe; so fair that it has never seemed to me so fair; the corn fields are white to harvest, and the home mead is mown; and now I will ride back home, and not fare abroad at all."*
>
> **Gunnar** · Gunnar's horse-fall

Grades 9–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

Of Fiddle Mord, and the Early Feuds

EARLY CHAPTERS (I AND FOLLOWING)

The saga opens, in this edition's table, "Of Fiddle Mord," and builds the marriages, insults, and lesser killings that will later find Gunnar and Njal.

- Dasent's chapter list begins with Fiddle Mord, Hrut, Unna, and Gunnhillda
- The early chapters are not a delay only; they set the legal and family world of the later tragedy
- Keep Dasent's name-forms: Njal, Gunnar of Lithend, Skarphedinn, Bergthora, Kari, Kolskegg, Lithe
- Skip the prefatory note and abridged introduction when quoting the saga itself, except to flag them

02

Gunnar and Njal

THE FRIENDSHIP AT THE CENTER

Gunnar of Lithend, the admirable man of the saga's first half, and Njal of Bergthorsknoll, wise and foresighted, stand as friends while their households are drawn into feud.

- Hallgerda's marriage to Gunnar, and her quarrel with Bergthora, spend the friendship of the husbands
- Njal's counsel and the lawsuits at the Thing are the saga's picture of law trying to contain blood
- The friendship holds longer than the peace; that is part of the book's weight
- Teach both men as the saga praises them, without making either a simple saint

03

Fair Is the Lithe

GUNNAR'S HORSE-FALL AND RETURN

Riding abroad as his atonement required, Gunnar is thrown, looks back at the Lithe and the homestead at Lithend, and will not go.

- The speech is exact in the narrative: "Fair is the Lithe; so fair that it has never seemed to me so fair..."
- The same words are also printed as the volume's italic epigraph, with slightly different pointing ("Fair is Lithe:"); quote the speech in the narrative, not only the epigraph
- Kolskegg warns him not to do this joy to his foes by breaking the atonement
- Gunnar's last defense at Lithend follows from this turning back

> *"Fair is the Lithe; so fair that it has never seemed to me so fair; the corn fields are white to harvest, and the home mead is mown; and now I will ride back home, and not fare abroad at all."*
>
> **Gunnar** · Gunnar's horse-fall, looking toward Lithend

04

The Burning

THE ATTACK ON BERGTHORSKNOLL

The feud comes at last to Njal's house. The house is set on fire. Njal, Bergthora, and their sons die in the burning; Kari escapes.

- The burning is the deed from which the hosted English takes its title, The Story of Burnt Njal
- Teach it with gravity; do not make a spectacle of a family dying in a burning house
- Njal's wisdom does not save the house; that is part of what the saga asks the reader to bear
- For older students (9–12)

05

Kari, the Law, and the Hosted Edition

THE LAST CHAPTERS, AND THE FILE

Kari's vengeance and the later settlements close the saga. The hosted text is Dasent's complete translation, PG #17919.

- The later chapters carry lawsuits, slayings, and a hard peace
- The 1900 prefatory note, Dasent's preface, an abridged introduction, chronology, and footnotes are in the file; quote the saga chapters, not the Victorian introduction, for the map's speeches
- Link this map to Laxdæla, Egil, Grettir, and to the Myths hub
- The conversion of Iceland is in the background of this world; teach it with the other sagas

Friendship · Law and Feud · Home and Land · Courage and Doom · Vengeance and Peace · Counsel Unheeded

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. Gunnar's speech in the narrative is exact: "Fair is the Lithe; so fair that it has never seemed to me so fair; the corn fields are white to harvest, and the home mead is mown; and now I will ride back home, and not fare abroad at all." The volume's epigraph is almost the same, with different pointing; quote the spoken lines.
2. The hosted text is George Webbe Dasent (1861), PG #17919, complete. Keep Dasent's names: Njal, Lithend, Skarphedinn, Bergthora, Lithe.
3. The burning is the moral and narrative center of the later saga. Teach it with gravity, not as spectacle.
4. The file includes a prefatory note, Dasent's preface, and an abridged introduction. Do not quote the Victorian introduction as if it were the saga.
5. For grades 9–12. Link this map to the other three sagas in this wave, and to the Myths hub already on the site.

Quotations are verbatim from the George Webbe Dasent, 1861, Project Gutenberg #17919, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/njals-saga/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.