

Kristin Lavransdatter: Bright, Defiant Axis

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Abstract

Kristin Lavransdatter, by Sigrid Undset is a story set in the first half of the fourteenth century in the central and southern region of Norway which tells the saga of a bright and defiant woman who journeys through life with daring desire, making her life a complex pilgrimage of exploration, questioning, sacrifice, suffering, and ultimately deliverance. This work of over 1,000 pages won Sigrid Undset a Nobel Prize in 1928. As the work nears its hundredth birthday, Undset's position in the history of women writers deserves the attention of contemporary international readers because it poses many questions about the lives of women which are still poignant today. As a writer of historical fiction in the Realist tradition, Undset crafts her characters to reveal the complexity of the human condition as they journey through life in the Middle Ages, fraught with contradiction, namely the struggle between the tangle of earthly desire, romantic love, and familial loyalty, while being bound by the teachings of the Christian church. Most importantly, however, Undset explores how the choice of a husband affected a woman's life-long financial security and the standing of her children for generations to come. *Kristin Lavransdatter* is the story of a bold woman who chooses to challenge this hierarchical framework and take on the complex, burdensome pilgrimage which follows, ultimately revealing her main character's own inner strength and honor through Undset's unique compassionate lens.

Keywords: Kristin Lavransdatter, Sigrid Undset, Scandinavian Literature, Nordic Literature, Role of Women Characters in Scandinavian Literature

Section 1.0

Kristin Lavransdatter, by Sigrid Undset, was originally published as three separate volumes including, *The Wreath*, in 1920, *The Wife*, in 1921, and *The Cross*, in 1922. In 2005, this collection was newly translated by Tiina Nunnally and published by Penguin Classics as the compilation entitled, *Kristin Lavransdatter*. As a story set in the first half of the fourteenth century in the central and southern region of Norway, the narrative tells the saga of a bright and defiant woman, Kristin Lavransdatter, who journeys through life with daring desire, making her life a complex pilgrimage of exploration, questioning, sacrifice, suffering, and ultimately deliverance. This work of over 1,000 pages won Sigrid Undset a Nobel Prize in 1928. As the work nears its hundredth birthday, Undset's position in the history of women writers deserves the attention of contemporary reader's because it poses many questions about the lives of women which are still poignant today.

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Section 2.0

The Wreath

The Wreath opens with a chronicle of the lineage of Kristin Lavransdatter's family and their connection to the nobility in Norway and Sweden. Undset straddles the border between Romanticism and Realism throughout her trilogy with her tactile portrayals of the beauty of nature and the connection between agrarian life and the land, reminding the reader of Romantic writers like Thomas Hardy in *Return of the Native*, with her vivid and lush descriptions. Her characters are beautiful and true in their complexity, and yet are believable because of their flawed and narcissistic desires, showing Undset's connection to Realism. The trilogy often visits Scandinavian mysticism, revealing the very late conversion of Scandinavia to Christianity and the lingering pagan traditions which were very much a part of her characters' belief systems. There are moments in Undset's writing where paganism seems to overtake the strong pull of Christianity, shown throughout Undset's writing in the description of pagan acts like burying an important familial ring in a cemetery in order to save the life of a young family member from the jaws of death.

2.1

Undset's narrative is shaped around the saga of one family with Kristin Lavransdatter as the axis. Undset portrays the compassion for which both Lavrans, Kristin's father, and Ragnfrid, Kristin's mother, have for their servants and the poor of the community as generous and prosperous farmers with deeply held Christian beliefs. The role of the parish priest and the village church as a focal point within the community are established and portrayed with intricate detail to reveal the interconnection of the church and state in medieval society in relation to the feudal system. The reader is always made aware of the importance of familial lineage in relation to other nobility and the royal family, revealing the economic importance of family connections during this time period. While her novel provides a vivid and rich picture of life in the Middle Ages with detailed accuracy related to the setting, it is nonetheless a work of fiction and her characters reveal Undset's perspective as a modern writer in the 1920s.

2.2

Within this framework, Undset introduces Kristin, the eldest daughter, a strikingly beautiful young woman, who has a very close connection to her father, the respected Lavrans. Kristin has been raised in ideal circumstances, being born into Lavran's high born family and having had gentle, loving parents to foster her every step alongside two younger sisters. As the story opens, Lavrans has promised Kristin to Simon Darre, an honorable young man of considerable wealth and equal family rank. Before Kristin is united in marriage to Simon, she is sent to a convent for a year to serve the church at some distance from her family.

During this year, she meets a handsome knight and near relation to the reigning King, Erland, who saves her from dangerous woodland robbers, and returns her safely to the convent. What ensues thereafter is a romance with whirlwind proportions, and a fury of upset for Simon, Kristin's betrothed, with eventual shame upon her father's house. Kristin's passion for Erland takes her to unknown heights, leaving her without her maidenhood, the necessary cloak of a respectable unmarried woman. Her trysts with Erland expose her naive trust in a man who has already been banned by the King for adultery with another man's wife, resulting in the conception of two children.

The Wreath becomes a metaphor for the eventual, begrudging marital consent Lavrans grants Kristin and Erland as they wed amidst this unseemly background. An elaborate marriage feast is prepared by Kristin's family, without Lavran's knowledge of Kristin's secret, the young child she carries, adding further public scandal to this union.

2.3

Undset's portrayal of the suffering this marriage causes Kristin's parents is painfully honest, revealing her contribution as a writer in the Realist tradition, while allowing the reader to delve into the complexity of how unions in the Middle Ages are formed. The night of Kristin's wedding, in a heart wrenching scene, Ragnfrid reveals to Lavrans that she was "taken" by force by a man before she married Lavrans, and that she was unsure of the paternity of the son she eventually bore. Because of her own difficult journey, Ragnfrid has a keen awareness of Kristin's fragile position. Through the character of Ragnfrid, Undset makes the reader aware of society's demand that women remain chaste before marriage, even as women were assaulted privately, gravely threatening their very safety. Through Ragnfrid's experience of having to hide this event for nearly two decades from her own husband, the reader experiences the sobering expectations that women bore alone.

Within this context, Undset also offers vignettes of the devastating and lasting consequences of being a child of an unmarried woman, especially if the child's parents did not possess the birthright of nobility. Undset reveals the tenuous future these offspring would face through many of her secondary and tertiary characters who are lucky if they were able to secure a marriage to someone of lower rank of the merchant class. Through these portrayals, Undset instills the historical importance of family lineage and property rights of the reigning nobility in stark contrast to that of the peasant class. Undset's fiction is deeply immersed in the historical setting, allowing her to create characters with depth and feeling, fostering a sense of empathy for "lesser" characters whose economic misfortune lasted for generations. This play of fate further instills the reader with a sense of the heavy consequences a child would face given the limits of birthright. With Undset, the reader always feels the heaviness of personal will and the lasting effects of human choice, often a parallel for human folly or sin, even as the injustice of the feudal system is revealed through her story.

2.4

Undset must also be credited for her portrayal of Kristin as a young woman with unstoppable will, however naïve and ill begotten. She explores Kristin's and Erland's scandalous meetings with depth and feeling, revealing the complexity of their tenuous situation as an unmarried couple driven by romantic desire, fraught with Undset's plot twists and turns. This is especially powerful as Undset explores the question of a woman's passion and desire both inside and outside of marriage.

Section 3.0

The Wife

At the opening of the second part of Undset's trilogy, *The Wife*, Kristin arrives with her new husband Erland to Husaby, Erland's familial estate, in a northern village near the ocean, far from Kristin's ancestral home in southern Norway. She finds the estate in complete disarray with the grain houses empty and lice in all the bedding and puts her compass upon making the estate productive as a self-sustaining farm. With these challenging circumstances, Kristin takes upon a new role as wife and head of household. Undset's descriptions of Kristin with her lavish silver-smithed belt full of keys become a symbol of her authority as a strong wife. In Scandinavian folk clothing from the middle Ages, key belts were a symbol of great importance and leadership.

3.1

At the very same time, and in the duality typical of Undset's characters, Kristin attempts to conceal her ill-timed pregnancy from both her servants and her own husband. In this journey of shame and self-deprecation, she desperately tries to ground herself in the Christian faith of her upbringing and seek God's forgiveness. In this section, Undset reveals Kristin's belief that her child will be bewitched and scourged because it has rooted too early.

In this guilt-ridden mindset of self-doubt, she delivers her son, Nikolaus, in an agonizing near-death experience, assisted by midwives. Undset is brilliant in her treatment of the transformative experience of birth and the metaphorical power of new life; Kristin is blessed with a healthy son. It is these moments of contradiction from which Undset reveals her empathy for her characters; through the delicacy of the descriptions she offers them a kind of forgiveness. Still, the newborn has a large birthmark on his chest which vaguely resembles a hand, which Kristin believes stems from conceiving the child before she was wed and then witnessing her own parish church burn down, an old pagan belief purported to cause unborn children harm. It is this duality of forgiveness and scourge which makes Undset's characters so believable, honest, and relevant given the burdens women traditionally faced regarding sexuality, guilt, and shame well into the twentieth century.

3.2

After the birth of her son, Kristin sets upon a pilgrimage to atone for her sins, through deeply wooded terrain with only her son upon her back alongside a throng of peasants, also seeking forgiveness. From this backdrop, she eventually bears Erland eight children, continually struggling with the polarity of human love and desire on one side and the Christian duty and service of her birthright on another. Kristin takes on the role of head of household, making Erland's estate sing with productivity and self-reliance; as a mother she loves and devoted. With each new child, she is increasingly aware of the need to provide a solid inheritance to her sons to ensure their financial futures.

3.3

Kristin eventually becomes the manager of Erland's vast estate and the lands which accompany it; Erland, not surprisingly, proves to be a poor financial manager, squandering his ancestral land to purchase sea vessels for the crown in northern Norway, which he serves as a brave knight. He thrives as a commander of men at sea and views Husaby and Kristin as his symbolic touchstone while the hard work of farming and managing the property are left to Kristin and her young sons. In *The Wife*, Kristin experiences the reality of raising young energetic boys with the realization that they will not have enough ancestral land to provide for their futures. In this setting, Undset reveals the vulnerability a woman faces in a marriage without birth control; with each additional child, the limited land is further divided.

3.4

Eventually in *The Wife*, Erland's actions make this situation even more dire because he is caught plotting to overthrow his own kinsman, Norway's king. He is captured, tortured, and stripped of his estate and his knighthood. In a plot twist, his life is spared ironically by his new brother in law, Simon Darre, Kristin's former betrothed, in an act of love and loyalty. After Kristin and Erland's Husaby estate is seized by the crown, they are forced to live on Kristin's ancestral home of Jorundgaard in close proximity to Simon in southern Norway.

Section 4.0

The Cross

This turn of events reveals the long love that Simon has borne for Kristin, despite his marriage to her sister. Simon has become a wealthy nobleman, farmer, and father and has all the hallmarks of success.

In *The Cross*, Undset again metaphorically presents the burden from which love and free choice stem. Simon struggles to embrace his own wife, Ramborg, Kristin's younger sister, who has loved him deeply from the age of childhood. Eventually this tension drives a permanent rift between these two families; Simon cannot overcome his love for Kristin and Ramborg can no longer ignore Simon's devotion to her sister. Through Simon's character, Undset presents the reader with the inevitable question, "What if Kristin had denied her longing for Erland and chosen Simon, the man her father knew would be an emotionally stable and financially prudent choice?" Undset indirectly poses the question of passion and desire within a life-long relationship by revealing the story behind Kristin's parents' courtship, which was based on the concept of pragmatism in sharing equal familial rank and wealth. This question of romantic love was posed by

Romantic writers time and again and would be fitting given that Undset published her trilogy in the early 1920s.

4.1

Despite this familial rift, Kristin and Erland seem one and the same; stubborn in their devotion for one another, and yet, never peaceful. Their love is emotional, heated, stubborn, defiant, and also steadfast. They seem to weather tremendous challenges and remain largely constant. Undset's portrayal of Kristin's unending beauty and Erland's knightly gait continue throughout the trilogy, but are particularly noted in "*The Cross*," when Kristin goes to visit Erland after she has driven him from their home during a pivotal fight over Erland's inability to provide financial security for their sons. In Undset's trilogy, their sons are largely strong and vibrant, becoming the manifestation of their passion and love for one another. Even as Kristin and Erland struggle to reconcile their life's choices, they continue to love one another, living in separate residences while their eighth infant eventually dies from lack of strength, a deciding moment of tragedy and action which breaks their standoff, uniting them as Erland is fatally wounded before receiving the priests' cleansing blessing. This circumstance is only fitting given Erland's standing as an irreverent, wayward pagan in Christian times.

4.2

Undset straddles the border between the Romantic tradition of the Victorians and the coming Realist tradition as she poses the question, "What life-long consequences result from choosing a partner based on the concept of love?" These characters toil on with life's challenges; they are romantic in that they live and love shunned by genteel society. Erland is lauded by his sons for his bravery in challenging the king while becoming a pauper on his own land. Kristin, although often regretful of Erland's weaknesses and inability to provide for the family, loves him deeply until her own end. Her decision to choose Erland over Simon has proved to be one which has born great hardship and material sacrifice, and yet she has born eight largely vibrant sons. She is an impassioned, defiant, stubborn, and unlike Erland, ultimately a deeply religious woman. Undset has created in Kristin, a character who is multi-dimensional while remaining single minded and strong willed. Kristin Lavransdatter is a woman who has followed her desire to marry the man she loves; despite his obvious weaknesses, she becomes a strong wife at the helm of her household. She makes hard decisions while remaining loyal and devoted to a husband who cannot provide the stability she grew up with in her father's house. She becomes accountable for her own choices and actions, although often through the veil of Christian morals and ideas of sin, found in the teachings of the church in the Middle Ages. Undset offers the reader a portrayal of a complex female character who struggles with her own life choices, making this poignant trilogy so relevant today.

4.3

What is the role of honor and what is the place of shame in Christian Scandinavia in the middle Ages? How does the pilgrimage journey factor into this balance and how does Undset place Kristin within the complexity of these roles? Kristin's final journey is a pilgrimage among peasants and monks to become a nun at a convent near Erland's ancestral home. She shows great courage in risking her own life to bury a forlorn mother and prostitute, who has succumbed to the Black Plague, abandoned by all others who are afraid of catching the contagious disease.

At the end of her life, Kristin is portrayed as a kind woman who has empathy for others, risking her own life to give another human being a proper burial. She remains true to "*The Cross*," bearing the body of this deceased woman to a dignified resting place. Kristin rises above the social morays of the time which were to condemn "sinful" women and mothers, and through her compassionate act, demonstrates honor and truth.

4.4

Undset's epic trilogy, *Kristin Lavransdatter*, is romantic in that it is driven by human passion at odds with societal values, while revealing the Realist tradition of exposing human weakness and struggle. Kristin (and Erland) remain brave, despite their own naiveté and disregard for society's morays. They are willing to pay for their own debts despite their childish longings. They eventually show great sacrifice for others becoming servants, defending familial honor while maintaining their own desires and faults. They are each deeply flawed and often careless, but they also care immensely for their children and families. Undset thoroughly explores how one generation's choices can have a lasting material impact on the next generation, but also how resiliency and rebelliousness can be assets, turned for advantage, as in the case of Gaute, their son, and his wealthy mistress who are similarly defiant and clever in order to secure their futures. This meta-narrative becomes one of near equally matched assets, wealth and family lineage.

4.5

In her trilogy, Undset also explores the role of sacrifice and loyalty, both in a romantic and nationalistic sense. Erland's connection to the Norwegian crown and its people is explored through the risks and sacrifices as a knight and seafarer. Kristin's sacrifices for her sons as a mother are deeply moving. She possess the grit to walk the pilgrimage road twice during her lifetime and challenge her husband about how his actions impact the future lives of their sons.

4.6

Unlike many Scandinavian authors, Undset cannot be criticized for being too brief. Her writing is filled with romantic description and historic detail. She approaches the characters of Erland and Kristin with vigor and commitment, bringing them into the light in a way that is unforgettable and indelible. It is this quality, which most likely won her the Nobel prize for literature and for which the reader will most remember in an age where marriage (and inheritance) are no longer the sole deciding factors in a person's ability to succeed. One could easily argue that these institutions still play a significant role in modern life and for which Sigrid Undset had the foresight to bring to light as early as the 1920s; we are still deeply engaged in her character portrayals nearly one hundred years later.

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