THE EFFECT OF THE CONVERSION IN NJÁLS SAGA

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This paper will take the Devil's side in reaction to Christian forces which have been at work in criticism of Njáls saga. Those forces argue, to put it simply, that the conversion episode in chapters 100-105 marks a turning point in the moral structure of the saga, whereby the old heroic ethic of the blood-feud is replaced by a new Christian ethic of mildness, peace, and reconciliation. I would like to review this idea in its various forms, and test it.

The first statement of the idea may come from as far back as 1855, when Carsten Hauch spoke of the saga as illustrating "how the spirit of revenge is defeated by the spirit of Christianity" (1855:465, as quoted in Lönnroth 1976:6). A generation later the Swedish poet A.U. Bååth, in his book on composition in the sagas, referred to Hauch approvingly:

> The [conversion] episode shows itself, as Hauch asserted in detail, pp. 435-8, to have a vital relationship with the saga as a whole insofar as it introduces into it the element on which alone its ending -- the reconciliation in ch. 159 -- can be based. It "belongs to the innermost essence of the story". (1855:145-6; mentioned in Lönnroth 1976:10)

As far as I am aware, Icelandic scholars -- Guðbrandur Vigfússon (1878), Finnur Jónsson (1904,1923), Björn M. Olsen (1992?), Sigurður Nordal (1953) -- have as a whole refrained from claiming that the conversion marks a moral turning-point in the saga. Finnur Jónsson goes as far as to say that the episode "har så lidt som muligt med sagaen at göre" (1904:101). Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, however, claimed that Njáll was performing an act of penance when he had his sons go with him into the farmhouse prior to the burning:"þetta er greinileg yfirbót. Guð er miskunnsamur, og mun hann oss eigi láta brenna bæði þessa heims og annars. Þessi písl, sem þeir gengust sjálfir undir í þessu lífi, mundi afmá brot þeirra og leysa þá undan refsingu annars heims" (1943:146). Einar Ólafur also spoke exuberantly of the feeling of freedom and hope and cleansing that comes into the saga at the end, replacing the domination of evil forces and the sense of fate in the first two-thirds of the saga (1954:cxlix), and he spoke of the conversion chapters as having their fit place (cxxv), but he fell short of seeing a new, Christian, spirit at work generally in the last part of the saga.

The next clear statement of the thesis I am dealing with occurs in Ian Maxwell's article on "Pattern in Njáls saga." Maxwell speaks of Höskuld's death as a Christian sacrifice and of Njáll as showing a saintly firmness at his death which makes it, too, a sacrifice (1957-59:40). Maxwell says further that the Conversion "mark(s) a most important division in the saga"; the change brought about by the coming of Christianity "affects the action itself as well as men's attitudes to it" (44). The conflict of good versus evil is put in secular terms in the first part of the saga, but in Christian terms in the latter part -- Gunnarr sings in his barrow, but Höskuldr falls forgiving his enemies, and "this sacrifice of innocence is a sin to be expiated in fire" (44).

> Old things have not been swept away, but a new leaven has come in; good and evil touch deeper chords in men's minds and the human condition is seen under a new aspect. In this sense one may fairly see chapters 100-105 as the centre of the saga, and their emergence from its main course as an effective part of the design. (44)

In the introduction to the Penguin translation, first published in 1960, Magnus Magnusson talks about the saga as a homily in which an active will towards good "is the only answer to the violence aroused by evil."

> Christianity comes to Iceland half-way through the action; and it is the Christian virtues of self-sacrifice and humility that eventually stem the tide of evil, not the pagan virtues of heroism and pride. Njal, with his wierd pagan prescience and his complex intelligence, is powerless against the doom he foresees for his friend Gunnar and himself, and only broadens the scope of catastrophe by his efforts to avert it; it is only when he resigns himself to the new God, when he abandons his devious scheming and sacrifices himself and his violent sons in the fire at Bergthorsknoll, that the possibility of resolution emerges. (1960:27)

Denton Fox's article of 1963 offers what might be thought of as a temperate view of the change that comes about in the saga after the introduction of Christianity: "If the author of the saga sees a clash between Christianity and revenge, and gives the final preference to Christianity, he also recognizes that revenge could be a very pressing duty and, in a land of uncertain legal sanctions, to some extent a commendable one." (1963:310)

The notion of a shift in ethical perspective found strong expression again in two books published by American university presses in the 1970's which offered "clerical" readings of the saga as -- in Magnusson's term -- a Christian homily. Richard Allen speaks of the conversion as an event "properly emphasized . . . because it marks a decided extension of the saga's range of values" (Allen 1971:117). The old values "are not necessarily superseded or contradicted," but they "are set within a frame of new values" (117).

> When Njáll's body is recovered from the ashes it is uncorrupted and untouched; his skin shines with a holy brightness. This detail is surely not -- even in the neutral sense -- an "excrescence" on the matter of the story; it is a deliberate contrasting of the different meanings, the changed possibilities, surrounding death from Gunnarr's day to Njáll's. (119)

Later Allen explains this wider theme:

> But once the force of Christianity is placed behind the men of good well and wisdom (Njáll is one of the first converts), the conflicts in the saga intensify. From here on the conflict is no longer one between desirable and undesirable tendencies in a society of men. It becomes a widening one in which events in Iceland and elsewhere become specifically linked with a conflict of good with evil. This conflict is made visible in the wonders. In the part of Njáls saga following the conversion they become spectacular unveilings of the apocalyptic and demonic realms. (154)

(The wonders that Allen refers to are the witch ride (gandreið) in chapter 124, the description of Njál's body in ch. 132, Flosi's dream in ch. 133, the omens at the Battle of Clontarf in ch. 156, and the Darraðarljóð in ch. 157.)

Lars Lönnroth sees evidence of the clerical mind of the author in an Augustinian pattern of history in the saga, i.e. the world is the arena for a constant struggle between good and evil, in which, nonetheless, God's shaping hand is in control. Though "God is present in the action of Njála long before the conversion", . . . "the references to his regiment increase" after the conversion.

> When Valgarðr the Grey destroys crosses and other sacred symbols, he immediately becomes sick and dies (chapter 107). When Höskuldr is murdered by the sons of Njáll (chapter 111), he asks God to help him and forgive them for their sin. But his widow, Hildigunnr, also invokes God's name when she tries to make Flosi avenge the murder (chapter 116). The "bad luck" (ógæfa) which then befalls the sons of Njáll (chapters 117-123) and prevents them from reaching an honorable settlement must be interpreted as God's punishment. Njáll before the Burning assures his family that "God is full of mercy and will not let us burn both in this world and the next" (chapter

> 129). This prediction is affirmed in chapter 132, where the dead bodies are found to be miraculously preserved, an indication that the souls have been saved (cf. above, p. 122). The Burning must then be interpreted as an atonement for the sin of killing Höskuldr. In accordance with this idea of atonement, Flosi and Kári cannot reach a final reconciliation until they make a pilgrimage to Rome and are absolved from sin by the Pope (chapters 158-159). (Lönnroth 1976:129)

As for the characters in the saga, Lönnroth argues that the "first half is dominated by noble heathens (Gunnarr, Kolskeggr, and Njáll), who do not worship pagan idols but believe in fate and are dimly aware of a divine presence" (141). "In the second half of Njála all the characters have become Christians, and their conversion has brought a sense of increased responsibility to the scene of action". Thus Flosi is aware, before the burning, that the deed they are about to commit "will be a matter of grave responsibility before God since we are Christians ourselves" (emphasis in Lönnroth)."The implication is that a pagan could have been excused for such a deed, but a Christian will have to atone for it before he can be saved" (142)

According to Lönnroth, the author of Njála admired the old legal system as well as the noble men who exemplified it, yet he also knew, "more than any earlier sagawriter, that the system led to disasters, which could be mitigated only by Christian charity and reconciliation, prompted by God. This is what happens in the second half of the saga and especially in the last chapter" (148). Lönnroth even goes so far (following a suggestion by Allen 1971:204) as to suggest an analogy between the two parts of the saga -- the so-called "Gunnars saga" and "Njáls saga" -- and the Old and New Testaments (148).

Paul Schach sees a transformation from the concept of fate to the Christian concept as a result of the conversion chapters:

> In the first part of the saga (chaps. 21-81), which takes place during pagan times, there is much talk about fate and honor. Early in the second part (chaps. 82-132), the author inserted a digession in the form of a detailed description of the conversion (chaps. 100-105), after which the pagan concept of fate, at least in Njál's mind, is transformed into the Christian belief in providence. (Schach 1984:120)

Joseph Harris also sees the structural symmetry of the saga -- "the two analogous feud structures separated . . . by the great digression on the Icelandic conversion" -- as throwing "into contrast a pre-Christian 'heroic' culture and the earliest phase of a Christian ethic. . . . Gunnar's life, set in pre-Christian times, is worked out in terms of a heroic ethic. . . . Njáll's fall takes place in Christian times with the attendant deeper meaning of action expressed in Flosi's moving words about Christian responsibility just before the burning and in Njáll's pregnant words about a future life" (Harris 1986:211). Harris provides a further twist to these ideas when he suggests that the two halves of the saga consistute a historical dialectic based on the familiar topos of fortitudo et sapientia:

> The extensive description of the conversion, really the center and hinge of the saga, ends the glorious pagan past in which Gunnarr, exemplum fortitudinis, embraced his fate, and introduces the era of Christian sapientia, exemplified in the parallel tragedy of Njáll the Wise. The saga's second great digression, the Battle of Clontarf in 1014, marks with drama and supernatural portents the end of the heroic period in the death-throes of paganism. (212)

It should be clear by now that this line of thinking -- exemplified also in Carol Clover (1987:145): "No other Icelandic family saga more consistently or patently poses Christian morality as an antidote to evil disorder" -- has acquired, at least on American shores, a kind of orthodoxy, and thus deserves scrutiny.

No one will deny that the author of Njála, looking back from the thirteenth century, had a strong historical sense and that as he traced the unfolding events in his long story he gave special emphasis to the conversion of his country to Christianity in the year 1000. It is also evident that he added a new element to his saga when relating events after the conversion. He now begins to take material directly from Christian writings: the Dialogues of Gregory the Great, accounts of the conversion of Iceland and the Battle of Clontarf, hagiographies, and perhaps accounts of the deaths of Judas and Arius (Hill:1981). Beginning with the chapters on the conversion (100-105) we see for the first time references to the Christian God, miracles (the preservation of bodies in the burning), omens, and visions (Flosi's dream). In the Battle of Clontarf one man, Hrafn inn rauði, has a vision of the depths of hell and of devils who try to drag him down there -- fortunately he vows a third pilgrimage to Rome and they turn him loose (157:452).

The question is not whether there is a new Christian emphasis in the saga, but how it works, and at least three possible answers to this question are reflected in the studies that have just been reviewed:

1. One answer might be called ethical, in that it sees a new ethic is at work in the saga after the conversion, a Christian ethic that we can see in the actions of the characters and the movement of the plot; in fact it is this new ethic that brings the saga to its peaceful conclusion. Two instances in particular have been cited in this connection: (a) Síðu-Hall's renunciation of compensation for his son and (b) the reconciliation between Flosi and Kári.
2. The question has also been answered in specifially theological terms: according to this view, the saga takes on the dimensions of a Christian drama of sin, punishment, and atonement, whose main stages are:
   (a) the slaying of Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði (sin);
   (b) the failure to reach a settlement with Flosi and the subsequent burning (God's punishment);
   (c) the death of Njáll (expiation);
   (d) Flosi's trip to Rome, where he receives absolution, and his reconciliation with Kári (atonement)
3. It is also possible to see the new Christian element as working in a more general way, with no effect on the plot but as providing, in a suggestive way, a wider setting for human activity than the saga had provided before -- a vision of a better world than one governed by the feud ethic. In this view, to which I subscribe, the author added the Christian elements out of a fine sense of history and a deep sense of the importance of the conversion in the history of his country. He wished to set his saga squarely into its historical context, but he did not want to write Christian allegory or show in any systematic way that the new values were superior to the old (though there was not the least doubt in his mind that they were).

The rest of this paper will be a consideration of passages or incidents that have figured prominently in discussions of these matters.

Immediately after the conversion chapters (100-105) we see, in an almost too naive form, what in effect is Iceland's first miracle. Ámundi the Blind, son of Höskuldr Njálsson, prays to God to judge his claim against his father's slayer, Lýtingr, and he is given sight for long enough to allow him to sink his axe into Lýting's head. Lars Lönnroth reads this scene as "an exemplum emphasizing the need to adjust existing law to God's will" (1976:145). Ámundi's use of the phrase rétt fyrir guði (106:273) "refers to the Natural Law implanted by God in the human heart", a law which gives Ámundi the right to compensation even though the laws of the Commonwealth denied him that right (as an illegitimate son). This is probably too much of a theological burden to place on the phrase rétt fyrir guði, though it is remarkable as the first mention of the Christian God after the conversion. The killing of Lýtingr by Ámundi is precisely the same as the one that gave rise to it and which came immediately before the conversion chapters, Lýting's killing of Ámundi's father: in both

cases a relative who has been left out of a settlement asserts his rights to blood-vengeance, and when the opportunity comes, he acts. The only new thing is that there is a new God on the scene, but this new God lends his support to the old law. The episode asserts, in fact, that ethically and legally, nothing has changed.

The slaying of Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði in chapter 111 has also been read theologically. It would of course be impossible to deny that the slaying of this admirable man, while he is sowing corn -- he puts up no defense and even asks God's forgiveness for his slayers -- strikes us, as the saga says it struck people throughout the land (112:283), as a terrible crime. And Lars Lönnroth is no doubt right (1976:114) that Njál's speech at the Althing ("þótti mér sløkkt it sœtasta ljós augna minna", 122:309) has Biblical overtones. But again it is a matter of how the religious language functions, and we should be cautious of calling the death of Höskuldr a martyrdom (Lönnroth 1976:96), a "medieval passio" (ibid.:114), or a sin which will need to be expiated later at the burning (ibid.:116,129).

> The second part, "Njáll's saga," begins with the introduction of this new order, which is severely challenged when a Messiah figure, Höskuldr Þráinsson, is martyred. (Lönnroth 1976:148)

I would prefer to read the "distinctly Christian elevation" (Maxwell 1957-59:40) in the description of Höskuld's death as part of the new rhetoric, not a new theology. Höskuldr is a perfect example of the noble, patient, forbearing saga hero -- a type that includes both pagans and Christians -- and in fact Höskuldr showed himself to be such a person well before the conversion, when as a young man he was asked by Njáll if he knew the cause of his father's death:

> "Veit ek, at Skarpheðinn vá hann, ok þurfu vit ekki á þat at minnask, er sætzk hefir á verit ok fullar bœtr hafa fyrir komit."
> "Betr er svarat," segir Njáll, "en ek spurða, ok munt þú verða góðr maðr." (94:236-7)

This is the same man who later, when he has become a Christian, says to Mörðr:

> "En þó at því sé at skipta ok segir þú satt, at annat hvárt sé, at þeir drepi mik eða ek þá, þá vil ek hálfu heldr þola dauða af þeim en ek gera þeim nökkut mein." (109:278)

Höskuld's forbearance is a matter of his character, not of his conversion.

It should not be assumed that every killing committed in a Christian context was regarded as a sin. Dorothy Whitelock, in her study of Beowulf, has shown how medieval Christianity tolerated and accepted killings necessitated by the duty of vengeance. Two of her examples might be mentioned:

> In 801 no less prominent a churchman than Alcuin himself wrote to Charles the Great in recommendation of a Northumbrian nobleman called Torhtmund that he had 'boldly avenged the blood of his lord'. Towards the end of the tenth century, the Cambridge Thanes' Guild, an association of a semi-religious, semi-social character, had its statutes entered on what was most probably a fly-leaf of a gospel-book once belonging to the monastery of Ely. These statutes pronounce: 'If any guild-brother slays a man, and does so as an avenger by necessity, and to remedy the insult to him . . . each guild-brother is to supply half a mark to his aid. . . . If, however, the guild-brother slay anyone foolishly and wantonly, he is to be himself responsible for what he has done.' (Whitelock 1951:13-14)

Far from regarding the slaying of Höskuldr as a sin, William Miller (1983) has set it in its proper context by showing that it was the inevitable next step in a feud with the

Sigfússons that goes back to the time when Þráinn (Höskuld's father) agreed to be present at the slaying of Þórðr leysingjason, the foster-father of the Njálssons (ch. 42). Miller's detailed tracing of this feud is complex but persuasive; in particular -- and at the end of the long chain of events leading up to the slaying of Höskuldr -- Miller shows that Höskuld's role as peacemaker on behalf of Lýtingr gave him some responsibility for Lýting's slaying of Höskuldr Njálsson (ibid.; see also Miller 1989:308-9). Thus Höskuld's death, in spite of Christian overtones, takes its meaning in the saga from a pattern of feud and local politics, not from a pattern of sin and expiation.

The next event that has been cited as part of the new structure is the death of Njáll and his family, which has been read as a willing sacrifice which expiates the sin of slaying Höskuldr.

> Njáll before the Burning assures his family that "God is full of mercy and will not let us burn both in this world and the next" (chapter 129). This prediction is affirmed in chapter 132, where the dead bodies are found to be miraculously preserved, an indication that the souls have been saved. The Burning must then be interpreted as an atonement for the sin of killing Höskuldr. (Lönnroth 1976:129)

First, of course, it has not been established that the killing of Höskuldr is to be read as a sin. Furthermore, although Lönnroth, as well as Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, quote Njál's words,

> "Trúið þér ok því, at guð er miskunnsamr, ok mun hann oss eigi bæði láta brenna þessa heims ok annars" (129:329),

we should also remember Njál's other famous pronouncement in this scene:

> "Eigi vil ek út ganga, því at ek em maðr gamall ok lítt til búinn at hefna sona minna, en ek vil eigi lifa við skömm." (129:330)

This is not the language of a man about to undergo voluntary expiation. Finally, the miraculous preservation of the bodies of Njáll and Bergþora and Þórðr Kárason, as well as the crosses which Skarpheðinn burnt into his own flesh (ch. 132), are wonderful Christian touches which may well indicate that their souls have gone to heaven -- but they do not indicate that a particular sin has been atoned for. The burning was not an expiatory act, with Flosi serving "as God's tool in an act of divine retribution" (Lönnroth 1976:116); the burning was part of the feud.

Another scene that is discussed in this context is Hallr á Síðu's renunciation of compensation for his son Ljótr, who was killed in the fight at the Althing in chapter 145. Ian Maxwell says that Hall's offer "to lay down his son unatoned for the sake of peace . . . would, I think, have been impossible under the old dispensation (1957-59:42), and Lars Lönnroth writes that "the audience is probably to understand that Hallr acted so nobly because he was guided by his <u>fylgju engill</u>, Saint Michael, the great guardian of legal justice in the medieval tradition" (1976:148). Though it is not unthinkable that a noble and wise pagan who saw the need to restore order to a hopelessly divided Althing might not have done the same thing, it must be admitted that here an act which looks like Christian forbearance has some influence on the plot, however limited. Hallr was given prominence in the conversion chapters as an early convert (ch. 100) and as the Law-Speaker for the Christians, who gave Þorgeirr Ljósvetningagoði three marks of silver to decide what the new law should be (ch. 105). His speech at the Althing in ch. 145 turns the tide, as Einar Ólafur Sveinsson says (1954:cxlviii), so that everybody except Kári and Þorgeirr skorageirr agrees to an arbitrated settlement.

The exception of these two men is significant, however, and in spite of the order

achieved at the Althing, Hall's gesture does not prevent the feud from continuing. And the reason that the feud continues is that another Christian (at least Kári later behaves as a perfect Christian in making a pilgrimage to Rome) not only insists on avenging the burning but does just the opposite from Hallr: he refuses to let his son lie unavenged:

> "Eigi vil ek þat," segir Kári, "at sættask. En þó kalla ek nú, at vit hafim hefnt brennunnar, en sonar míns kalla ek vera óhefnt, ok ætla ek mér þat einum, slíkt sem ek fæ at gört." (147:422)

As Kári later explains to Björn í Mörk, he intends to kill a total of fifteen men (152:436) -- and it is Kári, not Hallr á Síðu, who is the hero and the determining force in the last part of the story.

The final passage cited by the Christian readers is of course the reconciliation of Kári and Flosi at the end of the saga, and Flosi's general forbearance. Allen says:

> It is fitting that this work . . . is brought to a conclusion by one man's decision not to act. Flosi, who against his will gave grim assent to lead the Burners, imposes peace at the end, not through action but through inaction in the face of the strongest provocation a man could endure -- the repeated killing off of his followers. (1971:91-2)

Lönnroth (1976:129) says that the reconciliation between Kári and Flosi is only possible after their pilgrimages to Rome and their absolution from sin by the pope. What really happens at the end of the saga -- in spite of the Christian machinery -- is not Christian peace but merely the burning out of a long and terrible feud. Kári ceases his slayings not because of any sudden mood of repentance but because he has achieved the vengeance he had set for himself, and Flosi, who has always understood and tolerated Kári's need for vengeance, has simply been waiting patiently for this moment to arrive. "Flosi mælti: 'Fám mönnum er Kári líkr, ok þann veg vilda ek helzt skapfarinn vera sem hann er'" (147:422); "Flosi mælti: 'Ekki gerði Kári þetta fyrir sakleysi; er hann í engum sættum við oss; gerði hann þat at, sem hann átti'" (155:444).

The ethic that moves the plot after the Conversion is clearly articulated in a paired set of chapters (115, 116) which delineate the possibilities open to Flosi after the killing of Höskuldr. In chapter 115 Runólfr Úlfsson aurgoða gives Flosi one kind of advice:

> "Þess vil ek nú biðja þik . . . at þú gefir ró reiði at takir þat upp, at minnst vandræði hljótisk af, því at Njáll mun góð boð bjóða ok aðrir inir beztu menn" (115:289).

Flosi is favorably disposed toward this counsel of peace -- from a man who has not been associated with the Christian cause and who speaks in practical, not Christian terms -- but in the next chapter he is moved in the opposite direction, by the whetting of his niece Hildigunnr, the wife of the saintly Höskuldr. This scene, in which she places the bloody cloak of the slain Höskuldr on Flosi's shoulders while she invokes the Christian god, and causes him to turn red and then pale and then black in agitation at what lies before him, is the most decisive scene in the latter part of the saga. Far more than the conversion, it determines the course that events will take until the end of the saga, and the motivation is surely not Christian.

It is indeed a sad irony that the last part of the saga, which takes place in the Christian era following the conversion, is bloodier, grimmer, and more sober than the earlier part. There are no feasts, no courtships, no weddings, no noble exploits abroad. The reader misses the beauty of, for example, the portrayal of Gunnarr, who appears in retrospect to have lived in a simpler, lighter world. Kári -- who in many ways resembles Gunnarr (his skill at leaping, at catching spears in mid-air) and in a sense replaces him as the central manly hero -- lives under the burden of a heavier and grimmer responsibility than Gunnarr

ever faced. Christianity, at least in Njáls saga, has not produced a kinder, gentler Iceland.

The many Christian elements in Njáls saga from chapter 100 on have at most a historical relevance to the saga, setting the events firmly in its time and suggesting a higher ethic. In many cases, indeed, it is clear that the Christian language is mere decoration, introduced in such a way as to call attention to the irrelevance of Christian concepts. Cases in point occur when Hildigunnr whets Flosi and charges him "fyrir alla krapta Krists þíns ok fyrir manndóm ok karlmennsku þína" (116:291) or when Flosi says before the burning: "er þat þó stór ábyrgð fyrir guði, er vér erum kristnir sjálfir. En þó munu vér þat bragðs taka" (128:328) -- in both cases the new faith makes absolutely no difference in the face of the old requirements of feud.

If my argument that the Christian matter in the last part of the saga is historically useful but really incidental to the actual feud which is at the heart of the saga, we may compare it to another famous feud story where Christian values were ineffectual:

> Next Sunday we all went to church, about three mile, everybody a-horseback. The men took their guns along, so did Buck, and kept them between their knees or stood them handy against the wall. The Shepherdsons done the same. It was pretty ornery preaching -- all about brotherly love, and such-like tiresomeness; but everybody said it was a good sermon, and they all talked it over going home, and had such a powerful lot to say about faith, and good works, and free grace, and preforeordestination, and I don't know what all, that it did seem to me to be one of the roughest Sundays I had run across. (Twain 1985:147)

The Sunday peace is of course broken when the feud between the Shepherdsons and the Grangerfords breaks out again, resulting in the death of Huck's friend Buck, his father, two of his brothers, and a number of the Shepherdsons. Huck is witness to the slaying of Buck and another young boy, and his description brings home to us the cruelty of such violence:

> All of a sudden, bang! bang! bang! goes three or four guns -- the men had slipped around through the woods and come in from behind without their horses! The boys jumped for the river -- both of them hurt -- and as they swum down the current the men run along the bank shooting at them and singing out, "Kill them, kill them!" It made me so sick I most fell out of the tree. I ain't agoing to tell all that happened -- it would make me sick again if I was to do that. I wished I hadn't ever come ashore that night, to see such things. I ain't ever going to get shut of them -- lots of times I dream about them. (ibid.:153)

Though Huckleberry Finn is marked by a comic view of the discrepancy between ideal and practice which is absent from Njáls saga, the grim irony in both works is the same: that feuds do not readily allow themselves to be governed by the Christian ideals of brotherly love.

Note: All references to Njáls saga are by chapter and page number to the Íslenzk fornrit edition, thus "(152:436)" refers to chapter 152, page 436.

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