

What happened to Siegfried?

According to the old myths, the legendary hero Siegfried was carried in his mother's womb for seven years before birth, an exhausting detail that Wagner actually used in one of his early drafts but, mercifully for Sieglinde, dropped again soon afterwards. In those circumstances, it would have been debateable who was the more heroic, the son or the mother! The mythology that provides much of the *Ring's* narrative is peppered with such details. They make fascinating reading but they are not at the heart of what Wagner had in mind when he decided to write an opera based on the old Nibelung poems and the legends of Siegfried.

Then again, the character of Siegfried offers a wealth of inventive opportunities for a stage director. Orphaned at birth, he is raised in isolation by a devious guardian who intends to use him to gain an all-powerful ring, and then kill him. The boy identifies more with the forest animals, fish and birds than with his guardian Mime, who has kept him in the dark about his origins. When Siegfried does extract a few details about his parents, he becomes obsessed with the idea of his absent mother, imagining that she is speaking to him through bird song.

Learning of Mime's murderous intentions from the dwarf's own lips, Siegfried's reaction is positively oedipal. He kills his surrogate father and marries a woman whom he thinks at first *is* his mother. One might imagine that Sigmund Freud and his circle would have been curious about this young man, but from papers published in 1911 it seems that they were more interested in Erik in *Der fliegende Holländer*, largely because of the latter's dream about Senta putting to sea with the Dutchman. 'Dreams are the disguised fulfilment of a repressed wish', said Freud, so perhaps the frustrated Erik really wanted Senta to suffer for her unhealthy obsession with the pale stranger. She joins the Dutchman in a watery grave but then, to the amazement of the assembled throng, they are seen clasped in each other's arms rising above the waves and soaring heavenward. An almost identical scene features in Wagner's 1848 text for *Siegfried's Death*, the prototype of *Twilight of the Gods* and, in its expanded form, the entire *Ring*.

The stage directions specify that after Brünnhilde has ridden Grane into Siegfried's funeral pyre: 'The flames meet above the bodies, entirely concealing them from view. Suddenly a blinding light strikes forth from the embers; on the fringe of a leaden cloud, as of the smoke from the

dying fire, the light ascends. In it appears Brünnhilde on horseback, helmeted and in the dazzling armour of a Valkyrie, leading Siegfried by the hand through the sky. At the same time, and while the cloud is rising, the waters of the Rhine flow over to the hall: the three water-maidens, lit by brilliant moonlight, swim away with the ring and the Tarnhelm.’

The *Ring*, as Wagner first conceived it, was an allegory of social and political developments in the nineteenth century. An authoritarian regime (represented in the narrative by Wotan and the other gods) was succumbing to the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism represented by Alberich who renounces love in the pursuit of wealth and power. But, Wagner believed, a new and more humane society would eventually arise, inspired by noble aspirations personified by the heroic Siegfried, a man who, in a loveless world, 'never ceases to love'. 'Siegfried Mark 1' therefore, may be regarded as a personification of the reforming power of love.

Modern opinion tends to regard heroes with cynicism – a reaction perhaps to the disastrous consequences of hero-worship in the 20th century. However, even from the earliest days, commentators were sceptical about the brash boy Siegfried. In 1882, a London newspaper reviewer commented: 'The hero Siegfried's first feat of arms is to slaughter a curiously infirm and helpless dragon who had never done him any harm and was living in strict retirement when this irrepressible hobbledehoy intruded himself upon its privacy. And he promptly follows up this discreditable deed by slaughtering the funny old dwarf who brought him up from earliest infancy with invariable kindness. This, moreover, he does upon the faith of a mere bird's verbal statement, confirmed in a most unsatisfactory manner by some incoherent babble uttered by his victim when obviously in liquor' Even Wagner's biographer Ernest Newman once joked about the Heldentenor 'who looks and behaves like an overgrown boy scout and gives the spectator the impression of a man whose mental development was arrested at the age of twelve and has been in custody ever since.....'

It is a popular prejudice not easily overcome, and one to which some directors deliberately pander. Siegfried himself gives us a clue as to his kind of heroism when he admits that, having just been taught fear, he's foolishly forgotten it again. Brünnhilde calls him a childlike hero and a foolish guardian of glorious deeds! 'I have to laugh because I love you' she says. They are truly as one because she sees him as he sees himself. The challenge for a director is to represent on stage both the hero as

others perceive him, and the naïve boy - the Parsifal-like innocent - as he sees himself.

What did Wagner mean when he referred to Siegfried as a hero? His knowledge of heroes came from two sources: the myths of ancient Greece and Rome, and the sagas and poetry of Northern Europe. Think of the myth of Bellerophon, one of the greatest classical heroes and the slayer of the chimaera, a fire-breathing monster. Bellerophon receives the mighty horse Pegasus from the goddess of wisdom, Athena. A parallel action occurs in the prologue to *Götterdämmerung* when Brünnhilde gives her horse Grane to Siegfried to help him pursue his destiny in the world. She also gives him her knowledge and wisdom learned from the gods – a clear sign that humanity is now supplanting divinity.

In both the Classical and Norse traditions, heroes had god-like attributes which set them apart from non-heroic mortals and reinforced the view that they were superhuman. They often had gods as parents or grandparents, as Siegfried did. But Wagner came to the conclusion that the German myths were in advance of the Greek because in them the heroes, whom he described as fully developed human beings, were increasingly displacing the gods. ‘Man is god perfected’ he wrote when jotting down ideas for an unfinished opera of 1849 called *Achilles*. That is why we witness Wotan giving way to Siegfried in the third act of *Siegfried*, and why the gods play no part at all in *Götterdämmerung*, being merely figments of memory and imagination.

Wagner’s description in the 1850s of Siegfried as ‘a fearless human being - one who never ceases to love’ - was not how heroes were usually presented, and it was a long, long way from the corrupted image of Siegfried as an embodiment of national and racial superiority. It reflected Wagner's attachment to the ideas of the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach who maintained that the gods were the creations of men, not the other way around. And if the gods counted for nothing then neither did the god-like attributes of heroes. In the new humanistic world envisaged by Wagner and Feuerbach, the quality that made heroes heroic was their humanity. Siegfried is a fearless human being not because he doesn't fear dragons but because he doesn't fear the gods. His behaviour towards the Wanderer in Act Three of *Siegfried* illustrates this perfectly. For this man of the future, the god Wotan simply does not exist.

Waltraute tells Brünnhilde of Wotan sitting solemnly in Valhalla awaiting the end. When she tries to persuade the former Valkyrie to save the gods by giving up the ring, what she is really doing is attempting to turn back

the clock – to restore the old order of superstition and oppression. But Brünnhilde has been awakened not just to the sun, the light and the radiant day, but to a whole new life – Siegfried’s life of freedom. This is the true significance of her awakening.

So now we can speak of ‘Siegfried Mark 2’ – Siegfried the awakener to freedom and humanity; to a life in which the gods play no part at all.

The first significant steps towards this growing sense of humanity were taken by Siegmund the Volsung, who fitted the traditional heroic mould as an offspring of the god Wotan. Fleeing from his enemies, Siegmund is reunited with his long lost twin, Sieglinde, the downtrodden wife of Hunding. Alone with her he greets the coming of spring as a metaphor for the return of love into their lives and into the story of the *Ring*. Alberich had renounced love but Siegmund and Sieglinde reassert it, and it will survive the machinations of Alberich and his son Hagen. In the second act of *Die Walküre*, Siegmund’s refusal to accept the loss of Sieglinde as the price for immortality in Valhalla inspires Brünnhilde to defy Wotan. So, it is Siegmund’s decision motivated by profound love that sets in train the events leading to the downfall of the gods and the rise of a new order. Truly, Siegfried is Siegmund’s son in more ways than one. The idea that the future belongs to Siegfried, which is to say to a fearlessly-loving human being, is a hugely attractive one, but even Wagner - the ‘impractical dreamer’ as Bakunin called him - found it unsustainable. His own maturing during the quarter of a century that separated the commencement and completion of the *Ring* led him in quite another direction. Thus we see the processes of change at work once again, not only within the characters but also within the structure of the work as a whole.

As the Nibelung dramas evolved, it became clear to Wagner that the character at the very heart of the story, around whom the big issues turned, was Wotan. And Wotan, he said, resembles us to a ‘T’. He represents the flawed world as it is; a world in the process of change. Indeed, the great moral and philosophical messages of the *Ring* are, in the end, provided by Wotan and Brünnhilde, for they are the ones who experience the effects of change to the greatest degree. Wotan is destroyed by it and Brünnhilde is transformed by it. That is why it is Brünnhilde rather than Siegfried who comes to understand the realities of life, as she reveals in the immolation scene. In one of Wagner’s most important pieces of writing – his letter to August Röckel of January 1854 - he speaks of the necessity of embracing change. ‘The remainder of the poem’ he says, ‘is concerned to show how necessary it is to acknowledge

change, the eternal newness of reality and of life, and to yield to that necessity. Wotan rises to the tragic heights of willing his own destruction. This is all that we need to learn from the history of mankind: to will what is necessary and to bring it about ourselves.' This was essentially a Schopenhauerian position rather than a Feuerbachian one, and it represented a major shift in Wagner's thinking. When Wagner first read Schopenhauer's writings in 1854, they came as a revelation to him; not because they told him something surprising but because they confirmed what he had already come to believe intuitively. At last, he said, he could understand his Wotan.

The new Siegfried is no longer the gods' redeemer but an innocent abroad; a symbol of hope in a hopeless world, caught up in machinations he doesn't comprehend. In *Götterdämmerung*, he unwittingly recreates all the mistakes that Wotan had made in *Das Rheingold* - embracing power, entangling himself in false treaties and renouncing true love. He becomes the victim of Alberich's lovelessness and the Gibichungs' poisonous ambitions. Ultimately then, he is a tragic figure, not a triumphant one. The mature, and by then pessimistic, Wagner was in no doubt that human beings were going to make the same old mistakes over and over again. There would be no political escape from this cycle, only a personal one.

The feeling of compassion that overwhelms Brünnhilde when confronted with Siegmund's love for Sieglinde marks her first step towards humanity and mortality. She is awakened to new life by Siegfried and, for them both, the old world of the gods is of no consequence and they foretell its end. 'Farewell, Walhalla's glittering world' sings Brünnhilde, 'farewell splendour of the gods'.... 'let the twilight of the gods now draw near'.... 'I live by the light of Siegfried's star.... radiant love and laughing death'.

So why do things go terribly wrong between Brünnhilde and Siegfried, and how are they put right? Hagen stands behind all their problems, and behind Hagen looms Alberich. Lovelessness is making one last effort to get the upper hand. Through Hagen's intervention, Siegfried is made to forget Brünnhilde - a terrible catastrophe in terms of the medieval values enshrined in the main sources for *Götterdämmerung*. By those standards, physical separation was natural, desirable even as Siegfried fulfilled his destiny in the world. But they must live for each other in their hearts and minds. That is why the lovers exchange keepsakes: the ring for Brünnhilde and the horse Grane for Siegfried. But to forget a loved-one was unforgivable. The forgetting in this instance is engineered by Hagen and his half-brother Gunther and half-sister Guttrune. As a result, far from continuing to love Siegfried, Brünnhilde now joins in the plot to kill him.

Hagen-induced hatred is eating into her soul just as the twisted harmonies of the ring are eating into the musical fabric of the score.

Siegfried undergoes a metamorphosis, being transformed by the Tarnhelm not only into Gunther but also into a brute. For the moment, he is no better than Fafner who had been similarly transformed by the Tarnhelm. In his anger in *Die Walküre*, Wotan had sentenced Brünnhilde to be taken by the first stranger who chanced upon her. She had recoiled from this terrifying prospect, pleading with her father to protect her with fire against all but the worthiest hero. When Siegfried-as-Gunther emerges suddenly from the flames, he reawakens memories of the fate once threatened by the ‘angry and cruel god’. Brünnhilde, who had been brimming with joy in anticipation of her returning lover, is emotionally crushed. Siegfried compounds the tragedy by tearing the ring from her finger, mimicking Wotan’s violent act of wrenching it from Alberich’s finger. The result is equally terrible, for Brünnhilde in her own way also renounces love and becomes an accessory to Siegfried’s murder.

One of Wagner’s sources, Thidrek’s Saga from the late 13th century, states categorically that on the fourth night, at Gunther’s request, Siegfried deflowered Brünnhilde by force. However, although Wagner relied on Thidrek’s Saga for material in *Siegfried*, he seems not to have done so for *Götterdämmerung*. Siegfried refrained from forcing himself on Brünnhilde when disguised as Gunther, not out of respect for her but because of his commitment to his ‘blood brother’. Had it not been for his obligation to Gunther, he might have behaved differently. Shocking though this seems, the fact is that Siegfried, deprived of his memory by the potion (itself a metaphor for Hagen’s evil influence) and transformed by the Tarnhelm, was no longer truly himself. He would not regain his true nature until the effects of the potion had been removed, just prior to his murder.

Another curious development occurs at the beginning of Act 3 of *Götterdämmerung* when Siegfried, having become separated from Gunther and the others in the hunting party, comes across the three Rhinemaidens. They tease him and demand the ring that gleams on his finger, but this time it is the Rhinemaidens who are rebuffed. His wife would scold him, he says if he gave away his goods so easily. ‘Does she beat him?’ they ask. ‘Perhaps the hero already feels her hand!’ They roar with laughter and dive under the water.

Getting tired of being teased in this way Siegfried thinks that perhaps he should give them the ring, and he holds it aloft. When they surface again,

it is to tell him solemnly to keep the ring and guard it well until he discovers what ill fortune it brings. Their warning could not be plainer. Anyone who possesses it is doomed to death. As Siegfried slew the dragon so he himself will be slain this very day unless he returns the ring to the river. This makes him bridle. He replies that as he was not deceived by their wiles, neither will he be moved by their threats. He tells them that he despises the worldly power that the ring is said to bring. He would barter it for the grace of love, but never under a threat. He counts life and limb of no more worth than the clod of earth which he then picks up and throws over his shoulder - a reference to the medieval practice of mercenaries doing this before going into battle. The Rhinemaidens decide to leave the madman, and foretell that, this day, a woman shall inherit the ring; one who will do what they ask.

It is a display of nihilism on Siegfried's part, and rather infuriating to think that he could have prevented the calamity to come by giving the wretched ring to the Rhinemaidens when they had asked for it. But then, Brünnhilde could have done the same when Waltraute had pleaded for it. On a superficial level Brünnhilde refused to give up the ring because it was the symbol of Siegfried's love for her, and she could not care less about the fate of the gods. And Siegfried would not give it up because Guttrune, to whom he was now bigamously married, would have disapproved. A dragon he could face, but an irate wife was quite another matter!

Beneath its surface, the story is all about not putting the clock back. The world has moved on and the old order is now in its twilight. The burden of superstition is being replaced by freedom of thought and the values of humanity. This does not happen without a struggle of course, manifested by the bitterness of Alberich, the ruthlessness of Hagen, and the narrow mindedness of the Gibichungs. Siegfried's guilelessness - his distinguishing quality - is also the source of his greatest vulnerability, and it costs him his life. But as he wakened Brünnhilde to freedom, so she in turn (as the Wanderer tells Erda) will accomplish a deed that will set the world free.

Siegfried's role at the centre of the drama as envisaged by Wagner in 1848 had certainly changed; he was no longer the prime instrument of a new world order founded on love. But his place in the drama remains a vital one - awakening Brünnhilde to a new life, and inspiring her wisdom through grief and love.

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