

## Kristin Lavransdatter—The Wreath

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Austin Athenaeum, March 2021

I begin this essay with several introductory remarks.

First, in this essay I have the entire *Kristin Lavransdatter* trilogy in mind. Now, lest you men begin getting restive, note that I will not spoil the plot of the remaining two books and I will not make remarks that depend on having read the entire trilogy. But this work is clearly a single work and not a trilogy of loosely connected stories, as is Sartre's *Roads to Freedom* trilogy. Those who haven't read the other two books in *Kristin Lavransdatter* should proceed immediately to do so. The one critical insight I want to offer did not occur to me until well into the third book, although it is on display throughout all three.

Next, I wish to acknowledge the utter superiority of Tiina Nunnally's translation. My heart goes out to anyone who followed my bad advice and read Charles Archer's *Romantic Drivel*.

Next, I'll just go ahead and proclaim this to be a stupendous epic of historical fiction. Far better than *Quo Vadis*; at least as good as, and probably better than *Ben Hur*. And given that Undset's output included many more novels and at least one more trilogy of historical fiction, I judge that her Nobel Prize was deserved. Her descriptions of the natural settings in her story are frequent and awe inspiring; her skill with all the tackle and trim of the medieval setting is clearly masterful. Add to these the profound lifelikeness of her characters and you have a story that makes you feel almost as if you were there.

Finally, I have had a mostly friendly ongoing debate with Jeffrey about the main challenge of the form of the novel. I have paraphrased literary theorist Ian Watt in saying something along the lines of the challenge of the novel being for the author to make his moral point structurally and not explicitly. If I have heard him correctly, Jeffrey has been contending that an author doesn't need to be trying to make a moral point and that simply telling a good story is enough of a goal for an artist. In formulating my idea about this book, it occurred to me that perhaps Jeffrey would be happier if we abandoned the "moral point" business and simply posit that when we approach a novel, we can ask, What is the author showing me in this story? This brings me to my thesis.

I suggest the following answer to this question for *Kristin Lavransdatter*: Against the fourfold background of Family, Faith, Farm, and Fate, Undset shows us how one's Choices govern one's life.

All five of these categories interact and overlap, but one's Choices are under one's immediate control in a way that the other four are not. One does not have much choice about one's Family, although obviously choice may be involved with the half of one's relations inherited in marriage, the people we can call kin. I say choice may be involved because in an arranged marriage choice is not involved, except when it is, as it supremely is in Kristin's case.

Faith has an element of choice in it, in terms of whether and how one embraces a certain faith position. But there is a lot about faith that is not part of personal choice, namely, the fact that one lives in culture in which the teachings, habits, practices, and cultural assumptions of Roman Catholicism are ubiquitous, along with a healthy, syncretic dose of paganism. One can choose how one will act in this context, but one cannot choose how everyone else will act or what they will think about how one acts oneself.

My third alliterative background element is Farm, and nearly everyone in this novel lives on one. By Farm I mean all the material circumstances one is born into. Here again, there is an

interaction with one's choices, whether one stays on it and works, or leaves, whether one is industrious or indolent, and so on.

Fourth is Fate. Choice interacts here, too. The fateful and horrid meeting between Kristin and Bentein on the road would not have happened if Kristin had not innocently agreed to a tryst with Arne to see him off. Nevertheless, Fate is at work here in the timing of Bentein's appearance, his observation that Kristin had been meeting with Arne, and his heinous behavior toward Kristin. Other key turns of Fate in this book are Ulvhild's tragic injury, Bentein's killing of Arne, the drought year, and Eline's crisis and death, which itself involves momentous choices on the part of several people, and finally, the burning of the church.

There are many Choices that are central to this novel, but in *The Wreath*, the two that rise to the top, in chronological order, are Erlend's decision to commit adultery with Eline, fathering children in the process, and Kristin's choice to give herself to Erlend in a way that is radically outside what her family and culture can be expected to countenance. In the other two books there are other huge choices that are central to the story, but as, promised I will not go into them.

To conclude, someone may want to quibble with me, and probably will, about where I am drawing the lines between Choice and the other four elements—Family, Faith, Farm, and Fate, and maybe Fate in particular. That's fine. My point is that Undset is showing us that all are involved, and in particular, how Choice governs one's life within the context of the other four.