

KALEVALA

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Kalevala

Kalevala, or Land of Heroes, is the national epic poem of Finland. It is an authentic epic composed of poems collected by Elias Lonnrot (1802-1884), a Finnish philologist. [Finland is a Scandanavian country lying between Russia and Sweden.]

In 1157 Finland was conquered by the Swedes, and Christianity was introduced to the Finns. Eventually most of them became Lutherans and were recognized as pious, industrious and law-abiding people. After Russia defeated Sweden in a 700-year-long war in 1809, Finland was absorbed by Russia. In 1917, Finland gained independence from Russia.

Kalevala, a mythical history of the origins of Finland, has its own, original meter. Each line is composed of eight beats. Almost every line starts with two unaccented beats, then one accented, three unaccented, one more accented beat, and finally another unaccented beat.

I am driven by my longing,
And my understanding urges
That I should commence my singing,
And begin my recitation.¹

The meter was later copied by Longfellow in his "Songs of Hiawatha."

I a light canoe will build me,
Build a swift Cheemaun for sailing,
That shall float upon the river,²
Like a yellow leaf in Autumn. ..

¹ Kalevala (London, J.M. Dent and Sons, 1936) p. 1.

² Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "Songs of Hiawatha," in Poems of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, ed. by Edmund Fuller (New York, Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1967), p. 85.

Good

Kalevala is a mixture of Shamanism (no space ↓ the belief in good and evil spirits), Animism (the belief in the existence of spirits and demons), and Christianity. It is a series of poems featuring four main heroes: Vainamoinen, Ilmarinen, Lemminkainen, and Kullervo. Vainamoinen, was "a great cultural hero, patriarch and minstrel, always described as a vigorous old man."³ He is known as the Son of Wind, Virgin of the Air, and God of Music. Ilmarinen is the brother of Vainamoinen. He has a human mother and is very good with his hands. Lemminkainen is a happy-go-lucky man, constantly getting himself into trouble. Fortunately his mother usually gets him out of trouble with her special powers. Kullervo is a very strong, mean slave who always misuses his power.

The following is a summary of Kalevala's fifty runes, or chapters: Vainamoinen is hatched from an egg and reaches the shore from the ocean. He makes the land that he reaches fertile with trees and wheatfields, and calls it the Kaleva (Finland). A Laplander, Jukahainen, has a duel with Vainamoinen and loses. He must give his sister, Aino, to Vainamoinen in payment. Aino runs away and eventually drowns. While looking for a new wife, Vainamoinen is slowed down by Joukahainen, who shoots his horse. Vainamoinen gets to a castle and is offered a wife if he can make a talisman (called the "Sampo") for his future wife's mother, Louhi. Vainamoinen returns home to Ilmarinen because Ilmarinen will be able to make the Sampo.

³W. F. Kirby, Introduction to Kalevala, p. ix.

Along the way home he finds the daughter of Louhi- his future wife. Ilmarinen makes the Sampo, brings it to the castle, and decides to ask for Louhi's daughter's hand in marriage. Louhi's daughter refuses to marry him.

In another story inserted here, Lemminkainen complains to Louhi about his own wife, and he is killed. His mother is able to put his body parts back together, and he is revived.

Vainamoinen wants to marry Louhi's daughter, but Louhi says he must go to the deathworld and find three magic words for her. He does so, and then with Ilmarinen, goes to Pohjola, Louhi's castle. Louhi's daughter makes her choice, and chooses to marry Ilmarinen over Vainamoinen.

Lemminkainen is upset because he is not invited to the wedding, so he kills the castle's lord. Before he can do any more damage he is driven off by frost.

In another story that begins here, Untamo sells Kalervo's son into slavery. Kullervo, her son becomes a herder for Ilmarinen. Louhi's daughter plays a trick on Kullervo, and Kullervo kills her. As Kullervo is leaving Pohjola, he rapes a girl, and she kills herself.

Ilmarinen turns a second daughter of Louhi's into a seagull after she provokes him. Ilmarinen, Vainamoinen, and Lemminkainen, all having reason for hating Louhi, set out for Pohjola to try to steel the Sampo. Vainamoinen puts Louhi and her army to sleep with a magic harp, and they steel the Sampo. But Louhi awakens, causes a storm, and Vainamoinen's harp is lost. Louhi and Vainamoinen have a battle, and the Sampo

is destroyed. Louhi plagues the Kaleva, but Vainamoinen heals his land's wounds.

Then Louhi drains the sun and moon of their light, but Ukko, the Creator, makes new ones. However these will not work, so Ilmarinen goes to Pohjola and steals back the sun and moon. A new king is hailed in the Kaleva, and Vainamoinen, in anger, leaves Kalevala, leaving his songs behind him.

It is interesting to note that Kalevala inspired Finland's greatest composer, Jean Sibelius, to compose a suite based on the stories of the Kaleva, appropriately entitled, "The Kalevala Suite." Kalevala is certainly a unique poem when compared to the more familiar poetry of today. With its fantastic story, and pleasurable rhythm, it is surprising that the poem is not more popular than it is.

Bibliography
List of Sources

1. Kalevala, London, J.M. Dent and Sons, 1936, p. 1.
2. Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth, Songs of Hiawatha, ed. by Edmund Fuller, New York, Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1967.

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NOTE

In researching this paper, it was extremely difficult to locate any information whatsoever concerning Kalevala. If not for the fact that my brother was able to find it at the NYU library, I may never have even obtained a copy of Kalevala